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It's Not Just Girls Being Girls: Relational Aggression at the New Hampshire Equestrian
Academy Charter School

“Sugar and spice and everything nice, that’s what little girls are made of.” Though this is a common children’s rhyme, unfortunately it does not always ring true. When I was in junior high school, I distinctly remember one girl who made it her life’s work to torment me in every way she could. Heather never beat me up, or shook me down for lunch money, but she would pretend to be my friend and then as soon as I opened up to her, she would carry my secrets to everyone else in the sixth grade.

I remember one instance in particular just before a junior high dance. It was very important in the sixth grade to have a boyfriend and though I was not the most popular girl in our class, I had one. Looking back on it now, he was nothing to write home about, but he was a living, breathing boy and that was all that really mattered. The night before the dance, Heather called me at home to let me know that Scott was no longer my boyfriend, he was hers. I refused to believe her, but when I arrived at school the next day, Scott had Heather’s initials shaved into the back of his head and I was devastated.

Girls may not be known for engaging in physical altercations, but they do have their own way of bullying. According to Cheryl Dellasega Ph.D. and Charisse Nixon Ph.D., authors of Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying, female bullying or relational aggression (RA) is, “the use of relationships, rather than fists, to hurt another.” (Dellasega & Nixon, p. 2)

I stumbled upon this topic due to the unique nature of the school where I teach. The New Hampshire Equestrian Academy Charter School is a very small start up charter

school that opened on September 18th, 2006. What makes it unique is the fact that alongside a college preparatory level high school curriculum, there is also an Equine Studies program that focuses not on riding, but on other aspects of horse care and management as well as veterinary science.

My role at this school is a multi-faceted one. I not only teach three sections of college preparatory level English, but also act as the school's Academic Director. There are two other full time teachers, an Equine Studies teacher who is also my co-Director and a Science teacher. Part time teachers who come in for only their class periods teach all of the other subjects.

Since this school is so specialized, we attracted a very specialized student body. We started the school year with twenty-five students in grades 9-12. The gender distribution was two males and 23 females. We have had some attrition throughout the year and a few new students join, so in this last trimester of the year, we have 21 students, 3 male and 18 female.

Students are split into two heterogeneous, multi-age groups for all of their classes, with the Junior and Senior pulled out for separate English and Science classes. Our initial intention was for the students to be in one class all together, but space constraints made that impossible.

Though students are not required in any way to ride horses, they are all involved in horses in some way, even if that is just loving them and wishing they could ride. Out of all of the students who do have horses and ride, many students are involved in different equine disciplines, ranging from English Equitation to Three Day Eventing to Barrel Racing. We have one student who also owns and shows miniature horses. Not all of our

students compete in the equine arena, but that does not mean that they do not compete with each other. It is commonly known that in the horse world, every horse person does things differently and each one of them thinks that their way is the only way.

The actual location of our school is something else that makes it stand out. Our constraining academic setting consists of three tiny classrooms and an office in the back of a real estate office building. Since we have such limited space, students do not have much of a chance to get away and spend time alone during the school day.

The gender distribution in the school was intimidating to me at first. Knowing that the majority of students at NHEA would be female brought up many concerns about behavior that is commonly known as “girls being girls” that I now know is actually relational aggression. I thought back to my own middle school days and remembered the drama, hurt feelings, dirty looks and tears that so often surrounded female relationships.

The year started off strong. We brought the students together once before the official start of school and they worked together in groups to come up with their own rules and guidelines for this new school. We felt that it would be important for them to be involved in these decisions so that they would feel more invested and make this *their* school.

Several students brought up the topic of cliques and how they did not want them to be a part of their school. Many expressed the fact that they had wanted to leave their previous schools because of this behavior. More than half of the girls also mentioned wanting to get away from “the drama” of girl groups and go to school somewhere they didn’t have to worry about dealing with those things on a daily basis.

I felt so much better after hearing the students talk about this and state very clearly that they did not want the drama as a part of their school. I thought that by acknowledging the problem before it even began, that the students were being proactive in preventing an issue before it started. Unfortunately, this lasted only so long.

By December of 2006, only three months into the school year, very clear lines were being drawn between groups of students and there were several students that for one reason or another were excluded completely. I used a sociogram to document these boundaries (see Appendix 1) and found that there are in fact three distinct groups of students, with three students who were not mentioned by other students in either a negative or positive way. These social groupings appear to have formed based on the classes students were placed in, though the smaller of the two classes has two groups within that one class.

My main goal over the course of this research was to discover the exact characteristics of the relational aggression that takes place at my school. Through direct collaboration with my students, student free-writes and two student interviews , I collected data to discover a potential answer to my question. Instead of just one answer, I came up with at least five and a few other questions.

Like the girls interviewed in, Odd Girl Out by Rachel Simmons, when my students were asked about bullying in their lives, they could not stay silent. Some like “Sarah” spoke about the bullying that occurs over the Internet, “It is more extreme now with the Internet. Using myspace and instant messenger makes it easier because you don’t have to face the person.” (Personal Interview, April 30, 2007) It appears that bullying is becoming more prevalent in these days of technology because the bullies

themselves don't have to put themselves out there in order to harass their victims face to face. Another student who is a self-proclaimed bully has this to say about the use of the telephone in bullying, "People are meaner on the phone because it is easier to not be face to face. There is no worry that way about being beaten up." (Personal Interview, April 30, 2007)

In a free-write, many of my students chose to write down their own definitions of bullying. I did not share my definition of bullying or explain anything about relational aggression to them, but by reading their definitions, it is obvious that relational aggression is an ongoing problem in their lives. Students said, "Bullying: doing something to someone else that causes physical or emotional harm. I don't think it's all that bad though, everyone does it even if they don't mean to." This student did not relate the term bullying to just physical intimidation or harm. They chose to include emotional harm as well, which is a part of the definition for relational aggression. Another student says, "Bullying is when a person tries to belittle someone or trying to harm them whether mental or physical. I think people bully other people around without knowing what they are doing." Both of these students also mention the fact that they do not believe that all bullying is done intentionally. It appears that some people seem to perform these relationally aggressive actions without even knowing they are causing harm.

When I asked about causes for bullying, I got several varying answers. The student who claims to have been a bully for her entire life said point blank, that she is not a bully because she is insecure about herself, which is a common theory. She says that she does it for the pure enjoyment and that she purposefully targets people who are, "vulnerable, self-conscious people." (Personal Interview, April 30, 2007) Another student

who feels that she has been a bully in the past says, "I have always had a history of being a bully. I don't have bad intentions, but it is like a self-defense and self-protecting thing." (Student Free-Write) Some students it seems turn into a bully before they themselves can be the victims of bullying.

The bully-victim relationship is not as simple as it sounds however. We have a pair of students who are on again off again friends who are constantly bullying one another. One of them said that in their situation it is more a case of, "...bullying out of kindness. I pick fights with her when she needs help." (Personal Interview, April 30, 2007) The student in question has had some very serious issues with depression this year and has been cutting herself severely. Though to the observer it appears that the students are being horrifically mean to one another, on the inside their perception is, in this case, that they are just trying to help a friend get the help that she needs.

Student responses seem to point to misunderstandings as a huge reason that bullying begins. One student says, "People make remarks about how much stuff I have, but they aren't me so they don't really know." (Personal Interview, April 30, 2007) Students look at a situation from the outside and see it one-way, but really if they looked closer, they might see something completely different.

Another student points to overreaction as the catalyst that starts relational aggression, "Girls are sensitive and when they hear something that they think might involve them or involve someone they know, then that is how the fighting starts and all the drama. A lot of things get blown out of proportion and they just escalate until someone blows up and a lot of people get involved." (Student Free-Write) This idea that a girl can't speak out against someone who she feels is doing her wrong, points to the

theory mentioned in Rachel Simmons' Odd Girl Out, that from birth, girls are taught to be "nice".

Girls think that being nice means that they need to put away their feelings and not directly confront people. Because they stray away from this direct confrontation, things get "blown out of proportion" and become not just a problem between two girls, but two larger groups of girls. "Bullying is an ongoing problem and is tough to stop. Girls try to do things in a roundabout way which causes small problems to evolve into big issues."

(Student Free-Write)

Students spoke directly about this group against group action. "Most of the bullying I've faced is just one girl doesn't like another girl for whatever reason, and it's pretty much just a girl group against another girl group spreading rumors and threats until one group backs down or they all get in trouble." (Student Free-Write) Instead of girls going up to another girl who they think said something about them, or did something to them, they go back to their core group of friends and talk it over. Rachel Simmons mentions this phenomenon in many of the vignettes in her book Odd Girl Out. The girls she interviewed state, "Sometimes you tell your friends but (sometimes you don't) tell anybody... you'll go up to somebody and say, 'Oh you know, Kaya gets on my nerves.'" (Simmons, p. 72) One girl at NHEA gives a reason for this lack of direct confrontation between girls, "It looks good to be friends with everyone. That way people won't think you're nasty." (Personal Interview, April 30, 2007) It is important for girls to appear to be friends with everyone because they use their social status to gauge their own importance.

This need to at least appear to be friends with everyone is the root of the complaint about, "two-faced people." When asked how relational aggression most often

shows it's face at the New Hampshire Equestrian Academy Charter School, the resounding answer was people being "two-faced." Student's definition of "two-faced" is a person who pretends that they like you to your face and then talks about you as soon as you leave the room. In a school as small as ours, this is not something that students could keep under wraps for long before everyone knows what everyone has said about each and every one of the others. This perception of people being "two-faced" is directly related to the fact that girls are encouraged not to directly confront people when they are upset or angry. Instead of being honest with the person upsetting them, girls are nice to their faces and then complain to their friends about the other person's behavior.

Another girl says, "All of the drama that girls start is annoying. Some of the drama would include being two-faced, lying and peer-pressure. I have been two-faced myself sometimes but who hasn't? I don't like it and I'm not proud of it, but it happens." (Student Free-Write) It appears that although these girls know what they are doing is wrong, they just accept the terms of relational aggression as a part of life. One student in particular equates relational aggression with some kind of litmus test for potential leaders. She says, "It is impossible to stop. It is human nature. Cave men told stories about leaders and everyone is looking for leaders. It is just a learning process of how to be a good leader." (Personal Interview, April 30, 2007) Is this actually something that could be true, or just an excuse to make treating people badly okay?

Rachel Simmons interviewed a young woman who had a similar opinion about relational aggression. A young woman named Stephanie switched schools and became fast friends with two girls at her new school. Stephanie inadvertently upset one of her new friends and was immediately ostracized from their group. This exclusion caused

many problems in Stephanie's life including eating disorders, depression and an extreme lack of self-confidence. Stephanie looks back on these trials and talks about the strength of women. She says, "Women... are the strongest people in the world. Everything we do is harder and I really believe that. I think women are incredible creatures." (Simmons, p. 113) Stephanie does not directly equate relational aggression with identifying leaders among women, but she does intimate that dealing with this behavior makes women stronger people.

Girls made it very clear that relational aggression was in fact a problem in our school. They spoke freely about people being two-faced and just wanting to fit in. They spoke of the fact that they knew what they were doing was wrong, but they still did it, because they thought it was the thing to do and the only way to go.

Part of the idea in opening this Charter School that catered directly to this very specialized group of people was that people would have an easier time getting along because even though they came from twenty different towns in the state, they would immediately have something in common. A section of Nixon and Dellasega's Girl Wars, talks about ways to help girls learn to go beyond relational aggression. It refers to the importance of getting girls involved in activities that she likes and that give her skills to develop over time. The authors stress however, "Some sports seem to foster an unhealthy degree of competition, perhaps because of their focus on individual rather than team performance." (Dellasega, Nixon, p. 48)

Unfortunately, equestrian activities are almost entirely based on individual accomplishments so it appears that inadvertently, we have created the polar opposite of the atmosphere we were hoping for. Instead of giving students a supportive community of

people who share their interests, we have thrown them into a situation where there is constant competition. Even though not all of the students are competing in actual events and if they are, they probably aren't even competing against one another, they are in constant, daily competition over their techniques and beliefs.

There are probably a million different ways to care for horses. I am sure that there are a million different ways to ride as well. It seems like many of the young women who are attracted to riding horses are very independent and outspoken individuals. These same young women are very protective of their beliefs and how they care for their horses and tend to be very vocal about it. One thing that many people have differing views on is fencing. There are people who swear that electric fencing is the only way to fence in a field and others who think that electric fencing is not only unsafe but, unprofessional. Though this may seem inconsequential to most people, it can be a major bone of contention in the horse world.

After discovering the face of relational aggression in my school, I wanted to try to find a way to curb it. Many of the sources I read suggest that education about bullying and relational aggression are the best way to put an end to it in your school. When I asked one of my students in an interview if she thought that this would help, she shared a story with me about her previous school. She said that at her last school, bullying had been a huge problem and the school instituted bullying classes to help educate students about bullying in order to help prevent it. Instead, in that instance, bullying classes completely backfired. The student said, "Learning about it doesn't help. It just shows the bullies different ways to push people's buttons. Lecturing and surveys about bullying are bad too. Acknowledging that there is a problem makes it worse." (Personal Interview, April

30, 2007) This student's suggestion instead was to teach people to ignore the bullies. She said that if people she was picking on ceased to react to her teasing, that she left them alone because it was no longer fun.

My initial thoughts were that community-building activities could be used to help foster a sense of community and put an end to the relational aggression. In the case of my school however, it seems that opening a dialogue with students has gone a long way toward improving the situation.

A large group of my students approached me last Friday as we were walking down the long, tree lined driveway from the farmhouse to the Equine Clinic. They said that they had something serious to discuss with me and immediately I groaned on the inside, assuming that they were going to complain more about the History teacher and how he really did forget to tell them that their projects were due this Friday. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised.

Apparently, my students were as intrigued by this question about relational aggression and bullying as I was. Not only did they discuss it with me, they started to discuss it amongst themselves. It apparently became a favorite topic of theirs, because they came to me with *their* conclusions about the face of relational aggression in our school.

Their theory is something like this: our school is very small and therefore everyone gets to know everyone else very well. This changes the dynamic of relationships from just school friendships to the level of family members, since everyone knows everyone else so intimately and therefore knows everyone else's business. Most families have open dialogues about other family members, their choices and things that

bother them about Aunt Nancy or Uncle Alfred. In this way, the students do not think that what they are doing is bullying at all, they see it as relating to people in a familial way. They may not see however that the reasoning behind their picking apart of others isn't love and affection as in a family situation. Again I wonder if this is an actual possibility or if it is another attempt at an excuse.

The important part though is not whether or not their theory has validity. The important part is the fact that my students were engaged enough in this research to take it upon themselves to talk in a fairly large group, that included people not generally in their particular social circles, and come to their own conclusions.

Perhaps the student was right in saying that giving classes on bullying is not the way to go about bringing it to an end, but I don't agree that it is something that should not be acknowledged. It seems that when the students in this particular situation were given the opportunity and impetus to have an open dialogue about their school, they took that opportunity and ran with it. Just like some people may bully without realizing it, I think that these students have taken the first steps to ending relational aggression in their school, without realizing it.

I have been thinking long and hard about the implications of this research. Finding the "so what" I think has been the most difficult part of this entire process. I think that in teacher research it is difficult to come up with universal implications, because for every different group of students you have, you will have different group dynamics and things will happen differently. One of the most valuable things I have gained from this research, is realizing that keeping an open, honest dialogue with your students is often the best way to solve problems. These students may not immediately

cease their relationally aggressive ways, but I think that now that we have discussed it and let the monster out of the closet, that they will start to think twice when they turn to their friends to complain about someone's behavior and consider addressing the person directly.

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