Preventing and Intervening in Relational Aggression

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Purpose

- Present current research on relational and physical aggression
- Learn about school-based efforts to reduce relational and physical aggression
- Learn strategies for helping students, teachers, and parents recognize and respond positively to peer aggression

Introductory Questions

- In what ways are children aggressive?
- What types of problems occur at school because of aggression?
- What strategies have most parents, teachers, and counselors tried to combat aggression?

Introductory Exercise

If a Miracle Were to Happen.......

Public Health Significance: Aggression in the Schools

- Early onset
- Occurs often
- Occurs primarily in unstructured school contexts
- Little intervention by students & staff
- Costs society over $60 billion/year
- May lead to more serious violence
Subtypes of Aggression

- Physical/Overt Aggression
  - Related to dominance
  - Most prevalent for boys
  - Includes hitting, kicking & threatening

- Relational Aggression
  - Manipulation of social standing/relationships
  - Most prevalent for girls
  - Includes rumors & social exclusion

Outcomes for Aggressors

- Physical/Overt
  - Academic Deficits
  - Problem-Solving Deficits
  - Peer Relationship Problems
  - For Some: Developmental Trajectory of Violence

- Relational
  - Peer Problems
  - Problem-Solving Deficits
  - Internalizing Difficulties
  - Comorbidity with Physical Aggression

Outcomes for Victims

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Poor Self-Esteem
- School Avoidance

Importance of Working with Urban African American Youth

- Importance of understanding factors that contribute to aggression among urban African American youth
- Lack of resources & accumulation of stressful life events
- Children attending inner-city, under-resourced schools are at increased risk for emotional & behavioral problems, yet many are quite resilient

Importance of Working with Urban African American Youth

- Some negative outcomes are more prevalent among ethnic minority children
- Research on best practices in school-based aggression programs includes (Leff et al., 2001):
  - Define aggression broadly
  - Focus on prevention and early intervention
  - Develop and use culturally sensitive interventions
  - Design programs targeting unstructured school settings
  - Develop aggression prevention programs for girls

Developing School-Based Aggression Prevention Programs

1. School-wide approaches
   - Playground, Lunchroom, and Youth Success (PLAYS)
2. Skill-building for relationally aggressive girls
   - Friend to Friend Program
     (Funded by NIMH - K23MH01728, R01MH075787)
3. Skill-building for all youth (universal program)
   - Preventing Relational Aggression in Schools Everyday (PRAISE)
     (Funded by NIMH - R34MH072982)
General Themes Emphasized By Our Programs

- Theoretically Driven
  - Social Information Processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994)
    - Re-training the way students learn strategies to process social cues in the environment
    - Development is influenced by relationships with significant others in one’s social environment
  - Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973)
    - Role-playing, practicing, shaping new behaviors

- Culturally-Sensitive & Community-Responsive
  - Participatory Action Research Framework (Leff et al., 2004; Nastasi et al., 2000)
    - Combines theory & past empirical research with key stakeholder feedback
    - Full involvement of key stakeholders
    - Partnership drives project and ensures meaningfulness
    - Researchers & participants form non-hierarchical trusting relationships
    - Links research to practice

- Appreciation of Context
  - Inner-city schools
  - Students who are predominately African American from lower income families
  - Intense academic pressure in schools
  - Playground/lunchroom is a problematic setting that also has the potential to serve as an important arena for social skills promotion

School-Wide Approach: Playground Interventions

- Playground Lunchroom and Youth Success (PLAYS) Program
  - Redesign layout of playground
  - Provide activities/organized games
  - Active monitoring
  - Promoting better collaboration & communication among adult supervisors

Why Focus on Playground/Recess?

- Potential Difficulties
  - Unstructured setting
  - Rough & tumble play may escalate
  - Aggression may occur
  - Little intervention by students/staff
  - Staff do not usually receive training
  - Some children feel unsafe or victimized
  - Can negatively affect post-recess attention and academic achievement

- Potential Benefits
  - Enjoyable time
  - Promotes physical and social competence
  - Opportunity for adults to serve as social skills agents as opposed to disciplinarians
  - Related to post-recess attention and academic achievement
### Steps Taken for PLAYS
- Conduct Needs Assessment
- Conduct Regular Meetings
- **Create Structured Lunchroom Program**
- Design Interactive Playground
- Conduct Assemblies
- Build Link to Parents & Teachers

### Purpose of Needs Assessment
- Determine a school’s strengths & weaknesses
- Learn about past strategies
- Identify key personnel
- Outline a game plan

### Structured Lunchroom Program
- Establish & post rules
- Establish incentive system
- Develop time-out/consequence system
- Clarify routines (bathroom usage, transition to playground)
- Establish indoor activities for rainy days

### Creating an Interactive Playground
- Establish rules and routines
- Divide playground into sections
- Assign playground assistants to specific sections
- Choose activities for each section
- Provide live modeling and training
- Develop “Caught Being Good” systems

### Results from Leff et al. (2004)
**ORGANIZED GAMES**
- increased cooperative play (26% to 78%)
- decreased rough play (26% to 13%)
- increased intercultural interactions (40% to 53%)

**ACTIVE ADULT MONITORING**
- increased intercultural interactions (40% to 59%)

### PLAYS Publications
## Building skills for at-risk girls: Friend to Friend (F2F)

### Prior Research
- Based upon best practice programs
  - Anger Coping Program (Lochman, 1992)
  - Brain Power Program, (Hudley & Graham, 1993)

### Why these programs?
- Social-cognitive, school-based, & highly promising for urban African American physically aggressive boys

### Stakeholder Feedback
- Students
- Teachers
- Playground Supervisors
- Parents & Community Partners

## FRIEND TO FRIEND INTERVENTION

### School-based group intervention for relationally aggressive girls
- 8-10 girls per group
- Trained graduate students & teachers co-lead the 20 group sessions
- Conducted during lunch-recess
- Composition of group: typically 6-8 relationally aggressive girls and 2 prosocial role models
- 10 accompanying classroom sessions
- Modalities developed through partnership
- Cartoons, videos, and role plays

## MAIN ASPECTS OF F2F

- **Detective Analogy** used to help girls be more observant of their social world & internal cues
- Learning types of friendship making problems
- Identifying signs of physiological arousal
- Developing calming/cool down strategies
- Better understanding others’ intentions
- Developing alternatives in conflict situations
- Evaluating those alternatives
- Applying social cognitive strategies to *gossip* and peer group entry types of social situations

## Implementation Partners

### Teachers & Community Members
- Trained to co-lead intervention
- Assist with classroom sessions
- Cue youth to use strategies
- Help with behavior management
- Adults from school and community who know the students, families, & neighborhoods
- Observe sessions & provide feedback on:
  - Cultural relevance
  - Levels of engagement
  - Suggestions for working with teachers & families

## Initial Trial of F2F

### Goal: Demonstrate Acceptability of F2F & Establish Effect Size Estimates
### 361 3rd-5th graders from 2 urban schools completed peer noms. (77% part. rate)
### Peer noms used to establish prevalence rate of girls with relational aggression (GRA).
- GRAs > .50 std above mean on relational agg.
- If classroom has > 1 GRA, then the classroom is randomly assigned to intervention vs. control
- GRAs from intervention classes receive 20 session F2F & 8 classroom sessions vs. GRAs from control classes are in control condition

## Subject Selection Steps

- **Step 1**: Which classes met inclusion criteria?
  - 11 out of 18 classrooms (49 relational aggressors)
- **Step 2**: Randomly assign class: F2F or Control
  - 6 Intervention Classes and 5 Control Classes
- **Step 3**: Randomly choose GRAs from each Intervention and Control classroom
  - 32 Relation Aggressors:
    - 21 Intervention versus 11 Control
- **Ethnicity**: 97% African American
- **Grade**: 3rd (n=10), 4th (n=9), 5th (n=12)
Implementation Analyses

- Each group session was videotaped
- Videotapes were randomly selected & core content & process items coded for integrity by research assistants on a 0–2 likert scale
  - 0 = Not Implemented; 1 = Partially Implemented; 2 = Fully Implemented
- Integrity: Content (86%); Process (96%)
- Inter-rater reliability was strong for content (86%) and process (96%)

Acceptability of the Friend to Friend Program

Students (16 items): M = 3.49, SD = 0.41
Teachers (21 items): M = 3.39, SD = 0.39

1 to 4 likert scale: 1 = Highly Unacceptable to 4 = Highly Acceptable

Treated Vs. Untreated Relational Aggressors: Teacher Ratings of Behavior (Change Scores)

- Children’s Social Behavior Questionnaire (CSB: Crick, 1996): Relational Aggression, Physical Aggression, Peer Likeability subscales
- ES = Effect Size

Treated Vs. Untreated Relational Aggressors: Hostile Attributional Bias (Change Scores)

- Cartoon-Based adaptation of a HAB vignette measure (Crick, 1995)
- Cartoon version has strong psychometric properties & stronger acceptability/cultural sensitivity than standard version (Leff et al., 2006; Leff et al., 2010)

ES = .74
ES = .43
ES = 1.73

CONCLUSIONS

- Participatory research is an effective way to design empirically-supported programs in a culturally-responsive manner
- F2F is one of the first empirically-supported relational aggression interventions
- Results suggest F2F is acceptable & feasible to implement within urban school setting
- F2F has potential to decrease relational & physical aggression, hostile attributions, and feelings of loneliness among urban African American relationally aggressive girls

Friend To Friend Publications

- Developing F2F through Partnership

- Preliminary Empirical Study
Current Research (2007-2012): Friend to Friend Clinical Trial

- Examine impact of F2F in 6 schools across wider range of outcomes
  (School Support Program; ROI MH075787; Leff, PI)
- Use of a more sophisticated design
  - Random assignment to F2F or Homework, Study Skills, Organization (HSO) group
  - Control for non-specific treatment factors
  - Provide a clinically meaningful alternative for relationally aggressive girls
- Examine participants at 9 month follow-up

Preventing Relational Aggression In Schools Everyday (PRAISE)

- Empirical Research
  - Relational aggression is a problem for boys too
  - Relational aggression is persistent over time & across setting
- Key Stakeholder Feedback
  - Teachers desired assistance for all students: May lead to improved class climate & learning
- Components of PRAISE:
  1. Social cognitive re-training (F2F) Plus...
  2. Empathy, perspective taking, bystander...

PRAISE Intervention

- Classroom-Based Prevention Program
  - 2-3 trained graduate students work with teachers to implement
  - 20 sessions (bi-weekly)
  - PRAISE is integrated within curriculum
  - Modalities developed through partnership
    - Cartoons, Videos, Role-Plays
  - Extensive partnership-based process used to adapt materials for boys
    - Content areas: appropriate for girls & boys

ADDITIONAL ASPECTS OF PRAISE: TEACHING EMPATHY

ADDITIONAL ASPECTS: PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

ADDITIONAL ASPECTS: EMPOWERING BYSTANDERS
Preliminary Trial Of Praise

- Parent permission: 88% of 3rd & 4th graders at a large urban elementary school
- All consented youth participated in peer nominations to help determine aggression status
- 10 classrooms randomized, blocked by number of relational & physical aggressors, to intervention versus control condition

Measures

- Aggressive Behavior – Teacher reports
  - (CSB; Crick, 1996)
- Cartoon-Based Hostile Attribution Bias
  - (Leff et al., 2006; Leff et al., 2011)
- Knowledge Measure of Social Processing & Aggression
  - 15 item multiple choice measure
  - Strong psychometric properties have been found
  - (Leff, Cassano, et al., 2010)

Student Acceptability Of Praise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Student Acceptability</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>Post (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>ANCOVA</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intervention (n=13)</td>
<td>7.69 (2.59)</td>
<td>10.46 (2.37)</td>
<td>F = 8.0, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>.63</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Control (n=7)</td>
<td>5.14 (1.77)</td>
<td>6.29 (2.06)</td>
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1 to 4 likert scale: 1 = Highly Unacceptable to 4 = Highly Acceptable

Teacher Report Of Acceptability & Feasibility

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<th>Teacher Acceptability</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>Post (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>ANCOVA</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intervention (n=13)</td>
<td>3.60</td>
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<td>3.03</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Control (n=7)</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>2.69</td>
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1 to 4 likert scale: 1 = Highly Unacceptable/Unfeasible to 4 = Highly Acceptable/Highly Feasible

Findings For Aggressive Girls Related To Knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>Post (Mean, SD)</th>
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<th>Effect Size</th>
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<td>Intervention (n=13)</td>
<td>7.69 (2.59)</td>
<td>10.46 (2.37)</td>
<td>F = 8.0, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Control (n=7)</td>
<td>5.14 (1.77)</td>
<td>6.29 (2.06)</td>
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Higher scores represent greater knowledge (range from 1-15)

Findings For Aggressive Girls Related To Relational Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>Post (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>ANCOVA</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSB – Relational Aggression</td>
<td>Intervention (n=13)</td>
<td>1.93 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.10 (1.22)</td>
<td>F = 8.9, p &lt; .01</td>
<td>1.38</td>
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<td>CSB – Relational Aggression</td>
<td>Control (n=7)</td>
<td>1.93 (1.07)</td>
<td>3.43 (1.42)</td>
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Higher scores represent higher levels of aggression (range from 1-5)
Findings For Aggressive Girls Related to Overt Aggression

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<th>Measure</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>Post (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>ANCOVA Effect Size</th>
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<tr>
<td>CSB - Overt Aggression</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>1.60 (.75)</td>
<td>1.48 (.60)</td>
<td>$F = 51.4, p &lt; .001$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.11 (1.12)</td>
<td>3.44 (1.24)</td>
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Findings For All Girls Related to Knowledge of Problem-Solving

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>Post (Mean, SD)</th>
<th>ANCOVA Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>6.41 (2.62)</td>
<td>9.53 (2.77)</td>
<td>$F = 40.0, p &lt; .001$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>6.98 (2.75)</td>
<td>7.02 (2.74)</td>
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Conclusions

- PRAISE rated acceptable by girls, boys, & teachers; and appears relatively feasible
- PRAISE improves girls’ (and boys’) knowledge, & has a strong aggression suppression effect for aggressive girls
- PRAISE did not impact boys’ behavior
- Questions raised: Does PRAISE need to be more intensive and/or provide additional services (playground prevention, teacher training?)
- Need for replication across more schools

Praise-Related Manuscripts

- Preliminary Empirical Study

- Integrity Monitoring related to PRAISE Program

Special Series on Relational Agg. Programs: School Psychology Review


How to Start the Aggression Prevention Process

- Where would you start?
- What types of strategies or interventions would make sense to consider?
### Implications of the Research Studies

- Recognizing Problems and Talking with Youth
- Thinking through School-Wide Strategies
- Thoughts for Increasing the Youth’s Social Skills
- Strategies for Increasing Parent-Child Communication
- Addressing Issues of Cyber-Aggression

### Recognizing Problems & Talking With Youth

#### Signs that a Child or Adolescent is Distressed about Aggression

- Changes in Eating Patterns
- Changes in Sleeping Patterns
- Headaches and Stomach Aches
- Desire to Avoid School
- Worsening in Academic Performance
- Complaints about classmates and/or decrease/increase in calls to and from friends
- Complaints about Recess and Lunch periods

#### Some Reasons Children Do Not Tell Others When Having a Problem

- They may be embarrassed
- They may feel that there is something wrong with them
- They may be afraid that you will overreact, or confront the other child/children’s parents
- They may feel that they are the only one who has had this type of problem
- If they are bullying others, it may be working for them and they don’t want to get in trouble

#### Strategies for Parents

- Talk with your child about their friends, and what school is like for them.
- Talk with their teacher, school counselor, or other adult at the school
- Better understand how they are spending their free time when not at school
- Encourage your child to talk about their school day
  - What went well, and what did not go well

#### School-Wide Strategies

- **Activities and Supervision at School**
  - Encourage child to become involved in structured activities during lunch-recess (when available)
  - Stay close to friends when approaching “bullying hotspots.”
  - Establish a point-person at school the child can go to for support/help

- **Avoiding Conflicts**
  - Understand and avoid bullying hot-spots
  - Think through ways of entering groups
  - If a child is being bullied through non-physical means, take it seriously
  - Role playing with school counselor
### Helping Parents Promote Youth’s Social Skills

#### Promoting Friendships
- Develop one good friend
- Have short, quick outings which are fun and highly structured
- Set specific goals related to friendships
- Remember: Having friends means being a good friend

### Helping Parents & Teachers Promote Youth’s Social Skills

#### Promoting Perspective Taking
- Use Concrete Demonstrations, e.g., "Walk a Mile in My Shoes."
- Identify “Teachable Moments”
- Ask Questions, e.g., "What do you think she is thinking? What would you be thinking if you were her?"
- Point out Benefits of Seeing Both Sides

### Helping Parents and Teachers Promote Youth’s Social Skills

#### Promoting Problem-Solving Skills
- Resist the Urge to Step In Right Away
- Validate Feelings and Praise Help-Seeking
- Ask Questions to Elicit Understanding of the Problem—including his or her Role!

### Promoting Positive Parent-Child Communication
- Creating a special time each evening to play a fun game, talk about the day
- Learn about your child’s friends and hobbies
- Be a good listener and try to be non-judgmental (when possible!)

### Cyber-Aggression: The New Frontier

- Why Not Walk Away?
- Why Might it be Worse than Other Forms of Aggression?
- What to Do if Your Child is Bullied On-Line
  - Don’t Just Turn It Off
  - Good Parent-Child Communication is Key
  - Teach Strategies
- Preventing Your Child for Being a Cyber-Aggressor
  - Make it More Human
  - Monitor their Involvement
Monitoring Children’s Communications

- Monitor their use of internet/email and cell phones.
- Keep the computer in a common area.
- Help them set up their email or Facebook account and know their passwords.
- Ask periodically whether they have seen any gossip or mean comments in emails or texts.

Thank You

- Questions?

- For more information please contact Steve Leff at Leff@email.chop.edu or 215-590-7067