

BY KATHLEEN VAIL



Covert aggression can be just as damaging as outright bullying—and just as big a problem

Look at the pretty girl with the honey-blond hair, the one always in the middle of an adoring orbit of friends, the one with the seemingly endless supply of outfits from Abercrombie and Fitch. She has everything, all right, but popularity isn't always what it seems.

She and other adolescent girls live in a world where best friends can become enemies overnight, where one look from another girl can mean the difference between isolation and belonging. It's a world where no one tells you why you can no longer sit at the lunch

table with your friends, where secrets are traded like currency.

"If your kid has a knot in her stomach every day, how will she pay attention in class?" said Anne Cass, principal of Riverdale High School, near Portland, Ore. "You know gossip is ugly. I've seen enough kids with their stomachs clenched, day after day, in pain."

Adolescent and preadolescent girls wield enormous power over their peers. Their weapons—gossiping, name-calling, excluding—may not give other girls black eyes or bloody lips, but they can be as harmful as physical intimidation, violence, and

racial slurs. These frequently covert acts of aggression also affect your school climate and culture, as well as the girls' grades and sense of self-worth.

Why worry?

This behavior is not new, of course, and many adults say it's just part of growing up. After all, didn't everyone feel shunned or neglected or ridiculed at some point as a kid? What is new is the spate of media attention on the topic of girl bullying or girl aggression that was sparked by two recent books, Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabes* and Rachel Simmons' *Odd Girl Out*. The media coverage was quickly branded as sensationalism, and the topic went the way of last week's news.

What's lost in ignoring girls' covert aggression, however, is the very real hurt it can produce. The phenomenon might be just one slice of today's teen culture, but it can be a particularly poisonous one. Counselors and psychologists who have seen girls' aggression at work say it occupies a major part of the middle school counselor's time. And, they say, it should be recognized for what it is: bullying, on par with violence and intimidation. But girls' covert aggression often goes on unabated, with teachers and administrators turning a blind eye because it doesn't disrupt order in the classroom or the school.

Women in particular want to ignore it, said Wiseman, either because it brings back painful memories of their own childhood relationships or because they think calling attention to it makes women look bad. For these reasons, she said, "it's hard to see the actions as bullying."

It is bullying, though, and it interferes with academic achievement. Girls who are caught up in these dramas are not thinking about their grades. "If a student is being gossiped about, she can't concentrate on her math class," Wiseman said.

Another reason to intervene: These betrayals can haunt girls for the rest of their lives. "A myth that exists strongly is that girls are mean, but they'll get over it," said Susan Wellman, founder of the nonprofit, volunteer-run Ophelia Project in Erie, Pa.,

istrators, school board members, and parents. It requires that all participants be willing to examine long-held assumptions and uncover personal prejudices.

Relational aggression, as social science researchers call it, can be lessened through anti-bullying programs that raise awareness of the problem, target school culture, and work with girls directly. "It works, but it's a slow process," said principal Cass, whose district is using the Ophelia Project program. "It's messy stuff."

Girl world

To understand what's going on with girls, you need to step into their world. You'll find they are eager to talk to adults about how other girls act.

"They love talking about it," Wiseman said. "It's like loosening a valve that was too tight. They are tripping over themselves to talk about it."

Catelyn and Corinne Thurman are two such girls. At 14, Catelyn is a year and half older than her sister, but they are often mistaken for twins. Both sweep back their glossy brown hair from their faces in ponytails. Both apply blue eye shadow just along their lash lines. As they sit at their kitchen table drinking hot tea on a cool spring evening, Catelyn's pink-painted toenails peek out of chunky house slippers with large blue and white felt flowers. Corinne's slippers have ladybugs on top.

The girls attend public school in Fairfax County, Va., one of the largest and most affluent districts in the United States. Catelyn will enter high school in the fall; Corinne, middle school. With their mother nearby listening in, they happily explain the intricacies of their social milieu.

Corinne avows there are two popular groups at her school—the mean popular kids and the nice popular kids. She's in the latter group, she said. Catelyn, on the other hand, is friendly with the popular girls at her school, but she has her own group and is considered well liked.

At ground zero of the social world of girls are the popular

for your schools

which has developed school-based programs to address girl aggression.

In fact, Wiseman has talked to women in their 70s who vividly remember the names of girls who tormented them years ago. Further, there's some suggestion, said Wiseman, that this type of bullying sets girls up to accept abusive behavior or stay in abusive relationships with men.

But changing deeply ingrained behavior—behavior that happens mostly when adults aren't around—isn't easy. It takes a commitment from the whole community—teachers, admin-

girls, the alpha girls, the Queen Bees. They usually reflect the prevailing culture's ideal of femininity, said Wiseman. They are pretty, but in a conventional way. They are slender. If they play sports, they can't be too athletic. They aren't too smart, either, or at least they aren't supposed to get good grades or study too much.

Chances are the popular girls are the most socially savvy, which is how they are able to maintain their position at the top. They are often ruthless in their rules, telling the other girls whom they can be friends with, what they can wear, how they



girl, M., saying they hoped she wouldn't come over to them. When M. approached the two girls, they greeted her with smiles, as though they hadn't been talking about her. "I feel bad for those girls," Catelyn said. "I hope my friends don't do that to me." But, Catelyn hastened to add, M. isn't very nice, either.

Girls take great pains in not showing any outward aggression or even anger. If you ask a girl if she's mad at you, Catelyn said, she'd deny it: "They don't say it to your face. They do it through other people."

They also use each other to gain entrance into a higher-ranking group. Girls who attain higher status abandon their old friends. Catelyn had a good friend whose main goal in life was to become popular. The friend started playing soccer with the popular kids at recess and even dated a boy she disliked just because he was popular. Her tactics worked. "I've bumped into her in the hallway," Catelyn said. "She doesn't even say my name."

Thirteen-year-old Tyler Cumbo and her friends Ashleigh Lee and Kristan Miller see similar things in their school. They are on the same basketball team and attend school in Prince George's County, Md., across the Potomac River from Fairfax County. Twin girls on Tyler's school bus began to torment her when one of them dated a boy who'd been Tyler's friend since childhood. "Now they say I'm flirting with him. They talk behind my back," she said.

Being friends doesn't make you immune to hurtful

GIRLS NEVER QUITE GET OVER IT. IT DOES SHAPE AND COLOR WHAT WE EXPECT FROM OTHER WOMEN.

Phyllis Chesler, author of
Woman's Inhumanity to Woman

should act. Popularity, Wiseman pointed out, is a full-time job. Roles are fluid, so the Queen Bee must expend a lot of energy to make sure she stays on top; other girls are always trying to topple her.

"Power corrupts," said Stan Davis, a school counselor in Maine and founder of Stop Bullying Now. "These girls are given the power to say, 'You live, you die,' and it destroys them."

Putdowns and popularity

Catelyn and Corinne agreed. "A lot of the popular kids are mean," said Catelyn. Corinne added, "Their leader walks around acting like she's the boss of everyone. If she puts you down, you are out."

At recess, when the girls play basketball, Corinne said, the popular girls will watch. If a girl misses, the others heckle her with sarcastic remarks. If that same girl makes the shot, the others say she made it only because another girl tripped.

Catelyn's gym locker was near the lockers of two popular girls. One day, she overheard them gossiping about another

behavior, although the girls say friend fights are not the same as other types of disagreements. Even so, Ashleigh and Kristan will subject Tyler to the "silent treatment" when they're mad at her. If Tyler talks, the two will pretend they can't hear her. They'll ask each other, "Do you hear something? A dog barking?"

The tyranny of kind and nice

No one believes girls are made of sugar and spice. They are, after all, humans, and therefore are capable of the full range of human behavior. Somehow, though, even in this postfeminist age, we still expect boys to be aggressive, domineering, and competitive, and we expect girls to be cooperative, nurturing, and, well, nice. Because bullying and aggression are behaviors we expect from boys, we tend to overlook or minimize them when girls are the perpetrators. The fact that relational bullying is easy to overlook is by design. "Girl aggression is covert," said Wellman. "It's easy to ignore."

It was so easy to ignore, in fact, that some writers, re-

IT TAKES A SCHOOL

searchers, and educators say behavioral scientists pretty much disregarded aggression by girls until the early 1990s when a group of Scandinavian social scientists started to look at the differences in the way boys and girls show aggression. Until then, it was assumed that girls were less aggressive than boys. This research—and subsequent studies by University of Minnesota professor Nicki Crick, Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan, and others—suggests that girls are just as aggressive and competitive as boys, but in different ways.

Some boys are relationally aggressive, of course, just as some girls are physically aggressive. On the whole, though, girls are more likely than boys to use withholding friendship as an act of aggression. Some researchers have suggested that girls are biologically predisposed to value relationships and emotional connections more than boys do, so that's the arena in which they express their emotions.

Others say that it's the "tyranny of kind and nice," a phrase coined by Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown in their book *Meeting at the Crossroads*. Girls are socialized to be nurturing and sweet, which forces them to express their aggression in backhanded ways. Overt aggression is not considered feminine. A key element of girl aggression is that the aggressors set up a situation in which they can hurt someone and not be blamed—or even be discovered.

"It's aggression in a way that you don't have to take responsibility for it," said Brown, a professor and director of the women's studies program at Colby College, Waterville, Maine. "The more conflict escalates, the quieter they become."

Being taught that you can't compete openly, to smile when you're mad, causes anger to fester and become toxic, said Phyllis Chesler, a feminist scholar and professor and author of *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*. And women don't stop being relationally aggressive when they turn 18, said Chesler. These behaviors survive well into adulthood.

Gilligan and Brown's research and that of others suggest that at a certain point in their development, girls fear being ostracized so much that they will do anything to be accepted by the group. Girls are raised to please everybody, said Stan Davis. They say, "That person doesn't like me. I can't stand it if someone doesn't like me."

Changing behavior

While opinions differ on what to do about relational aggression, researchers and educators who work with adolescent girls agree: It won't go away by itself. In her research on relational aggression, Charisse Nixon, a professor of psychology at Penn State University, found that without intervention, the behavior doesn't abate. She looked at girls' normative beliefs—that is, their beliefs about what is acceptable and normal. When the girls believed that relational aggression was normal and saw that everyone else accepted it, the behavior persisted.

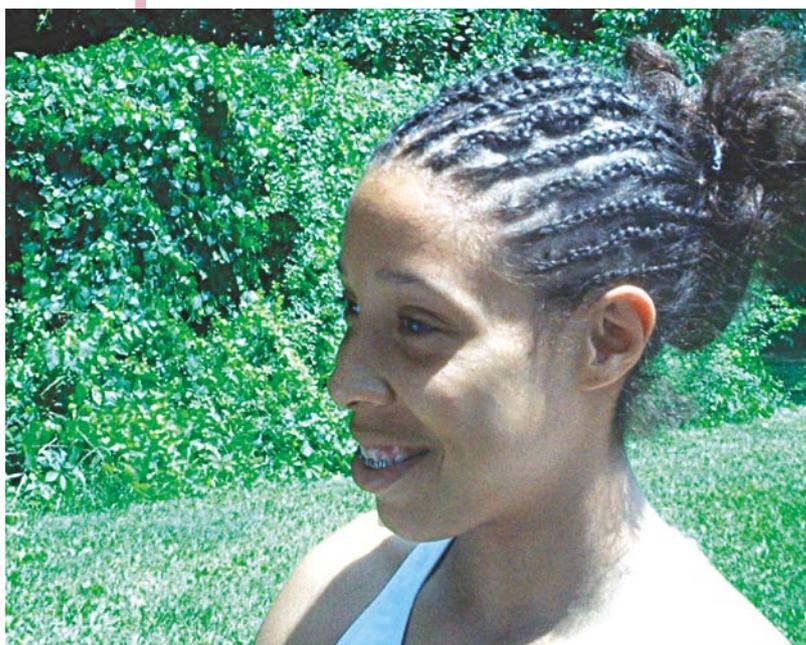
IT WAS PARENTS in the Riverdale School District, a small, 600-student school system outside Portland, Ore., who asked the Ophelia Project volunteers to come to their district. Riverdale High School principal Anne Cass said the parents in the elementary school didn't like the kind of behavior they were seeing in their children. Cass got involved when she heard that high school volunteers would be needed.

Eleven schools, including Riverdale, have been pilot sites for the Ophelia Project. Volunteers from Ophelia train teachers, administrators, and parents. They also train the high school volunteers who will work with the younger students.

High school students are a key component to the program. Not only do they suggest other ways for girls to act, they also act as mentors and role models to the younger girls. Nora Lee, who graduated from Riverdale last June, said she volunteered because she knew what went on in middle school. The volunteers ask the students to perform skits, such as what happens when one girl isn't invited to a birthday party. "It opened their eyes to show what was happening, that they are hurting people," said Lee.

The high school girls can usually tell who's popular and who's not, said Ophelia counselor Katie Allison. They try to put the high-status kids in the place of the lower-status roles in the skits.

People are treating each other better as result of the program, said Cass. "We are developing a system to call students on the covert stuff," she said. "It has to be a cultural change."—K.V.



"As long as we have that tolerance, it won't change," Nixon said.

In other words, girls believe it's OK to go out with their best friend's boyfriend, said Katie Allison, a middle school counselor in Erie, Pa., who volunteers with the Ophelia Project. "It's acceptable to start rumors. No one thinks there's anything wrong with that."

The Ophelia Project challenges these beliefs. It focuses on schoolwide change, rather than a fix-it program for a couple of girls. Wellman founded the project—named in honor of Mary Pipher's seminal girl-culture book, *Reviving Ophelia*—to address relational aggression in schools, after she discovered that schools weren't doing much about it. "Most schools have policies on physical aggression," said Wellman. "We realized they don't have a system in place to deal with the more covert aggression."

Beyond Queen Bees and victims

The current discussion about popular girls could be misleading, according to Kenneth Rubin, a professor of human development and director of the Center for Children, Relationships, and Culture at the University of Maryland. Parents and educators get the idea that all girls are either Queen Bees or victims, and that there is no middle ground. In fact, said Rubin, author of *The Friendship Factor*, the girls and boys who have the qualities of a good friend—trustworthiness, loyalty, good listening skills—are likely to be the ones with the most friends, regardless of their social status.

Popular girls could become positive leaders if they were shown how. Sharon Lamb used the example of a girl who organized a snowball fight on the playground against another girl. "This is a girl with leadership potential," said Lamb, a professor of psychology at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vt., and author of *The Secret Life of Girls*. "How can we bring that into the classroom in a positive way?"

Online resources

The Crick Social Development Lab at the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota <http://education.umn.edu/ICD//SocialDevelopment>.

Empowered Program (Rosalind Wiseman) <http://www.empowered.org>.

GENaustin Girl Empowerment Program <http://www.genaustin.org/public/index.asp>.

National School Safety Center's review of school safety research <http://www.nssc1.org/studies/statistic%20resourcespdf.pdf>.

The Ophelia Project <http://www.opheliaproject.org>.
Project on Teasing and Bullying, Wellesley Centers for Women <http://www.wcwonline.org/bullying>.

Stop Bullying Now (Stan Davis) <http://www.stopbullyingnow.com/index.htm>.

Give girls ways to express their power, suggested Lamb. Trying to "fix" mean girls will only drive the behavior further underground. The best way to deal with relational aggression is to bring it out in the open and find ways to channel it. "Don't say, 'Never be angry,'" said Lamb. Instead, show girls that anger and aggression are part of life and need to be integrated into it. Invite conversations about what makes people angry. Find ways to help girls build solidarity, Lamb said. Form girl groups; let the girls talk about issues out in the open.

Counselor Davis said he tries to persuade girls to stop giving away their power to the popular girls. Instead of looking toward the center of their social circle at the high-status girls, he advises them to look to each other. He tells students that other girls might not have high social standing, but they could be good friends. It's a dangerous precedent for girls to start believing that a quality of friendship is to be mistreated. "I say, 'Choose as friends kids who aren't mean to you,'" said Davis. "It gets them out of the spiral."

Little girls and the future

Although it sounds like a middle-school phenomenon, relational aggression appears in younger girls. In fact, some research suggests that girls start behaving this way as early as preschool. The Ashlawn Elementary School Brownie troop girls in Arlington, Va., may not have heard the term relational aggression, but these 7- and 8-year-olds certainly know what it is. Gathered around a classroom table munching on an after-school snack of baloney sandwiches, the girls bounced and giggled, sparkling with energy. They sighed dramatically and exchanged knowing glances when asked about their friendships and their disputes.

"Boys fight about sports," said Lindsey. "Girls fight about girl stuff."

"People recognize that boys fight, and they don't tell boys the same thing they tell little girls," said Kelsey. "Because girls are expected to be more girlish."

When someone is talking behind your back, you are often the last person to find out, said Molly. "Your secrets are spread around the whole school."

"If I talked behind someone's back, I'd feel guilty," said Audrey. "If I knew someone talked about me, I'd feel sad. Did I do something that bad?"

These girls are just a step away from becoming preteens, then blossoming into teenagers. They already know the special ways girls hurt each other—and how it feels to be on the receiving end. They will look for guidance. If they find none, they will continue as before.

"What we have to do as adults is pull [relational aggression] into the public arena," said Wiseman. "If not, you don't have control over it. Kids can get away with it. It controls the culture of the school. If teachers aren't on this, kids think they're hypocritical and they think that adults are stupid."

Kathleen Vail (kvail@nsba.org) is an associate editor of *American School Board Journal*.