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How to Help Students Cope with Girl-on-Girl Social Aggression

According to Dr. Erin Willer, social aggression is associated with negative health—depression, social anxiety, social avoidance and loneliness—and emotional outcomes—hurt, embarrassment, anger, sadness and revenge.

Willer is an assistant professor at the University of Denver and a former high school English and speech teacher. The majority of her research focuses on how adolescent girls and young women communicatively manage social aggression—like gossip and exclusion.

In her seminar *Helping Girls Cope and Communicate about Social Aggression*, Willer gives advice on how teachers can help their students with social aggression.

“I know what the big question out there is, ‘Why social aggression among girls?’” Willer said.

Willer explained that while research suggests that girls are not meaner than boys (both genders are socially aggressive) girls tend to experience more psychological distress than boys.

“I just would like to make sure that we keep in mind [...] that the things that we’ll talk about also relate to boys,” Willer said. “Social aggression is something that is going on in boys’ relationships as well.”

So that teachers can better understand social aggression, Willer gave a definition and examples of what social aggression is. She

defined social aggression as “behaviors that damage an individual’s self-concept and/or her relationships with peers.”

Social ostracism, revealing secrets, talking behind one another’s backs verbal personal attacks, glaring, eye rolling and manipulating relationships are all examples of social aggression, Willer said.

“So these aren’t just behaviors that are hurtful to a girl herself, but also her interactions with other people, such as friends and romantic interests,” Willer said.

Willer presented a three-step exercise, which she had used in her research to help girls cope with social aggression they had experienced.

STEP ONE: REFLECT ON MEANNESS

The first step is to have students think back about meanness. Ask the girls to think about a time when another peer did or said something hurtful to them. Then give them a chance to talk it out with someone or write down their feelings about it in a journal.

“When stressful things happen to us, we ruminate about them,” Willer said. “That rumination leads to increased negative emotions and distress.”

Thinking back about meanness is a way to engage in the process of narrative sense-making, which is a way to give language to thoughts and emotions.

“What this does [...] is it helps individuals organize life events, many of which are messy, multi-focal, complicated or confusing into more manageable packages that make sense in the context of their lives and relationships,” Willer said.

STEP TWO: CREATE METAPHORS

The second step is for students to draw an externalizing metaphor for meanness. This is a way for students to stop blaming themselves and others for what happened and to instead focus on the aggression problem itself.

“So the purpose of externalizing a problem is to focus on the problem as the problem, rather than the person as the problem,” Willer said.

The key is to give clear instructions. Explain what a metaphor is and give an example. Willer used *love* as an example: “Love is like a warm blanket.” Then she recommends teachers or counselors ask the student to think of a metaphor for the meanness she experienced.

“Your metaphor should be something outside of you and outside of the other girls who did the mean thing,” Willer said. “In other words, try avoiding drawing a picture of other girls as real-life representations.”

As she instructed the girls to draw a picture of their metaphor, she gave another example.

“If I were going to draw a picture of what *niceness* felt like, I could draw a cat licking her kitten,” Willer said.

One girl in Willer’s study drew a picture of a cat scratching a couch. The girl explained that the cat dug its claws into the couch, even though the couch didn’t do anything to the cat.

STEP THREE: POSITIVE METAPHOR

The final step is to have students draw a redemption metaphor. This focuses the student on something positive that came out of her experience with meanness.

“This is based on life story research that suggests that those people who are able to see a bright side to a dark situation are actually healthier than those who focus on the negative,” Willer said.

Willer explained to her study participants that it’s normal to feel bad when other girls are mean, but that now it’s time to focus on the good that came out of it. She gave an example of how it may be hard to move to a new town and school, but it can be fun to move to a new house and get a new bedroom.

One student drew a picture of two peas in a pod. The peas represented her and one of her friends. The girl explained that having to deal with her friend being mean to her brought them closer together; like two peas in a pod.

“They felt better after that third day – after engaging in the telling of that story and then drawing the two metaphors, than they did during that first day,” Willer said. “In some regards, this suggests that engaging in these sense-making processes does help them feel better mentally, at least statistically.”

According to Willer, it’s important for teachers to discuss this exercise with colleagues before implementing it to prevent further victimizing students. Find out who is in the classroom and whether or not some of the students are having difficulties with each other.

“One thing that you’ll want to think about is if you do have those students in your room who are having conflicts with one another,” Willer said. “You don’t want to get them into a situation where they’re going to be talking about their experiences, and then later, their friends are going to make them pay for talking about it in the classroom.”

Willer suggested not only using this exercise with students struggling with social aggression, but also with students struggling with other relational problems like ADHD or poor academic performance.

“While these methods that I’m sharing with you are a good starting place, we really need to keep trying different methods like this to see what works and what doesn’t,” Willer said.