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# Relational Aggression: What Does it Look Like and How Does it Feel for Girls with Language-Based Learning Disabilities?

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Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Department of Psychology

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION:  
WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE AND HOW DOES IT FEEL FOR GIRLS WITH  
LANGUAGE-BASED LEARNING DISABILITIES?

Christine M. Barbone

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Psychology

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**PHILADELPHIA COLLEGE OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**Dissertation Approval**

This is to certify that the thesis presented to us by Christine Barbone  
on the 22 day of May, 2012, in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology, has been examined and is  
acceptable in both scholarship and literary quality.

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the context and occurrence of relational aggression in adolescent girls with learning disabilities, as described by their personal experiences and observations. A discussion of psychosocial adjustment and relational aggression with respect to the unique characteristics of children with learning disabilities will be presented. This study will provide a qualitative description of the social problem-solving skills of children with learning disabilities as reflected in their responses to common social scenarios. Special considerations will be given to their thought processes, insights, and emotional understanding of each situation.

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“He that is thy friend indeed,  
He will help thee in thy need:  
If thou sorrow, he will weep;  
If thou wake, he cannot sleep:  
Thus of every grief in heart  
He with thee does bear a part.  
These are certain signs to know  
Faithful friend from flattering foe.”

-William Shakespeare  
*The Passionate Pilgram*

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

The pervasiveness of relationally aggressive behavior among middle-school students is extremely well documented (Esplage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 2008; Rigby, 2000). According to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, almost 30% of youth living in the United States are estimated to be involved in bullying as a bully, a victim, a bystander, or all three. In recent years, relational aggression, which is a more subtle form of bullying, has emerged as a growing concern and has been found to be associated with a number of deficits, such as impaired social problem-solving skills, limited ability to understand and regulate emotions, and difficulty with establishing satisfactory peer relationships (Leff, Waasdorp, & Crick, 2010). Also well documented is the relationship between learning disabilities and each of the areas just noted (Kavale & Forness, 1996). Although academic deficits previously have been considered the predominant characteristic of LD, it is becoming increasingly evident that other dimensions, such as social competence and interpersonal skills, also can be identified as areas of concern. In addition to their academic difficulties, children with learning disabilities are especially vulnerable to a wide range of psychosocial problems, which can be just as debilitating as the learning disability itself (Bauminger & Kimhi-Kind, 2008; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Raskind, 2010; Tur-Kaspa, 2004).

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Research on the relationship between learning disabilities and bullying is somewhat limited (Mishna, 2003). Research has suggested that children with learning disabilities are at an increased risk of victimization; however, the specific risk factors are

and the processes that play a role in the interaction of learning disabilities and relational aggression remain unclear. Are students with learning disabilities more frequently identified as the victims

of relational aggression? Do their cognitive differences make them more susceptible to conflict situations? Do their learning differences interfere with their ability to communicate their needs and understand the subtleties of social situations? The co-occurrence of peer victimization and learning disabilities has been described as a “double jeopardy” that makes this population particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of bullying behavior (Mishna, 2003). Consider the following scenario:

*Lisa is a sixth-grade student who has been diagnosed with dyslexia. In addition to the academic difficulties she has resulting from her learning disability, she also has a history of social difficulties. She has trouble expressing herself verbally, and oftentimes appears to be one step behind her peers. She can be described as shy and frightened when having to join group work and other social activities. On this particular day, she watches intently as three of her classmates are absorbed in an emotionally charged conversation at the lunch table. She desperately wants to join them, but she does not know what to say. Although everybody had been nice to her during class, Lisa is now terrified that they will not let her sit down with them. She stands off to the side and the girls do not even seem to notice her. They are all laughing together, and when the lunch period ends, they retreat arm-in-arm to the other side of the cafeteria. Lisa watches in horror, as she is certain they are laughing at her.*

In this scene, Lisa demonstrates a number of deficits that result in a poor outcome to a rather common social situation. Not only does she lack the ability to express her needs in an appropriate manner, but she also has difficulty understanding the social cues that her classmates give her. Low self-esteem, self-consciousness, and an external locus of control combine to create a lack of social competence and self-confidence necessary to interpret the situation in an objective manner. Her interpretation includes feeling that they were purposely excluding her and that they were laughing at her. In short, Lisa was unable to approach them and ask them if she could be a part of their conversation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Scenarios like the one just described seem to be a predictable, albeit painful, part of growing up. Separately, learning disabilities and relational aggression each can make childhood a painful experience. Together, they become a “perfect storm” for emotional, social, and behavioral difficulties. The purpose of this study is to examine the context and occurrence of relational aggression in adolescent girls with learning disabilities, as described by their personal experiences and observations. A discussion of psychosocial adjustment and relational aggression with respect to the unique characteristics of children with learning disabilities will be presented. This study will provide a qualitative description of the social problem-solving skills of children with learning disabilities as reflected in their responses to common social scenarios. Special considerations will be given to their thought processes, insights, and emotional understanding of each situation.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Psychosocial Adjustment and Learning Disabilities**

It is well-documented that children with learning difficulties experience a variety of social problems (Raskind, 2010). According to a recent meta-analysis, as many as 75% of children with learning disabilities experience social-skills deficits that distinguish them from their nondisabled peers (Kavale & Forness, 1996). These deficits often lead to social rejection, difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships, and increased negative experiences in school. Although academic deficits previously have been considered the predominant characteristic of learning disabilities, there is evidence that other dimensions, such as social competence and interpersonal skills, also can be identified as areas of concern.

Bauminger, Edelsztein, and Morash (2005) suggested that social competence, or a child's ability to spontaneously recognize and accurately interpret nonverbal and verbal cues, ability to identify necessary emotional information, ability to make accurate attributions to another person's emotional state, and ability to apply general knowledge of social behaviors (e.g. how to initiate a conversation), is one of the most difficult tasks for a child with a learning disability. Researchers have examined a number of possible causes for these social difficulties. Possible causes include specific cognitive deficits related to social problem solving, low academic standing, poorly developed oral language skills, nonverbal communication deficits, concurrent psychological or emotional problems, and attention/memory disorders, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; Raskind, 2010). Currently, there does not appear to be any general

consensus about the exact cause of these social deficits; however, it appears that they can be just as debilitating as the learning disability itself (Bauminger & Kimhi-Kind, 2008; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Raskind, 2010; Tur-Kaspa, 2004).

**Social skill deficits and learning disabilities.** In an in-depth examination of the magnitude and specific types of social-skill deficits among children with learning disabilities, Kavale and Forness (1996) found that 75% of students with learning disabilities can be differentiated from their nondisabled peers on various measures of social competence. Their meta-analysis indicated that these differences were consistent across various dimensions of social behavior (e.g., perceived academic competence, adjustment, interaction) and also across different raters (e.g., teachers, peers, and self). When evaluated by their teachers, students with learning disabilities were found to have a lack of perceived academic competence and poor overall adjustment, as reflected in their increased levels of distractibility and anxiety. When rated by their peers, children with learning disabilities appeared to be defined in terms of reduced acceptance and greater rejection, which is demonstrated most clearly by the avoidance behaviors of their nondisabled peers. Finally, in self-evaluation, students with learning disabilities see themselves not only as lacking in academic competence, but also as lacking in nonverbal communication skills and social problem-solving skills. Moreover, these children have been found to demonstrate an external locus of control whereby they will attribute their personal success to luck, as opposed to their personal efforts or ability (Kavale & Forness, 1996).

The origin of these social skill problems remains unclear. Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain why children with learning disabilities demonstrate social



skill deficits. One suggests that these deficits are neurological and are caused by some form of neurological dysfunction. There does not appear to be much support for this theory (Kavale & Forness, 1996). Other theories explore the relationship between academic skills and social skills. Do academic deficits lead to social deficits? Do social deficits lead to academic deficits? Or do academic and social deficits occur simultaneously? A final theory suggests a correlation between social skills and academic skills; however, there is no implication with regard to cause and effect. This theory also is confounded by the fact that approximately 25% of students with learning disabilities who do *not* demonstrate social skill deficits (Kavale & Forness, 1996).

**Social information processing and learning disabilities.** In an effort to answer some of these questions, researchers have begun to focus on the social cognitions and social perceptions of children with learning disabilities as compared to those of their peers without learning disabilities. These studies are based on the notion that a person's social cognitions, or the thought processes underlying social interactions, are the mechanisms that lead to social behaviors and social adjustment (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Social information processing theory offers a detailed model of how children process cues in social situations and of the specific cognitive tasks that are involved when a child is engaged in social interaction (Bauminger et.al., 2005; Bauminger & Kimhi-Kind, 2008; Bloom & Heath, 2010; Bryan, et.al., 1998; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Meadan & Halle, 2004; Tur-Kaspa, 2004; Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993). Overall, results of these studies suggest that children with learning disabilities differ on measures of social perception and interpretation, perspective-taking, attribution biases, social knowledge, and specific problem-solving skills (Tur-Kaspa, 2004).

Dodge and his colleague (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1986) proposed a comprehensive social information processing model to conceptualize the cognitive processes underlying social interactions in children. The six steps in this model include (a) encoding social cues (i.e., attending to appropriate cues, chunking and storing information); (b) mentally representing and interpreting the cues (i.e., integrating the cues with past experience and arriving at a meaningful understanding of them); (c) clarifying goals; (d) searching for possible social responses; (e) making a response decision after evaluating the consequences of the various responses and estimating the probability of favorable outcomes; and (f) acting out the selected response while monitoring its effects on the environment and regulating behavior accordingly (Raskind, 2010). According to Crick and Dodge (1994), children attend to a social situation with a predetermined set of responses based on their inherent capabilities, past experiences stored in their long-term memory, and immediate goals or needs. The child uses the social cues that surround the particular situation and then respond to those cues according to the way he or she processes the information at that point in time (Tur-Kaspa, 2004).

Using this model as a framework, studies have examined specific aspects of this social-cognition process in children with and without learning disabilities in order to identify where the processing breaks down (Bauminger et al., 2005; Bauminger & Kimhi-Kind, 2008; Bloom & Heath, 2010; Bryan, et.al., 1998; Meadan & Halle, 2004; Tur-Kaspa, 2004; Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993). Collectively, these studies indicate that children with learning disabilities experience difficulties understanding more complex emotions (e.g., pride, embarrassment, guilt), understanding mixed or conflicting emotions (e.g., feeling love and hate simultaneously), and understanding hidden emotions (e.g.,

fear that might underlie feelings of anxiety or anger; Bauminger et al., 2005; Raskind, 2010, Tur-Kaspa, 2004). In their discussion, Bauminger et al. (2005) pointed out that children with learning disabilities appear to have the most difficulty in situations during which social context and perspective-taking play an important role. They found that these children encode social cues less well, recall less information, and add more irrelevant information when processing social situations. While their ability to identify a social problem and determine if it was generally positive or negative was similar to that of their peers without learning disabilities, children with learning disabilities displayed more negative attributions to social situations, were able to generate fewer solutions to the problem, and demonstrated a less effective decision-making process. Additionally, children with learning disabilities were less able to link their responses to their own personal goals (Bauminger et al., 2005).

In an attempt to explain further the differences between children with and without learning disabilities, one study explored the relationship among social information processing, emotional regulation, and attachment security (Bauminger & Kimhi-Kind, 2008). The researchers found that children who are secure and have better emotion regulation skills also have better social information processing abilities. Stressing the importance of early secure attachment as an important variable in emotion regulation, researchers pointed out that *internal schemas*, which include positive representations of self and others, allow children to process social information in ways that are accurate, unbiased, and competent. They concluded that children with learning disabilities who have difficulty with the various steps of social information processing are also at a higher

risk for developing insecure schemas and difficulties with emotional regulation, resulting in problems with loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Bauminger & Kimhi-Kind, 2008).

**Emotional understanding and learning disabilities.** The ability to recognize and understand emotions is a very important component not only of social information processing, but also of overall social competence (Bauminger et al., 2005; Bloom & Heath, 2010; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Bloom and Heath (2010) found that adolescents with general (language-based) learning disabilities were significantly less accurate at recognizing and understanding facial expressions than not only nondisabled children but also children diagnosed with nonverbal learning disabilities. They suggested that there may be some common cognitive “mechanism” that contributes not only to their academic difficulties, but also to their difficulty in recognizing facial expressions.

Another study addresses the relationship between perception of emotions and social skills in children with and without learning disabilities (Most & Greenbank, 2000). Based on the notion that people experience more positive social interaction when they have an accurate interpretation of the other person’s mood, affect, and other nonverbal components, such as tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions, researchers presented children with six different emotions in three ways (auditory, visual, and auditory-visual). Results indicated that children with learning disabilities performed significantly lower than their nondisabled peers on all three different modalities (Most & Greenbank, 2000).

**Social attributions and learning disabilities.** Another critical component of social information processing is social attributions, or the inferences people make about

the outcomes of their behaviors (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993). Tur-Kaspa and Bryan (1993) examined the inferences that children make about the causes of specific outcomes as they relate to their own behavior and the behavior of others. They found that children with learning disabilities “displayed a greater tendency to use external factors in explaining their social successes or failures” (Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993, p. 229). They used locus of control theory to demonstrate that children who attribute their failures to their own incompetence would be less likely (and possibly less able) to change their behavior in ways that might gain more social acceptance. Because children with learning disabilities oftentimes suffer from an external locus of control, they are more likely to view their social difficulties as something over which they have little power to change.

**Emotional disturbance and learning disabilities.** There appears to be some debate over whether or not psychosocial and emotional problems actually should be considered in the definition of learning disabilities (Greenham, 1999; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Wong, 2003). Once again, the question emerges about which comes first, the learning difficulty or the emotional difficulty, or whether they occur simultaneously. Nevertheless, children with learning disabilities have been found to experience higher levels of emotional disturbance than children without learning disabilities (Greenham, 1999; Maag & Reid, 2006; Newcomer, et al., 1995; Rock, Fessler, & Church, 1997). While the severity of their symptoms may not warrant a diagnosis of a clinical disorder, children with learning disabilities do appear to be more prone to internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression than do their nondisabled peers. In a review of studies of internalizing correlates of dyslexia, Mugnaina, Lassi, LaMalfa, & Albertini, (2009)

reported that a learning disability, such as dyslexia, is a well-documented risk factor for the development of depression and anxiety. Additionally, studies have suggested that there may even be a neuropsychological interrelationship between learning disabilities and emotional problems, relating problems, such as depression, to specific cerebral dysfunction that also is associated with learning disabilities (Rock et al., 1997).

**Social status and learning disabilities.** Taken together, all of the previously mentioned deficits may offer some explanation for the social difficulties and low social status experienced by many children with learning disabilities. While it remains unclear whether difficulties in social information processing are the result of poor academic abilities, peer rejection, and limited social experiences or if they are the result of some other inherent (emotional, social, neurological) deficit, the stigma associated with learning disabilities alone can also have an enormous impact. The social problems of children with learning disabilities are frequently a result of their own behavioral deficits combined with the biases and negative attitudes of their peers. Additionally, it has been suggested that the disability, as interpreted by others, is typically attributed to a deficit *within* the individual that needs to be diagnosed and treated as if it is an abnormality (Mishna, 2003).

Studies have shown that children with learning disabilities are not only viewed less favorably by their peers, but also perceived less favorably by teachers and parents (Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993). Researchers have found that “the social behaviors that teachers typically rate as essential for school success are really *compliance* behaviors that affect classroom management” (Bryan, 2005, p. 119). Following directions, cooperating with peers, and self-control are oftentimes on the top of teachers’ lists of appropriate

social behavior. Because teachers tend to implement classroom behavior plans that only reinforce these compliance behaviors, they may not be addressing the underlying social deficits and emotional needs of children with learning disabilities. Teachers often will fail to recognize the underlying feelings of loneliness and frustration that children with learning disabilities may also be experiencing. The teacher's challenge is to create socially inclusive learning environments that promote competence, acceptance, and social support (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008).

**Social interventions and learning disabilities.** Given all the questions surrounding the causes of their social and emotional problems, it remains quite difficult to determine how to best meet the needs of children with learning disabilities. It is not that children with learning disabilities fail to experience complex emotions, but rather that they struggle with how to accurately interpret, or to think metacognitively about their emotional experience (Bauminger et al., 2005). Research has indicated that the outcomes of social-skills training programs for children with learning disabilities have not been promising (Raskind, 2010). Given the language-based nature of their disabilities, combined with their unique and oftentimes individual problem-solving styles and cognitive abilities, it is not surprising that interventions that have a strong language and reasoning component (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy) are not always successful with these children. In a study of effective social interventions for children with learning disabilities, Bryan (2005) pointed out that interventions that target social status and peer acceptance have been met with limited success because they oftentimes address behaviors that are not related to the *cause* of the rejection (e.g., problem solving as opposed to interpreting social cues). However, interventions that focus on affect and

self-perceptions (e.g., locus of control, attributions) do appear to have positive effects on academic achievement (Bryan, 2005), and, as mentioned earlier, improved academic success subsequently will have a positive impact on social information processing (Kavale & Forness, 1996). Additionally, other studies point out that interventions should target understanding social contexts and developing the ability to understand other people's perspectives on social situations (Bauminger et. al., 2005; Raskind, 2010).

In a promising study of effective interventions for children with learning disabilities, Bryan (2005) described the efficacy of positive affect induction. Based on psychological research that describes the benefits of positive emotions on learning, social relationships, health, and the immune system, he cited a series of studies of students with and without learning disabilities in kindergarten through high school. Results suggested that children who learned in "positive affect conditions" (e.g., thinking about something that makes them happy) performed significantly better on academic and social problem-solving tasks, than did students in a neutral affect condition (Bryan, et al., 1998). The implications of this finding appear to be significant in that creating such an environment would take very little effort, time, and money. Music, pep talks, and self-induced compliments are offered as very simple solutions that would benefit *everyone* in any classroom setting.

As previously mentioned, another promising area for intervention with children with learning disabilities focuses on attribution retraining. Bryan (2005) pointed out that when combined with effective teaching strategies, retraining children's concepts of causality (e.g., locus of control) can have a significant impact on motivation, the ability to make choices, and developing appropriate behavioral responses. Given that children with



learning disabilities experience difficulties in generating alternative ways to resolve social problems and making appropriate decisions, this approach might prove to be a very effective.

**Risk and resilience and learning disabilities.** From an ecocultural perspective, some investigation has focused on the role that significant others play in child development. Wong's (2003) "Risk and Resilience" framework discusses specific issues that, because of their impact on children with learning disabilities, deserve consideration for research in the social domain of learning disabilities. She provides a brief overview of risk and protective factors for these children, with a focus on the interactions among the individual, family, school, and community. Protective factors include positive temperament, values and skills, effective parenting, presence of supportive adults, and opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities at crucial life-transition points. Wong (2003) also recognized that all of these factors involve variables that are either internal or external to the child (e.g., temperament vs. parenting), thereby offering a variety of options for the future development of effective interventions.

### **Psychosocial Adjustment and Relational Aggression**

Let us return for a minute to the scenario at the beginning of this discussion. Lisa is watching in horror as her "friends" sit huddled together around the lunch table. They refuse to even acknowledge her presence. She is wondering what they are talking about and terrified to think that they may be laughing at her. Did she do something wrong? Did she wear the wrong clothes to school that day? How will she ever get through the rest of the school day? Should she just go to the nurse and see if she can go home "sick"? Needless to say, this scenario is not uncommon in many elementary and middle schools.

Interestingly, it can go unnoticed by many adults, as on the surface, these girls just look like they are having fun. Unless Lisa has the self-confidence and courage to approach the group, she will probably take the pain and confusion that she feels home with her at the end of the day.

Unlike this situation, overt aggression, such as fighting, pushing, or destroying someone's personal property, is identified easily. Overt aggression has long been a topic of concern because it is conspicuous and many times potentially dangerous (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). The deleterious effects of bullying, particularly acts of outward aggression, are well documented, and efforts to prevent them are reflected clearly in the trend for schools to adopt "zero-tolerance" policies and institute school-wide positive behavioral support programs (Esplage & Swearer, 2003, Olweus, 1993).

Relational aggression, on the other hand, is not as noticeable. It is a more subtle form of aggression that takes the form of spreading malicious rumors, excluding others and, as in the previous example, "giving someone the silent treatment." It is ultimately aimed at destroying reputations, hurting feelings, and diminishing self-esteem (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Initially, girls appeared to engage in relationally aggressive behavior more than boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995); however, growing evidence indicates that some similarities may exist between the genders, and that boys and girls may be more similar in their use of relational aggression than previously was thought (Mayeux & Cillessen, 2008; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). With regard to past research, however, it is also important to note that aggressive behavior in boys traditionally has received greater

attention, making aggressive behavior in girls under identified and certainly less well understood (Leff & Crick, 2010; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010).

**Relational aggression and gender.** In a review of the literature on relational aggression, Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran (2006) presented a number of interesting findings related to gender issues and relational aggression. Overall, the research indicates that when girls are aggressive, they tend to display this aggression in a relational manner. Boys, on the other hand, tend to display their aggression in a more physical and overt manner (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Crick et al., 2007). Further, findings suggest that girls are more distressed by relationally aggressive behavior and view relationally aggressive behavior as more harmful than boys (Crick, 1995; Crick et al., 2002; Murray-Close & Crick, 2007). Girls tend to direct relational aggression towards other girls, and they tend to be more aggressive *per incident* than relationally aggressive boys. Overall, there appears to be fewer studies indicating a similarity in relational aggression across gender, with the results of these studies being either inconsistent or questionable (Merrell et al., 2006). More recently, however, studies have begun to show that relational aggression does affect boys psychosocially, and it also negatively impacts the environment (e.g. school) in which it occurs, making all students feel less safe (Leff, Waasdorp, & Crick, 2010).

While there may or may not be a difference in frequency of relational aggression between the genders, one difference appears to be in the perceptions of the relationally aggressive acts. Girls may engage in this type of aggression more than do boys because girls place a greater value on the importance of their friendships and are more intimate in their relationships in comparison to boys (Macoby, 2004). Girls appear to believe that

this type of victimization is the most hurtful, and they therefore are more sensitive to the effects of relational aggression (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Merrell et al., 2006; Talbott, Celinska, Simpson, & Coe, 2002). Boys, on the other hand, in their attempt to establish dominance, may believe overt, physical aggression to be most effective (Macoby, 2004). In either case, the agenda is the same. Physical and relational aggression are each intended to be hurtful, they suggest an imbalance of power and social status, and involve a feeling of dominance for the aggressor.

Traditionally, female psychosocial development places a high value on relationships. As a result, a girl's identity or sense of self is often connected closely to her relationships with others. In contrast, male psychosocial development emphasizes independence and autonomy, as well as involvement in larger social groups. Girls tend to have a smaller circle of friends with relationships that are intimate; boys tend to have a circle of friends with whom they carry out group activities (Macoby, 2004). One gender-specific factor that contributes to the development and manifestation of aggressive behavior in girls is that girls are more likely to fight with a person with whom they have close relationships. Historically, females are reprimanded more when they demonstrate overt aggression, and they are taught to use verbal rather than physical means to express negative feelings. In short, female aggression tends to be expressive rather than instrumental. Thus, girls' fear of losing valuable relationships, combined with their weaker physical strength and the social pressure to avoid overt expressions of aggression, appear to contribute to their use of more verbal and relational fighting strategies (Letendre, 2007).

**Relational aggression and social status.** In their review of research on psychosocial adjustment and gender, Merrell et al. (2006) also found that, regardless of gender, high social status is a prerequisite for effective relational aggression. Individuals with high social status may be able to use relational aggression more effectively, and they may engage in acts of relational aggression because they believe they will not be penalized because of their assumed well-liked position. They also may exhibit relationally aggressive behavior in order to maintain their high status among their peers. Andreou (2006) found that relational aggression is associated positively with perceived popularity in both boys and girls and that certain aspects of social intelligence (e.g., social skills and social awareness) are predictive of relationally aggressive behavior. Qualities such as being able to get along with other people and being able to get to know other people in a short period of time can be used to describe individuals with social intelligence (Andreou, 2006). Overall, these findings suggest that relationally aggressive girls often are perceived by peers, and by themselves, as influential and popular. They may not, however, be well liked. Although relationally aggressive behavior may lead to some peer rejection, it is also very effective for managing social power in ways that improve popularity (Andreou, 2006).

With respect to the concept of popularity, there also appear to be different “subtypes” of relationally aggressive youth (Estell et al., 2009; Puckett, Aikins, & Cillessen, 2008). Generally speaking, girls’ social behaviors can be perceived as a) pro-social and popular, b) relationally aggressive and popular, and c) relationally aggressive and unpopular. Because relational aggression involves a number of social skills and is most effective when “embedded” in a behavioral repertoire that includes pro-social

behaviors, the relationally aggressive and popular girls can cause the most harm. These are the girls who are socially manipulative and can navigate their social network and use their prowess to hurt others (Estell et al., 2009; Puckett, et al., 2008). How these girls, who are consistently mean, can maintain their popularity and high social status remains somewhat unclear.

As previously mentioned, some relational aggressors demonstrate an ability to understand and manipulate peer group standing. These girls are viewed as socially manipulative and influential, but not necessarily socially intelligent (Mayeux & Cillessen, 2008). Outwardly, they might have the appearance of social self-efficacy and self-confidence about their ability to manage social situations; however, inside, and perhaps subconsciously, they could be deeply fearful that they will lose their social superiority. In many ways, they must monitor their behaviors continually and care must be given that they use their relationally aggressive powers skillfully; otherwise their efforts might backfire and have the reverse effect (Puckett, et al., 2008).

It has been noted that relationally aggressive girls do not demonstrate aggression in all relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). They tend to become aggressive when they feel threatened or believe that they are disliked by others. In an examination of the functions of relationally aggressive behavior, Reynolds and Repetti (2010) identified two broad categories of reason that explain girls' aggression. The first category was more reactive and revolved around friendships and other group processes. These reasons included issues such as jealousy, revenge, attention seeking, self-protection, and a desire to be included in a certain group. The second category was more proactive and included reasons such as alleviating boredom, creating excitement or "drama," or having

something fun to do and talk about. Whatever the reason may be, acquiring a complete understanding of the underlying function of relationally aggressive behavior would provide very important information for the development of intervention and prevention programs (Reynolds & Repetti, 2010).

**Environmental factors and relational aggression.** Several environmental factors, particularly parental patterns of behavior, have been found to be related to aggressive and antisocial behaviors in all children and adolescents. These include use of authoritarian parenting styles, failure to set limits, failure to reinforce socially appropriate behavior, and parent-child coercion, particularly maternal coercion (Merrell et al., 2006). Several studies have pointed out that a reciprocal relationship exists between a child's coercive behavior and a parent's coercive behavior. That is, children from homes in which coercion and aggressive methods are used receive reinforcement for these behaviors, for they learn that these behaviors promote social success and allow them to "get what they want," albeit in a socially inappropriate way (Merrell et al., 2006).

From Bandura's social learning perspective, children also may learn aggressive strategies from modeling their parents' behavior (Kuppens et al., 2009). Relationally aggressive behavior in children parallels not only particular parenting practices, but also the manner in which parents resolve their own peer issues. When parents, particularly mothers, utilize relationally aggressive techniques with their own friends and family, children learn that social and emotional manipulation of others is a social style that can be used in many contexts. When these behaviors prove to be successful for the parent, the child then learns that such behavior is acceptable and effective in getting the desired result (Reed, Goldstein, Morris, & Keyes, 2008).

Studies also have found that mothers who are relationally aggressive with their own peers are more likely to be psychologically controlling with their children. Psychological control, given its manipulative and intrusive nature, is a construct very similar to relational aggression. Research has suggested that a parent's use of psychological control, or the use of behaviors such as invalidating feelings, inducing guilt, and withdrawing of affection, can be a factor in the development of relational aggression (Kuppens et al., 2009; Reed et al., 2008). Other parenting constructs that have documented relationships with aggressive behaviors, in general, include negative maternal affect, laxness, and the use of direct and punitive parenting techniques (Brown et al., 2007).

As previously mentioned, understanding the underlying function of relationally aggressive behavior would provide very important information for the development of intervention and prevention programs (Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). Children who are relationally aggressive and are perceived as popular would likely have little motivation to change their behavior. It is working for them within the context of their social environment, as their behavior allows them to hold high status and is oftentimes tolerated by their peers (Andreou, 2006). Additionally, understanding the emotional correlates of relational aggression is critically important. What feelings do the perpetrator and the victim experience prior to and at the time of the incident? Understanding how relationally aggressive incidents actually look and feel to the people involved is the key to understanding the overall dynamics (Reynolds & Repetti, 2010).

**Relational aggression and social information processing.** Social information processing theory also offers a very important framework for understanding and



addressing the problems associated with relational aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994). By looking at the social cognitions of children involved in conflict situations, one is able to gain a better understanding of the thoughts going through a child's mind when faced with a social problem. As discussed earlier, social information processing states that, when faced with social cues, children engage in a multi-step process before reacting to the situation: a) Encoding of situational cues, e.g., "*What is the problem here?*"; b) Interpreting those cues; e.g., "*What were the intentions of the other person?*"; c) Searching for a response, e.g., "*Based on how I feel, what are my options?*"; and d) Selecting a response, e.g., "*This is what I'm going to do*" (Crick & Dodge, 1994). By examining a child's cognitions at each step, one can gain a clear picture of the reasons for the behavior. In their review and reformulation of this model, Crick and Dodge (1994) also emphasized that emotions are an integral part of each information-processing step and should not be ignored.

Relationally aggressive children have unique decision-making processes (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Studies suggest that these children, like children with learning disabilities, demonstrate some social information processing deficits. For example, children who are relationally aggressive might misread social cues and attribute them to hostile or negative intentions. A relationally aggressive child might think that someone deliberately knocked the books out of her hand just to embarrass her. Additionally, relationally aggressive children tend to evaluate negative responses in a positive manner. *Why shouldn't I knock her books off the desk? She made me drop mine first!* Finally, a relationally aggressive child's ability to generate positive solutions to a social problem also might be impaired. She would have difficulty coming up with the options of just ignoring the book incident,

laughing about it, or even giving someone the benefit of the doubt by assuming that it might have been an accident (Leff, Waasdorp, et al, 2010; Murray-Close, Crick, & Galotti, 2006).

When involved in a social problem such as the one in this example, socially maladjusted children tend to interpret the overall situation more negatively than would well-adjusted children (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain this finding, including a) memory deficits that do not allow them to recall previously learned social information, b) selective attention to only particular types of social cues, and c) previously learned “schemata” that interfere with their ability to process social cues effectively. That is, an incident like the one described might immediately elicit a strong emotional reaction in relationally aggressive children that not only interferes with the encoding process, but also leads them to believe that they already have the situation figured out (Crick & Dodge, 1994). In the case of children with a learning disability, given their unique social and emotional processing styles, this type of emotional response likely occurs more often than not.

Examining a child’s social cognitions using the social information processing model is a very important part of understanding relational aggression. When children decide to behave aggressively, that decision is made, in part, as a result of their processing of social cues and their decision-making process. This model also includes an affective component in that it recognizes that immediate emotional reactions to social situations can significantly affect the social problem-solving process. However, this model does not include a moral component. It does not explore a child’s notion of

aggression as hurtful and morally wrong (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Murray-Close, et al., 2006).

**Relational aggression and moral development.** One might ask; Why do they hurt people? Don't these girls know it's wrong to behave that way? Don't they realize that they are making another person feel bad? What moral reasoning processes are relationally aggressive children using that might help them distinguish their behavior as right or wrong? In a study that explored the moral reasoning of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children, Murray-Close, et al., (2006) found that children of this age and developmental stage do adopt a moral orientation about aggression, in general. They consider issues of fairness and human welfare in their judgments. However, the children did differentiate between physical and relational aggression in their judgments in that they viewed physical aggression as more wrong than relational aggression, but relational aggression presented more frequently as a moral issue. This finding suggests that children of this age are aware that relationally aggressive behavior is morally wrong, but they may not be completely aware of its potential for harm. Additionally, children's judgment about aggressive behavior was found to be correlated significantly with their own behavior, as measured by teacher and peer reports (Murray-Close, et al., 2006).

Overall, it seems that children might recognize the moral implications of relational aggression, but because the effects cannot be seen, they do not understand fully the damage it can do to the victim. In his review of research on relational aggression, Merrell, et al., (2006) described the typical progression of the psychosocial effect of relational aggression on victims. When experiencing an act of relational aggression, victims first react with confusion and denial. They then begin to feel the psychological

pain of the act including depression and diminished self-confidence. This pain is followed by a growing fear or possibly paranoia that ultimately affects their trust in other people and future relationships. Finally, if the aggression continues, the victim will express a desire to escape the situation which could be reflected in school avoidance, physical illness, or possibly suicide (Merrell, et al., 2006).

### **Peer Victimization, Relational Aggression and Learning Disabilities**

Children with learning difficulties are clearly at an increased risk of being rejected and of being victimized by their nondisabled peers (Nabukoza, 2003; Rose, Espelage, D & Monda-Amaya, 2009; Singer, 2005). Studies that examine the dynamics of peer groups and the social relations of students with learning disabilities seem to suggest that students with mild disabilities may be more likely to be bullies and to be victims and that their patterns of social interaction and peer affiliation actually may exacerbate the risk for involvement in bullying ( Estell et al., 2009). Students with disabilities are more likely to adopt social roles that support aggression, more likely to associate with peers who also have social difficulties, and more likely to hold those peers in high esteem (Estell et al., 2009).

Children with language-based learning disabilities have difficulty not only with the written word, but also with the spoken word. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, children with language-based disabilities may have difficulty with expressing ideas clearly, learning and remembering vocabulary words, understanding questions, and following directions. Their language and behavior can be characterized as disorganized, confusing, and difficult to understand. Given the importance of the spoken word in almost all interactions, it is not surprising that these

children can have extraordinary difficulty maintaining satisfactory friendships and navigating their social world (Mishna, 2003).

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, learning disabilities and bullying can be like a “double jeopardy” (Mishna, 2003), for children with learning disabilities do tend to resemble those children who are victimized (Mishna, 2003; Singer, 2005).

However, the relationship between bullying and learning disabilities remains somewhat unclear. In a study that examined the psychosocial correlates of peer victimization in a sample of children with learning disabilities, Baumeister, Storch, & Geffen, (2008) found that children with learning disabilities and a comorbid psychiatric diagnosis, such as anxiety or depression, reported a significantly greater amount of peer victimization than did their peers with learning disabilities alone. This finding seems to suggest that the combination of the learning disorder and an emotional disorder, and not the learning disability alone, really places these children in “double jeopardy.”

While much research describes the psychosocial difficulties of children with learning disabilities, and also much research describes the psychosocial variables associated with bullying; these two issues rarely are addressed simultaneously. Singer (2005) described the cognitive affective processes that children with learning disabilities use when faced with a bullying situation. This study concluded that “children with dyslexia protect themselves from teasing by concealing both their emotions and their academic failure. Others, however, concentrate on their academic progress and their self-esteem seems to be strengthened by fighting against dyslexia” (Singer, 2005, p. 411). The most frequently mentioned thought processes of children with learning disabilities

were found to be a) to avoid or stop being bullied and b) to feel “normal” and protect one’s self-esteem (Singer, 2005).

What, then, are the thought processes and affective components associated with relational aggression? How do children with learning disabilities experience, understand, and interpret it? Are they just unarmed opponents against their socially intelligent peers, or do their problem-solving deficits force them to see relational aggression in a completely different light, thereby making them somewhat immune to some of its deleterious effects? This study will attempt to describe what relational aggression looks and feels like for children with language-based learning disabilities. It will provide a qualitative description of the social problem-solving skills reflected in the responses of children with learning disabilities to common social scenarios. Special considerations will be given to their thought processes, insights, and emotional understanding of each situation.

### Chapter III

#### Methods

##### Participants

The participants for this study included 17 girls in Grade 5 through 8 at the Academy in Manayunk (AIM), a private school for children with language-based learning disabilities (see Appendix A). Students who are admitted to AIM have a diagnosed reading, writing, or math disability that interferes with their ability to make adequate progress in a regular education program. That is, AIM students typically have average to above average cognitive abilities but are achieving at a level that is below what would be expected. AIM's admission policy states that "AIM's program is *not* appropriate for students whose difficulties are the result of a visual, hearing, or motor handicap; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; autism spectrum disorders; or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage" (see Appendix A). Like many students with a language-based learning disability, many of AIM's students also have a comorbid diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

The age range for the subjects was specified as such because middle childhood and adolescence appear to be the developmental periods in which relational aggression becomes especially problematic for girls. Studies have suggested that aggression, in general, increases in girls during Grades 3 through 6 (Low, Frey, & Brockman, 2010). It was felt that girls of this age are more likely to have experienced relationally aggressive acts, and developmentally, they are able to verbalize their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to these acts. The intent was to include girls with language-based learning

disabilities from a variety of backgrounds. Therefore, selection was not limited by socioeconomic status, religion, or ethnicity. In an effort to separate physical aggression from relational aggression, any girl with a diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder was excluded from the study. Finally, participants were considered volunteers and a sample of convenience; a demographic description is included in the Results section of this study.

### **Overview of Research Design**

Metaphorically, Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research as “an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material. This fabric is not explained easily or simply” (p. 35). In this investigation, the construct of relational aggression is the “fabric” that is being described. The “threads, colors, and textures” are the unique experiences and perceptions of each adolescent girl. Her learning disability serves to make the patterns in the fabric complex, distinctive, and most likely quite fragile. To complete the metaphor, the goal of the study is, therefore, to “weave” together the voices and experiences of the participants in order to gain a better understanding of this delicate fabric called relational aggression (Creswell, 2007).

Creswell (2007) outlines five different approaches to qualitative research: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study. Because the ultimate goal of this study is to generate a theory about the action, interactions, and social processes of people, a grounded theory approach was determined to be most appropriate. Grounded theory is a specific methodology developed in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss who believed that theory development should not come “off the shelf.” Rather, the grounded



theory approach goes beyond a mere description of the data in that it seeks to generate theory that is “grounded” in the stories (data) of the participants who have experienced the process (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The research goal therefore, is to develop a theory of the process, action, or interaction that is shaped by the perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2007).

The approach taken to this grounded theory study was systematic in that the investigator conducted interviews in the field. Participants, who were chosen through theoretical sampling, helped form the theory regarding relational aggression in children with language-based learning disabilities. Visits to the field occurred until enough data were collected to saturate the major categories involved in relational aggression. Creswell’s image for data collection in grounded theory research is a “zigzag” because the investigator is required to go out to the field to collect data, return home to analyze the data after each interview, and then go back to the field to collect more. As previously mentioned, this back-and-forth process occurs until the theory is fully elaborated (Creswell, 2007).

### **Measures**

Four instruments were utilized in this study. Each of these measures was designed to illicit information that would “saturate” the model. The first measure was a data collection form that was used to compile relevant background information on each participant (see Appendix B). This information was obtained from the student’s confidential file and included information regarding family and developmental history, current classification and secondary diagnosis (if any), cognitive ability levels, current

academic achievement levels, behavioral assessment scores and a description of her current educational program.

The second instrument was an open-ended interview designed by the researcher and the researcher's committee (see Appendix C). Each girl was provided with three vignettes and questions that addressed the perceived motive behind relational aggression (e.g., *Why might the person do this?*). Participants were asked to describe their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding relationally aggressive acts. Students also were invited to share any additional thoughts or feelings that they may have had, and clarifying probes were used as needed.

The third instrument was a close-ended questionnaire also developed by this researcher and her committee (see Appendix D). The purpose of this questionnaire was to gain a better understanding of the rate of occurrence of relational aggression for each girl (e.g., *How often does this happen in your peer group?*) and also of the perceived motives for relationally aggression (e.g., *What do you think are the two most likely motives for someone to do something like this?*). It provided a single vignette that describes a common relationally aggressive act (e.g., exclusion and rumors) and asked eight close-ended questions (e.g., five multiple choice and three questions with a Likert-scale response). In addition, four questions were designed to illicit a short answer response (e.g., *If you see something like this happen, what do you do?*).

The fourth instrument utilized was the Knowledge of Anger Processing Scale (KAPS; see Appendix E). The authors of this instrument were contacted and written permission to use this instrument was obtained (see Appendix F). Developed by Leff,

Cassano, Paquette, & Costigan, (2010), this scale is a knowledge-based measure of social information processing and anger management techniques. Used with predominantly urban, African American children, the KAPS was found to have strong psychometric properties with this population. It was felt that this instrument would be useful in this current study as the KAPS was designed to go beyond asking how one would react to a conflict situation. The KAPS utilizes a short vignette with multiple-choice format to identify the subject's understanding or knowledge of each of the steps involved in social information processing (e.g. "*If you can't tell if someone did something on purpose, what is the best thing to do?*"). Specific items address issues surrounding attribution of intentionality, physiological arousal and the importance of staying calm, and the choices one can make when involved in a social situation (e.g., entering a group, dealing with rumors, and being a bystander; Leff, Cassano, et al., 2010).

### **Procedures**

At the time of this study, 33 girls in Grade 5 through 8 attended AIM. Following the approval of both the school (AIM) and the College Institutional Review Board (see Appendices G & H), these girls were recruited for the study. Parents of each of these girls were contacted via mail and email. They were provided with an overview and the purpose of the study (see Appendices I & J), an informed consent form (see Appendix K), and a return envelope. Parents were asked to respond either positively or negatively to participation and were invited to contact this researcher with any questions they might have.

Parental consent and student assent (see Appendix L), were obtained for 17 girls prior to participation in the study. Three additional parents indicated that they did not want their daughter to participate in the study. Two more parents indicated that they would like their daughter to participate; however, the child did not feel comfortable discussing the topic and did not want to participate. In order to reach a point of saturation or “the point in the research when all concepts are well-defined and explained” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 142), all of the girls who received parental permission to participate in the study were interviewed.

Anonymity of participants was assured by assigning each interview case, including background data, measured responses, and interview transcripts, with a pseudonym, thus preventing the disclosure of the girl’s identity. A master list of subjects was kept with consent forms, and all data obtained from the interviews and reviews of records were kept in a locked file drawer when not in use by this investigator. An interview script (see Appendix M) was written, and a practice interview was held prior to beginning this investigation in order to assure the quality of the interview and the appropriateness of the measures being used. The interview script and practice interview tape were reviewed by the committee chair, and any necessary changes or suggestions for improvement were made.

Individual interviews with each girl were conducted in private during pre-arranged times which included regular school hours, before school, or after school. The location of the interview was a private office at AIM. Participants were told that the interview would be recorded and that their responses would be transcribed for further use

by this investigator. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Prior to beginning the interview protocol, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were told that they had the right to decline answering any questions that made them feel uncomfortable and that they may stop the interview at any time if they did not wish to continue. The participant was asked if she had any questions before beginning the interview; any questions were addressed before the interview began. At the end of the interview, students were offered the opportunity for debriefing. During the debriefing, if the participant was exhibiting signs of distress, her parents would have been contacted and a referral would have been made. No subject required further intervention in this regard.

Interviews began with the open-ended questionnaire. This portion of the interview was designed to illicit more substantive information regarding each girl's personal experiences with relational aggression. As previously described, each girl was provided with three vignettes (e.g., *You are walking up to your group of friends before class. You hear them talking about a party they went to over the weekend. When they see you, they stop talking and turn away from you.*) and questions that addressed the perceived motive behind relational aggression (e.g., *Why might the person do this?*). Participants were asked to describe their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding relationally aggressive acts. Each girl also was invited to share any additional thoughts, feelings, or experiences that they may have had. Clarifying probes were used as needed.

The close-ended questionnaire and KAPS were administered next. The purpose of each of these instruments was to obtain a clearer picture of the rate of occurrence of

the behaviors, the perceived motives behind relationally aggressive behavior, and each subject's knowledge or understanding of social information processing. Given the subjects' varying levels of reading comprehension, all questionnaires were read aloud to assure understanding.

After each interview was completed, recorded information was transcribed. Additionally, the investigator spent time after each interview recording immediate thoughts and impressions about the interview and interpreting the responses given on each measure. Transcripts, which were read and reviewed several times, were then coded for emerging themes or categories for further analysis. Once again, all participants were interviewed and it was felt that saturation was reached. More than 586 minutes of interview time were recorded and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is not a distinct step that occurs independently of data collection and report writing. These processes are interrelated and oftentimes occur simultaneously (Creswell, 2007). Data are organized, studied, interpreted, classified, and categorized as they are collected. It is a continuous loop in which coding, or categorizing the information, represents the "heart" of the data analysis and provides the researcher with the information necessary for interpretation that is independent of his or her personal views or views presented in the literature (Creswell, 2007).

The first step in analysis is data management. For this study, the primary investigator began by transcribing each interview, removing identifying information, and

assigning pseudonyms to each case. After each interview was transcribed and organized, transcripts were read and reread several times. Throughout this process, notes were taken, and the primary investigator began the process of interpreting and developing a system for categorizing the data. Grounded theory data analysis is a detailed procedure that consists of three phases of coding: *open coding*, a procedure that enables an investigator to develop categories from the obtained information; *axial coding*, which allows the investigator to connect the categories along specific dimensions; and *selective coding*, which essentially allows the researcher to create a story that unites the categories and ends with a set of theoretical proposals (Creswell, 2007).

A validation team assisted the researcher in the open-coding phase of analysis. The team consisted of the primary investigator; a Ph.D.-level colleague, who has been a school psychologist at AIM for 5 years; the third dissertation committee member, who is a Ph.D.-level developmental psychologist; and a Psy.D.-level clinical psychologist, who has qualitative research experience and is in a private practice that focuses on adolescent children's issues. After the data were examined by the primary investigator for salient categories of information, the validation team individually reviewed the transcripts and met as a team to discuss their perceptions of emerging categories. Each category was found to be composed of subcategories, called *properties*, which essentially condensed the database into a small set of themes that were inherent to the processes being studied. In this case, the process was relational aggression (Creswell, 2007).

Once an initial set of categories was developed, three central categories were selected as the phenomena of interest (Creswell, 2007). These central categories were

those that either were discussed extensively by the subjects or seemed central to the process (relational aggression) under investigation. Once the central categories were selected, the researcher returned to the data and began the axial-coding process. This process required that the data be reviewed again for insight into how the other identified categories related to the central phenomena. Ultimately, a theoretical model of relational aggression in children with language-based learning disabilities was generated based on the hypotheses or propositions that connected the categories to one another (Creswell, 2007).



## Chapter IV

### Results

The research findings were divided into four distinct sections: a) demographic findings, b) description of findings in response to the open-ended research questions, and c) description of findings in response to the close-ended questions, and d) description of the results of the Knowledge of Anger Processing Scale (KAPS), including both statistical and item analysis. The first section describes the demographics of the population with respect to age, grade, disability, and other relevant information. The second section provides descriptive summaries of the subjects' responses to open-ended questions about the three vignettes, including their thoughts, feelings and behaviors surrounding relationally aggressive acts. Beyond responding to the questions that were asked, the subjects also used their own voices to describe their personal experience with relational aggression. Categories and cross-case comparisons that emerged from this discussion are also discussed. The final section includes a description of the subjects' responses to the close-ended, multiple-choice, Likert-scale and short-answer questionnaires. Assigned pseudonyms are used throughout in order to protect subject anonymity.

#### **Demographic Findings.**

The participants in this study were 17 girls in Grade 5 through 8 at the Academy in Manayunk (AIM). They ranged in ages from 10 to 13 ( $M = 11.88$  years). All of the subject had a diagnosed language-based learning disability, with seven (41%) having an additional diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder for which they were on

medication, and 11 (64.7%) receiving speech and language therapy at school to address receptive and expressive language deficits. Thirteen (76.5%) were Caucasian, two (11.8%) were African American, one (5.8%) was Asian American, and 1(5.8%) was multi-racial. One subject was diagnosed as hearing impaired and one had an additional diagnosis of auditory processing disorder. Interestingly, seven (41%)were adopted (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Demographic Data Obtained from Participants' School Records*

NAME	Grade	Age	Race	Diag.	S & L	ADHD	Meds.	Adopted
Andrea	6	11	W	SLD	N	N	N	Y
Betsy	7	12	W	SLD	Y	N	N	N
Cindy	5	10	W	SLD	Y	N	N	N
Danielle	6	12	W	SLD	Y	N	N	Y
Elizabeth	7	13	Afr. Am.	SLD	N	Y	Y	Y
Francine	6	12	W	SLD	Y	N	Y	Y
Gabrielle	8	13	W	Aud. Proc.	N	Y	N	N
Hillary	8	13	W	SLD	N	Y	N	Y
Isabel	7	13	W	SLD	N	N	N	Y/N
Jenny	6	12	As. Am.	SLD	Y	N	N	N
Kelly	7	12	W	SLD	Y	N	Y	N
Lisa	6	11	Multi.	SLD	N	Y	Y	Y

Melanie	8	13	Afr. Am.	SLD	Y	Y	N	Y
Nancy	5	11	W	SLD	Y	Y	Y	N
Olivia	7	12	W	HI & SLD	Y	N	Y	N
Pamela	6	11	W	SLD	Y	N	N	N
Rachel	5	11	W	SLD	Y	Y	Y	Y/N

*Note: W = White, Afr. Am. = African-American, As. Am. = Asian American, and Multi = Multi-racial.*

A review of each girl's cognitive profile also was completed. Of the 17 girls, 15 had Full Scale IQ scores as measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Edition (WISC-IV) ( $n = 14$ ) or the Stanford-Binet, Fifth Edition ( $n = 1$ ). Two Full Scale IQ scores were not reported by the psychologist who conducted the evaluation due to the large amount of variability among the index scores. Two subjects' Working Memory Index and Processing Speed Index scores also were not reported because of variability. Table 2 reflects the mean Index and Full Scale scores for those subjects who were administered the WISC-IV. Overall, the mean of each Index score and the mean Full Scale IQ scores fell solidly in the Average range.

Table 2

*Mean Scores on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Edition (WISC-IV)*

WISC-IV	VCI	PRI	WMI	PSI	FSIQ
n	14	14	12	12	12
M	102.9	95.7	95.9	97.25	96.07
Range	89-124	82-112	83-104	85-131	84-112

*Note: VCI = Verbal Comprehension Index; PRI = Perceptual Reasoning Index;*

*WMI = Working Memory Index; and PSI = Processing Speed Index*

### **Descriptive Findings**

**Open-ended questionnaire and vignettes.** This section presents a summary and analysis of the themes that emerged from the open-ended interview questions related to the three vignettes. Overall, three major themes were identified as central to the occurrence of relational aggression in girls with language-based learning disabilities. These include: 1) developmental differences and reliance on adults, 2) social information processing and the need to know why, and 3) power and the bystander. Exemplar quotes are provided for each theme, including the speaker's pseudo-name and grade level (see Table 1).

***Developmental differences and reliance on adults.*** In general, female psychosocial development places a high value on relationships, and as a result, girls' sense of self is often closely connected to their relationships with others. In spite of their importance, however, there was a clear difference in the level of understanding of

relational aggression and friendships among the 5<sup>th</sup> through eighth-grade girls. In younger girls (Grades 5 and 6), relational aggression was viewed in a very concrete way. Incidents were seen as morally wrong, and younger girls appeared to rely heavily on the adults in their lives to take care of conflict situations. “Francine,” in sixth grade, told a story about the previous school year:

*In fifth grade, a boy was like calling me names a lot of the times and I asked him to stop but he didn't and it made me sad. So I told the teacher and he still didn't stop.*

“Rachel,” in fifth grade, described her friendship:

*Well, a couple times when we were fighting, (name) would like, if we were talking and she thought I was being mean to her, she would say, “Rachel's being mean to me!” But kind of around me, but not loudly enough that everyone would notice it was me.*

A fifth grader, “Nancy” described her perceptions of the way some of the girls in her class treated another person:

*Well, umm...at my old school, umm...this girl wanted to be in a conversation, but, but, they didn't really let her, so I saw her sitting in the corner, so I went over and said “Are you ok?” and she said “No, they're, they, they're not letting me umm...go into the conversation”, and then I told on them. Yeah, and then they got in trouble. Umm...Like, that was not very nice of them. What should I do? Tell on them or just do nothing? I'll just, I'll just tell on them.*

These girls knew the difference between right and wrong, but they did not know how to resolve the situation independently. If they made an effort to stop the bullying, and it did not work immediately, they turned to the adults in their lives to punish the perpetrator, as opposed to problem solving the situation. “Nancy,” in fifth grade, explained her approach:

*So, I would just like go to a teacher and say Umm...this kid, this girl, is like spreading rumors about me and that, that it's not actually true and she's trying to make friends with my friends and I really don't want her to. And it's my friend and I know that I'm never gonna let that happen.*

Girls at this age sometimes get caught up in negative feelings surrounding jealousy and competition for friendships. Rather than address their discomfort and anxiety, younger girls take a more concrete approach to resolving these uncomfortable feelings. “Rachel,” in fifth grade, described what this looks like with her friend:

*Well, if she's kind of really mad at me, she might try to make me like jealous of her, even if I tell her I'm not jealous of her, she might still be like, “Yeah, you are!” or like try to make me more jealous.... Well, she never really ends up making me jealous at all, but she tries to tell me like, um, like, one time she got her “Star” prize from the star box at our Monday morning meeting in the library, and I think one of her prizes that she could pick was to have lunch with a teacher and a friend, instead of going to the lunchroom, and she chose that one, and she went with another girl named (name) and Miss Z. And when I got back, she was there cause I didn't know where she went, and I was like, “Oh, whatever.”*

For younger girls, friendship is sometimes viewed as a tangible possession that can be given and taken away. Several of the girls described incidents during which a peer was allowed use her friendship as a way to manipulate other people. “Cindy,” a fifth grader, told a story which illustrates this:

*I share best friends with other people. Um...well, with my friend (name), she's my best friend, but she's also another person's best friend. And, we just both share her, and we don't like fight over anything. We just all sit together at lunch and stuff. Um...Sometimes I kind of feel left out because (name)'s talking to my other friend, and I 'm just kind of like sitting there. And then I just like try to start a conversation, but they just don't listen to me sometimes.*

Once again, given their concrete view of the situation, the younger girls seemed to feel that they could just switch their friendships “off and on,” as if the friendship were a light. Rachel, fifth grade, explained how it worked for her:

*Well...also with (name) cause, like in the beginning of the year we were really good friends and then we didn't want to be friends anymore, so we have been fighting off and on a little bit since then. And, well, sometimes lately she, I'll, when we're kind of like fighting or something, I'll see her like whispering into someone's else's ear, and I don't think it's about me, so I'll just move on. But then, like a minute later, I'll look up and it's back and it looks like the person that she told her, she is looking at me in a way that makes me feel like it's about me.*

As these girls grow a bit older, their views of relational aggression and friendships become a bit more complex; however, there is still a strong reliance on adults for support

and intervention. With regard to friendships, very few of the older girls in the study related incidents during which they felt like they were competing for someone's friendship. They did not view friendship as something they might have one day and then not have the next. The stories that were elicited by each vignette reflected a view of friendship as one that meant being accepted and included in a certain group. They placed a great deal of value on their connections with their social group, and when these connections were threatened, they felt distressed. Their experience with relational aggression, therefore, typically took the form of exclusion and rumors. "Kelly," a seventh grader, described a recent incident when one of her friends was excluded from an activity:

*Like yesterday, I was invited to somebody's house...Yeah, and so was somebody else. But, like, one person wasn't invited. So, I kind of felt bad for that person, so I asked the person that we went to her house...I said, "Do you think we could invite this person?" And she said she kind of didn't really want her to come so... She thought it was going to start like a fight or something, like she thought that she just didn't want her there. So the girl (the one not invited) said she was fine with it...she didn't really care, but I could kind of tell that like she did care because she like didn't seem like the same. Yeah...and I kind of felt like she was left out.*

"Olivia," in seventh grade, describes her experience with exclusion:

*It's not like, at the end of the year last year my group of friends was just sort of talking about a party, and they were like should I wear a fancy dress or a non-*



*fancy dress or a shirt. And then I walked over and was like what are you guys talking about and then they turned to me and were like, nothing. I didn't really do anything. I kind of just like walked away. I'm like, I was like so mad at them, like ok so they're not my real friends.... Umm...see that weren't really trying to put me down, they didn't like really want me to hear, but I heard 'cause I walked up to them and I heard what they were saying. And then when I turned, and then they turned around and I was like, "What are you guys talking about?" And they were like, "Oh, nothing."*

Rumors also were seen as a way to damage someone's relationship with her social group. Interestingly, many of these girls seemed to feel as if they had very little control over rumors. Once a rumor was started, they appeared to believe that there was very little they could do to stop it. They had a need to know if a rumor was true, as if truth would make it justifiable. Additionally, many of these girls seemed to feel that as long as they did not start the rumor, talking about it amongst other people was acceptable. "Isabel," in seventh grade, related her feelings about rumors:

*Umm..I think it happens to like, a lot of people. Like, there's just a lot of stuff that isn't true about you that people think. Cause like, somebody spreads it around.... I guess, I guess yeah (giggles) Somebody thinks about, thinks about them and then everybody knows it's like true, but it's not like, yeah.*

"Melanie," an eighth grader, described how powerless she would feel if a rumor were spread about her:

*If it was a friend of mine, I really would have no idea. I would be really upset with the other person, and I don't even think I would talk to them. And I'd be really embarrassed (Laugh). I would feel like no one would be able to listen to me anymore because they think that I've like done something...I don't know what it is that I've done, but...Yeah...and then if I like went to a teacher, they would be like, "Oh, wow, you have to go to a teacher.*

"Kelly," in seventh grade, told a story about a rumor spread about her friend.

*So, um they were all like talking about something that somebody did...so...Yeah, and then they pulled me to the side, the two boys, to ask me what I saw. And I really didn't know what to do... And then...I think that it was a rumor because the girl came up to me and like said, "Can you tell the boys to stop because, um?" No, she turned around and told the boys to stop, and she wanted me to help her get them to stop because it wasn't true, and she didn't want it to be...like it was a long time ago, and she just wanted to like...(To forget about it?) Yeah! And not make such a big deal about something that didn't really happen. I'm like really confused. And, I really didn't know what to say because I like really didn't know what happened.*

A sixth grader, "Lisa," related her experiences with rumors:

*Umm...Well, if I heard someone over, like...if I overheard something said, and I made sure that it was true, I'd be like, "Oh!" I would tell my best friend, and say like, "This is happening." Even if I don't know if it's "super true," I'd be like,*

*“This is happening. This is what I heard.” They don’t normally tell people, though.*

With regard to resolving some of these relational problems, the older adolescent girls differ from the younger girls in several ways. The older girls appeared to have some ability to take the other person’s perspective and could hypothesize reasons for someone to behave in a relationally aggressive manner. When they saw such behavior occur, these girls were able to say they felt bad about the relational aggression, and they will oftentimes know the appropriate response. However, they were not always capable of following through. “Melanie,” an eighth grader, told a story of her friend being excluded and how she helped her handle the situation:

*Well, my friend, she was walking up...she has like a locker that’s next to all the Upper School girls, but she’s friends with them. And they were talking about a party. It wasn’t...it hadn’t happened yet. They were talking about having a party and the girl asked what time the party was, and they said, “Oh, you’re not invited.” Maybe they were just upset with her or maybe they didn’t like her because she was younger than them, but...I don’t know. Yeah. Um...I didn’t say anything to them but she was like crying. She was really upset. We went to...I went with her to the office and she’s...she’s like a mess. (Laugh) So I just kind of sat with her until I had to go back to class, but...*

“Kelly,” in seventh grade, described her thoughts when she saw someone roll her eyes and complain about having to work with another student:

*They just kind of rolled their eyes like that (demonstrates a very subtle roll of the eyes off to the side). Rolled their eyes as they were looking away... I thought it was kind of mean. Yeah, she probably shouldn't have done that. She probably should have just said, "OK, well...I have to work with this person so I might as well get it over with." Maybe she was just like trying to be like funny cause she like looked at me when she rolled her eyes...so she was just like turning her head toward me, cause the other girl was sitting there (points to the other side). So, I don't know, maybe she was just like trying to tell me and like rolling her eyes... I just kind of saw her and then just looked back like, the way I was, like looked back to what we were doing in class. I just tried to ignore it.*

Although the older girls seemed to have a view of friendship and friendship issues different from the views of the younger girls, they still seemed to depend on adults to help them resolve their problems. They were not as quick as the younger girls to have an adult intervene; however, they did eventually seek out adult intervention for structure and guidance. This population of girls seemed to need an adult to help them process the situation accurately. If their initial attempt to resolve the issue was ineffective, or if the situation was serious, they typically turned to their mothers for help. "Melanie," in eighth grade, described how her mother helped her think about the situation:

*She always tells me that this person is probably being mean to me because of something else. So... if I tell her that I haven't done anything, like something else that's personal or something else that happened to them today, or they're just having a hard day. Or like that...yeah. (So how does she tell you to handle it?)*

*She...Oh boy! Um, (laughs)...walk away (pause) try to ignore them. Um...she's told me that if it keeps happening constantly, tell a teacher...or someone else who's there.*

***Social information processing and the need to know why.*** Crick and Dodge's (1994) model of social information processing defines the specific mental steps that children take when faced with social situations. Steps 1 and 2 of this process involve the encoding and interpretation of social cues. Encoding requires attention, focus, and immediate perception of both internal and external cues. Interpretation is a somewhat complex process involving mental representation, evaluation of self and others, causal analysis, and inferences about attributions and intent. Additionally, all of these processes are guided by experiences, images, and schemata that are stored in the person's long-term memory (Crick & Dodge, 1994). In short, during these first two steps, a child develops an understanding of the situation.

Girls with language-based learning disabilities appear to have significant difficulty with these first two steps. Overall, virtually none of the girls interviewed mentioned that they ever paid any attention to the facial expressions or body language of the other parties involved in bullying incidents. Even in the scenario involving a person rolling her eyes, only two girls indicated that they had seen this kind of behavior, and one of them admitted that she did not really understand why the girl would roll her eyes. One explanation could be that their ability to attend to these cues and to focus on the necessary information is compromised by their diagnosed learning disabilities and, in the case of seven of the girls, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. In an incident

involving an act of physical aggression, “Lisa,” a sixth grader, admitted to not understanding why something like that might happen:

*Hmm...Yeah. One time one kid shoved another kid right when I was standing there. Like, lightly shoved and one of the kid's backpack was like really heavy so he fell over. Yeah. I think it was just for fun. Like, I don't know. I didn't see the whole thing. They might have gotten in a fight before... I was with my friends and so, um, we actually went up to the guy that shoved the other guy and like said, “You should apologize!”*

In the case of relational aggression, “Elizabeth,” in seventh grade, describes her confusion about how to interpret a situation:

*She does talk behind my back a lot, even though she tells me that she doesn't, she umm...doesn't do it secretly, she does it in public and whenever I walk to my other friend she's telling about me I hear her, and she's like, “I'm not talking behind your back at all.” But she does... I just forget about it, 'cause if I do something then she's gonna do something back to me 'cause it's happened before.... I feel devastated and umm...really upset because it means that she really doesn't care about me being her friend. And umm...she also does it to my other friends to which she also tells me she doesn't like any of us. She just wants to do, she just wants...Umm...(pause) I think she just wants to...umm...I think, she probably feels like she's, gets like lonely a lot and that she wants friends but she doesn't know how to really, how to like tell each other she wants to be our friend and that stuff, But she has to do it in a way that hurts us and that she really doesn't*

*understand..... Me and my friends talk about it. And we try to figure out how we are suppose to solve this and what we are suppose to do because we want to talk to her first before we tell a teacher.*

Apparently many of these girls had difficulty with perspective-taking, a lack that severely inhibited their ability to interpret ambiguous situations in an accurate manner. Oftentimes, they would confront the aggressor to clarify the reasons for the aggression, and if the aggression was justifiable, it could be seen as acceptable. "Rachel," in sixth grade, described how she would handle a conflict situation:

*Well, I'd go up to whoever it was and ask them if it was about me or if it was something about me that they didn't want me to find out, and if they said no, then I would ask them, I would tell them probably, like, something like, "OK, but if this isn't nice about me or someone else, like my friend or something, it's not the right thing to do and you'll probably get in trouble if someone finds out, like me or my friends."*

"Hillary," an eighth grader, explained her understanding of why relational aggression occurs:

*Like, if someone bullies someone it's not because they don't like it or for popularity, they do it because like, this person just did something to me or this person is annoying me. Like kind of like payback. (So, like revenge?) But it's not even like revenge. Like, oh you did this in another class, it's like you do this right now or I'm gonna insult you right now.*

Additionally, given their receptive and expressive language problems, many of the girls did not appear to have the language necessary to talk about relational aggression. They struggled to describe their thoughts and feelings, and overall, they required prompting to retrieve personal examples. It is interesting to note that on several occasions, the girls denied having experienced a specific type of incident (e.g. exclusion, rumors). Yet, later in the interview, they offered a perfect example. Once again, this could be related to their ability to retrieve the information, or to the difficulty they have talking about it. If they did not have the language to talk about it, then they probably did not have the language to think about it and interpret the situation objectively. “Andrea,” in sixth grade, described a confusing experience that she had:

*Well, in the morning, yesterday...this little group was hanging around, and then someone came up and said that someone else wanted to like, like...I really don't know what it was all about, but...they wanted to like hug me or something. And, I thought it was true. 'Cause it sounded true, and the person who said it...I mean the person who I thought had said it, he sometimes can lie. So, at first, I thought it was true, but I thought back in fifth grade when, um, he used to lie a lot to the teachers, people. And so, everyone was like, that's all they could think about, that rumor, and so I had to do something about it.*

Sixth grader “Jenny’s” account of a relationally aggressive situation illustrates the confusion she had about the incident and also the difficulty she had describing it. Apparently, she was further confused by her mother’s involvement:



*I was wondering if that girl was, if my friend was mad at a person, because that person was doing mean stuff, and I wanted that person, I wanted my friend to be mad at the person, but my friend is that, my Mom said umm...you know umm...it doesn't really matter if she's mad, she just doesn't talk to you and something like that.... Yeah, like it, my Mom like said it doesn't matter if she's mad, just care, like, just like worry about yourself or something.... Like, umm....when I say a negative word to a person who's been really mean to me, annoying me and I don't want to talk to that person or it's like, being annoying, I like tell my Mom. I'm like, umm....and my Mom disagrees and say no you should do that.... Well, it won't, she won't...she won't really care, she just cares that umm...I am that, my, I should just, she umm...that she just like cares that the person shouldn't be telling rumors and talking behind my back.*

In their attempts to heal their relationships and make everything fine, these girls sometimes questioned why. At times they tried to use reason and logic to make sense of the situation, and in a few cases, the girls described their immediate thoughts as “Why me?” “What did I do?” “Why is she doing that?” Sixth grader “Nancy,” described her questioning:

*Well, it's my friend and I really like her, but I'm like friends with everyone in here, so umm... I like say I'm friends with everybody and then umm...one day she says, they said, “Thanks for being such a great friend!” in a mean way . Yeah, and I'm like what did I do?... I was like, that's weird. I thought (name) liked me, now she doesn't. And umm...that made me feel really bad.*

“Danielle,” in sixth grade, wondered what she did to deserve being treated badly:

*Um...I kind of just want to know why they did it. And then maybe I would go tell a teacher. Maybe they don't...maybe somebody else went over to the person and said it was my fault that and then they would try to get back at me.*

Eighth grader “Melanie,” described her logic:

*Ok. So like if someone is making fun of someone else, and then that person says, “Oh, that’s not nice!” and then the next day you see that same person who said to you that that’s not nice, doing the same thing to that other person...so like if someone is like, “Oh, that’s like, nice skirt!” being like sarcastic, and then the other kids like, “Hey, that’s not nice!” And then the next day she says something really mean to that person about like what she’s wearing, yeah, and then you’re just like, “Oh, well you just told me yesterday to be nicer to her, and then, now you’re doing the same exact thing!”... I guess they want to just like seem to everyone else that they’re like a really good person, and then, well not like really good or not that they’re a bad person, but I mean like prove to everyone that they’re....responsible? (Laugh) And then when they’re alone with this person, they’re like, “You’re really mean. Go away. You’re so annoying!” I think they don’t mean what they said before. I think they’re just saying that because they want to like seem more responsible. But they’re not actually trying to defend this other person.*

**Power and the bystander.** Relational aggression is clearly about power and one person having more over another. Relational aggression causes the imbalance, and it

solidifies the rules of the "in" group by taking power away from the victim. It also strengthens one relationship by damaging another. Sixth grader "Pamela," offered her point of view:

*Well I do have a, I found out one reason why girls are mean to each other. It's because girls get taught over the years, from older girls or TV shows or websites or things on the internet, you get taught it's not really the girls' fault why they're mean, they just learn it over the years. Everyone, like they learn it from guys, they learn it from girls that spread gossip because we got taught by it, cause it doesn't come and it goes, it stays with you and you just know that everyone's gonna gossip about you and you just get taught how to do it from older people and from TV shows or anything. I do sometimes have control over it but sometimes I just want to let it out and yell at the person for being rude to another person, or being rude to me. But I don't yell at them. Of course I say it in a calm voice. And they just keep on going. The more you tell them to stop, the more they'll keep on doing it cause they're obviously getting power from you and even if you're ignoring them you're still giving power to them. Either way, you're giving power to them. (Can this change?) No, unless you never get involved and everyone likes you, which to me is impossible.*

Pamela also offered an example:

*Umm...well sometimes umm...people come up to you and say that person doesn't like you that why they didn't invite you and they were talking about you in the party. That's what sometimes people do or they make up rumors about the party.*

*Because they just want to hurt me and take my power away to make me the weaker one and make me feel terrible about myself. And then that person feels good about themselves that they just did that.*

Eighth-grader “Gabrielle,” described the power she felt when she “played mean” in a school production:

*I can play mean, I can. But umm...then in the end it was like, oh why don't we all go see a movie on Friday? My Dad can get us another movie later and then we can all go, and we were all like, “Yey!” I felt a lot of power.... Yeah, I actually didn't like it though, 'cause at the end I was like, (name), I'm really sorry, she was like, “For what?” I was like, “For how I treated you!” and she was like, “It was a play.”*

When considering the bystander's relationship with power, there are two points that need to be made. First, the bystander seems to be contributing to the imbalance of power. With these girls, the bystander saw relational aggression happen, she knew it was wrong, but she could not seem to do anything about it. At times she would make an effort to defend herself or the victim and put the bully in her place. Other times, she preferred to just stay out of the bully's way, as if acting like her friend easier than risking getting involved and becoming a potential victim. From a social psychology standpoint, in cases involving several bystanders, this kind of avoidance may be due to a diffusion of responsibility. “Kelly,” a seventh grader, described what she did when she watched one of her classmates being excluded from an event:

*Yeah...and I kind of felt like she was left out. Yeah...Um...and then like the next day like, we just kind of went over. Like nothing really got handled. I'd be kind of feeling upset, too. Like, they all didn't want me there and like they're all just going to talk about me, and like they're going off and having fun and then we, um,...two of the girls were talking about it, and the girl that wasn't invited heard, and like kind of...(was upset).*

Secondly, the bystander may be the only one with the power to do anything about relational aggression. If the bystander can contribute to the imbalance of power, one may infer that she can take power away from the aggressor, as well. "Gabrielle," an eighth grader, described the way she handled a relationally aggressive incident:

*I was very artistic and my friend Sarah and I. She was my best friend then, but I don't really talk to her anymore. But we umm...we would draw pictures and then just attach them to this huge long chain of papers, and they would just like make a story. We thought it was awesome, we did it every day. But someone, then there was this whole birthday party thing going on and something was like, "Oh,..(name) do you want to come? And I was like, "Yeah sure, I guess." And then Sarah was sitting right next to me, and then they just walked away. And she was like, "Are you really going to go?" And I'm like, "No, no, I'm not gonna go cause they didn't invite you."*

"Gabrielle" also described a strategy that she has used to prevent hurt feelings in the past:

*Everyone in our little group was good at it (thinking on the spot), I mean, I'm good at it too. But I don't really do it. I don't really do it unless I really need to,*

*unless I absolutely need to avoid hurting someone's feelings, like, if two of my friends were just talking about someone and I was kind of just standing there, and then that person walks up, then I just kind of, just take them aside and say, "Oh, we were just talking about blah, blah, blah," but loud enough for them to hear, so they know, then I'll just tell them later. That like, you know, that they're not really good friends or something. Well, if it's to protect someone else, or tell someone else then we just, we know it's the right thing to do.*

**Close-ended questionnaire.** On the close-ended questionnaire, subjects were given a short vignette that illustrated a situation involving spreading rumors and exclusion. They were asked to respond to several multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale questions related to this scenario. They were then asked to respond to similar questions based on their own experiences with relational aggression.

Generally, subject responses indicate that the girls perceived improvement in a person's popularity as the most common motive for relational aggression. "Lisa," a 6<sup>th</sup> grader explained her point of view:

*I mean like if someone thinks like you're the "top dog," then they're going to do whatever you want 'cause they want to be popular, too. And then they're going, then like they're basically the top dog in that situation, 'cause you want to be like them. (What makes someone "top dog?") Popularity... How many people they know and are friends with, know... That's just like, if you don't have like the friends that that person has, that's OK. I mean, at least you have friends. It's better than nothing and even if you want more friends, you can make friends with*

*them on your own, not just following around one kid, like, “OK. I’m your little sidekick!” (sarcastically).*

“Gabrielle,” an eighth grader, described a personal experience:

*Well...umm... Well in my old school, they had a group of girls called the M&M’s. It was made out of (counting) five girls and they were, I don’t know, I guess the popular girls but no one really thought of them as the popular girls, they just did. Well, once they like put notes in people’s lockers about them, which was mean. They umm...one of the girls, was just really mean, and they all just realized that and they all just stopped talking to her. ‘Cause she was, I’ve known her since I was in kindergarten and pre-school, and she’s always been mean. I mean, she was smart too, but we just all hung out in a group and she just called us the nerds.*

The need for power and control and the need to put someone down were the two second-most likely motives, as reported by these girls. “Pamela,” a sixth grader describes her perceptions of power:

*I do sometimes have control over it (being mean) but sometimes I just want to let it out and yell at the person for being rude to another person, or being rude to me. But I don’t yell at them, of course I say it in a calm voice. And they just keep on going, the more you tell them to stop the more they’ll keep on doing it cause they’re obviously getting power from you and even if you’re ignoring them, you’re still giving power to them. Either way, you’re giving power to them. (Can*

this change?) *No, unless you never get involved and everyone likes you, which to me is impossible.*

“Melanie,” an eighth grader, describe a common situation in which someone acts nicely one day, and then deliberately turns around and is mean to the same person:

*Ok. So like if someone is making fun of someone else, and then that person says, “Oh, that’s not nice!” and then the next day you see that same person who said to you that that’s not nice, doing the same thing to that other person.... OK...so like if someone is like, “Oh, that’s like, nice skirt!” being like sarcastic, and then the other kids like, “Hey, that’s not nice!” And then the next day she says something really mean to that person about like what she’s wearing. Yeah, and then you’re just like, “Oh, well you just told me yesterday to be nicer to her, and then, now you’re doing the same exact thing!”... I guess they want to just like seem to everyone else that they’re like a really good person, and then, well not like really good or not that they’re a bad person, but I mean like prove to everyone that they’re....responsible? And then when they’re alone with this person, they’re like, “You’re really mean. Go away. You’re so annoying!” I think they don’t mean what they said before. I think they’re just saying that because they want to like seem more responsible. (I see) But they’re not actually trying to defend this other person.*

“Elizabeth,” a seventh grader, tried to makes some sense out of a situation during which someone was consistently mean to other people:



*Umm...(pause) I think she just wants to...ummm...I think, she probably feels like she's, gets like lonely a lot and that she wants friends but she doesn't know how to really, how to like tell each other she wants to be our friend and that stuff, But she has to do it in a way that hurts us and that she really doesn't understand...Me and my friends talk about it. And we try to figure out how we are supposed to solve this and what we are suppose to do because we want to talk to her first, before we tell a teacher. We definitely need to go to someone to talk about what is happening between us and how she really doesn't understand what's going on and that she needs to learn how to do it a different way...Yeah.*

The most frequently reported relationally aggressive act the girls had experienced was being talked about behind their back. "Elizabeth," in seventh grade, described her experience:

*She does talk behind my back a lot, even though she tells me that she doesn't, she umm...doesn't know it secretly, she does it in public and whenever I walk to my other friend she's telling about me I hear her, and she like, I'm not talking behind your back at all but she does...*

"Andrea," a sixth grader, described a personal experience with talking behind someone's back:

*Um...Me and this girl were sitting together, and she started talking about my other friend that was sitting right across from us... And after the class, she, the girl, she said not to tell my other friend what she said about her. And my friend said, "Was she talking about me?" and my other friend, well she said that and I*

*said, "Well...kind of." And so we had to go the teacher to say that someone was gossiping...I thought, "This won't turn out good if she keeps doing this."*

Having rumors spread about them and being excluded from an activity or event were the two second most common experiences for these girls. "Elizabeth," a seventh grader, described exclusion at her lunch table:

*A girl that I know she excluded another girl from the lunch table and she said, "You're not allowed to sit here because (pause) you follow us around too much and it's like, unfair to, umm, to each other. And that you always, like, you don't have to always have to be with us, you can also, like, go, umm...like, you don't have to always follow us around, you can always find someone else too!" and yeah.*

"Kelly," also a seventh grader, described a personal experience:

*Somebody was having like a party, and then somebody wasn't invited. It kind of happened like the story. Yeah it was a Bat Mitzvah and they just kind of like, when the person walked up, they just kind of like, it was just kind of like an awkward silence, nobody was talking. We just kind of looked at the person.... I thought it was kind of mean.*

When asked what they believed the other person's reasons were for behaving this way, the girls' responses varied somewhat. They perceived their aggressor to be acting out of a need for power or control, to improve their popularity, or a need to put someone else down. Revenge and improving negative feelings (e.g., jealousy) also were reported

as common motives for relationally aggressive acts. “Pamela,” in sixth grade, explains her views of power:

*Umm...well sometimes umm...people come up to you and say that person doesn't like you that why they didn't invite you and they were talking about you in the party. That's what sometimes people do or they make up rumors about the party. Because they just want to hurt me and take my power away to make me the weaker one and make me feel terrible about myself. And then that person feels good about themselves that they just did that. I was really depressed.*

“Olivia,” a seventh grader, described what exclusion looked like for her:

*Umm...there was like a bunch of us girls, my class only had like 5 girls, and there was this one that was like the queen girl. Yeah, and she was like the best out of all of us and then I walked up to them and they were like, “No, you can't!” Yeah, and they were like talked to the hand, they showed their hand (puts hand up in front of her face)... And then, like, they were just mad at me, I have no idea why, but they were.*

Interestingly, “Hillary,” an eighth grader, believed that people use rumors to initiate conversation:

*Like some people, aren't able to start normal conversations about normal things, like they did something or they saw a movie or something. They start conversations about rumors.*

The girls then were asked if they had ever acted in a relationally aggressive manner towards another person. The most common act reported was talking about

someone behind his or her back, followed by excluding someone from an activity or event. “Betsy,” a seventh grader, explained exclusion during lunch:

*Like a lot of that (exclusion) happens, I would say, at lunch...with one person. I mean, I don't really want to sit with her, but I will sit with her, like, I don't want to that much, but I want to be nice. Sometimes people won't make space for her just so she doesn't sit at that table.*

Sixth grader, “Rachel,” confessed why she sometimes tells secrets:

*Well...I sometimes tell secrets just because sometimes, because sometimes I don't, like later on, because it's not a good idea to tell secrets, but, it just, sometimes it's fun... Sometimes you might think it's fun to tell a secret. Yeah, like it's kind of funny or something...*

Sixth grader, “Pamela's” told a personal story:

*Yeah. So, there was this one girl I really, really, really disliked, and as you think, let's say this girl is like, she was popular, everyone loved her and everything, and you always think, like, “No one can be that perfect!” But I never exactly thought about that, but she always got her way. She was a spoiled little brat. She had no life. And she thought everything, everything around her was about her. And I just wanted to stand up for her, I mean stand up for myself and my friends to her. And just to tell her to stop and then I made a rumor that says umm...she...I forgot what the rumor was about, like that she did something really terrible to one of my friends and my friends did agree to help me with it.*

Interestingly, only one girl mentioned sending a threatening email or text.

*It was like when (name) was hitting me...not like huge hitting me, but I was thinking I was gonna tell finally to my parents that she was hitting me and she was kind of bullying me. I sent her a text, like after I called her and told her that she should like expect it. I'm going to make sure she gets talked to about it. Then after we hung up, I sent her a text saying, "It's not OK...I hope you know!"*

When asked their reasons for acting in a relationally aggressive manner, the girls most frequently reported that the victim was annoying or was bothering them. They also indicated that may have been seeking revenge or just trying to make themselves feel better about the situation. "Hillary," an eighth grader, explained her opinion:

*Like, if someone bullies someone it's not because they don't like it or for popularity, they do it because like, this person just did something to me or this person is annoying me. Like kind of like payback. But it's not even like revenge. Like, oh you did this in another class, it's like you do this right now or I'm gonna insult you right now. But I don't,*

"Lisa," in sixth grade, describes her experience with gossip:

*Um, uh...Well, last year, like there was this whole thing about these two girls gossiping. And they would like...we called, like... since they would kind of make up stories about us, we were just like, "OK...we're going to fight back." And we called them the "Gossip Girls" as a joke and they didn't really care. And then, like so...and then like if anyone, like...I remember I went up to them and was like "Hey!" with two of my friends, and they were just like "Oh...Hi." (Sarcastically)*

"Lisa" also linked relational aggression to jealousy and manipulation:

*'cause one of my friends, um, is friends with me and she, um, and one of my best friends is in another grade and since I hang out with that kid, she gets to know that kid better and better. And so, it's kind of like stealing your friend a little, cause then I see the two girls together and I'm like "You weren't friends a day ago!"... Yeah. I feel like used, like I mean, I've been friends with the girl that is ...um just like, my friend. I've know her since I was like a baby, so I know her really, really well now. And so I hang out with her a lot and then the other girl tags along with me and she's just like, "Hey-ey!" (Sarcastically)*

Thirteen of 17 girls reported that they tell their mothers when something like this happens to them, especially "if it is it's important," "makes them really upset," or "if it gets out of control." "Melanie," an eighth grader, indicated that she tells her mother everything because "She is kind of like my best friend," while "Isabel" reported that she does not tell her mother anything because "my mom's crazy." When asked what this meant, she stated that her mother tended to overreact, potentially making the situation even worse. Sixth grader, "Pamela," described her experience with telling her mother:

*I forget exactly who, but I do remember the story. That certain person, she was making rumors about in school and I told her (my mom) for once, 'cause I thought my Mom would get involved. And she literally went up to her Mom, and told her to tell her daughter to please stop. She literally got involved by doing that and I told her not to.... More drama.... Yep, that's pretty much it. So she just made it worse.... That's exactly why I don't tell her that much.*

The advice that their mothers give them varies somewhat; however, most of the responses centered around standing up for themselves or the victim, pointing out that the behavior was wrong, reasoning with the bully, telling a teacher, or just ignoring the incident altogether. “Olivia,” seventh grade, described her mother’s advice:

*Umm... (pause)...She kind of just like talks to me about it. But she doesn't tell me to do anything like something she says you should talk to her and ask her what it is or like talk to her and then, talk to her and tell her and like ask her what's going on.*

“Jenny,” sixth grade, explained her mother’s involvement:

*Ok. Umm...well, umm... This person was like having, umm...my friend, well my friend and like my other friend, well kind of, were like having, like hanging out together, like having a play date, and my other friend was umm...had been telling my friend that umm... something, making up a rumor that's not true, and my friend's Mom's friend heard it. And that's how I knew, I told my Mom, and my Mom told me, and that's how I knew, she made up a rumor.*

When asked what they do when they see relational aggression occur, the girls reported that they either try to stand up for the victim and tell the bully she is wrong, or they seek adult help. “Rachel,” fifth grade, explains:

*If I see someone else getting bullied... Well if they're that much my friend, then I might go up and make sure that nothing's going on with them and then if they're not really my friend, I might not do that, but if they are my friend really well, and I think that's not good, sometimes I forget that I shouldn't go in the middle of it*

*and then sometimes I say they should tell someone about it or they should go up and say this does not help, it's not nice to whoever...*

“Olivia,” in seventh grade, describes her efforts:

*(Pause)...Umm...I'd probably walk up to the umm...I'd probably walk up to the person that is saying (the bully?) yeah the bully, and say, “You should probably, you shouldn't be mean!” and then ask the other person if they were ok.*

“Elizabeth,” seventh grade, related to the victim:

*Like, right when I hear it I would go tell a teacher 'cause I know how that person might be feeling, and I know how it feels to be, to have that same thing happen to you, so I would go tell a teacher right away.*

“Melanie,” an eighth grader, tried to make some sense of the situation:

*I would probably, probably talk to the person...or not talk to them like walk up and talk to them. I mean just be like, “Why would you say that?” ‘Cause I feel like if there's no reason for that person to be mean to the other person, why be mean to the person? If there was a reason, then...Oh, God, that's a good question. If there was a reason, then they should settle it a different way, especially if they're knowing that that person is really like...I'm trying to think of the word...is really upset easily.*

Several girls reported that they would ignore it or walk away, especially if they didn't know the person that well or if they were afraid something might happen to them.

“Danielle,” sixth grade, wondered what she would do:



*“Um...I kind of just want to know why they did it. And then maybe I would go tell a teacher. Maybe they don't...maybe somebody else went over to the person and said it was my fault that and then they would try to get back at me.”*

Sixth grader, “Lisa” described her feelings:

*“Um...I...sometimes I'm too scared to go up and be like, “Back off!” But then I'll talk to the person after and be like, “Are you OK?”*

“Betsy,” in seventh grade, reported what she would do:

*“Um. I don't normally do anything.”*

“Francine,” in sixth grade, explained how she would react:

*“I just don't, just ignore it. Like, don't get into it or they'll keep on doing it.”*

“Rachel,” a sixth grader, described what she would do if she were the victim:

*Well, I'd go up to whoever it was and ask them if it was about me or if it was something about me that they didn't want me to find out, and if they said no, then I would ask them, I would tell them probably, like, something like, “OK, but if this isn't nice about me or someone else, like my friend or something, it's not the right thing to do and you'll probably get in trouble if someone finds out, like me or my friends.”*

Finally, the girls were asked where relational aggression most frequently occurs.

Fourteen of 17 (82.3%) identified the lunch room as the most common site for relationally aggressive acts in school. Several mentioned other social and somewhat unstructured settings, such as gym class, between classes, and in the large group room before or after school. They suggested that this form of aggression happens often in gym

because of the competition and heightened emotions associated with playing various games. Eighth grader, “Melanie,” explained why she thinks relational aggression happens in gym:

*Because it's the end of the day, and everyone's like really excited. And things keep happening and people are really competitive. Yeah. People get angry when other people do things wrong in sports and then it turns into a fight and then teams...especially teams, when you're picking teams. She, the gym teacher, tries to make it like really, really fair, but sometimes you're always going to be with one person you don't want to be with. Not that you don't like them, but I mean that you didn't pick for your team. And so people are like, “Oh, man...She's on our team.” or “Oh my goodness, I don't want her on my team so I'm not going to pick her.”*

“Nancy,” a sixth grader, explains her experience with gym:

*Umm...usually, umm...like, umm...in gym, because umm...sometimes umm...people like, well umm...one time, I was playing with a basketball, and someone said umm... “Hey, can you pass me that basketball, and I'll pass it right back to you?” But they were actually lying. So I passed it to them, I didn't know if they, they were going to take it from me, and they just dribbled it away, and they just, they didn't even give it back.*

Only one girl mentioned that relational aggression happens over the phone; no one reported texting or email as a common place for relational aggression.

**Knowledge of Anger Processing Scale (KAPS).** The KAPS is a 15-item questionnaire that assesses different stages of the social information processing model (Crick & Dodge, 1994). As previously mentioned, four of the items (Questions 3, 5, 11, and 14) address physiological arousal and the importance of staying calm in a stressful social situation. Four items are related to intentionality and the attributions that a person can make (Questions 1, 7, 9, and 12). The remaining seven items are related to the choices one can make when involved in relationally aggressive situations, such as participating in spreading rumors, being a bystander, and trying to enter a social group or situation (Questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 15; Leff, Cassano, et al., 2010). Table 3 presents the mean score for all subjects ( $M = 8.88$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ). Overall, test scores can be described as “moderate” with subjects’ individual scores ranging from 5 of 15 items correct to 14 of 15 items correct. Interestingly, these scores are consistent with those reported by Leff, Cassano, et al., (2010) for the post-intervention group ( $M = 8.82$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ), with scores ranging from 3 to 15. Table 4 represents the subjects’ responses on the KAPS, with the correct response is underlined and in boldface ( $n = 17$ ).

Table 3

*Knowledge of Anger Processing Scale (KAPS) - Test Statistics*

Subjects	Items	Mean	Median	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
17	15	8.88	9	2.02	5	14

Table 4

*Results of the Knowledge of Anger Processing Scale (KAPS).*

Item #	SIP Stage	A	B	C	D	% Correct
1	Attributions and intentionality	2	<u>7</u>	7	0	41.2
2	Choices	0	2	<u>15</u>	0	88.2
3	Physiological arousal	1	3	<u>6</u>	7	35.3
4	Choices	5	1	<u>6</u>	5	35.3
5	Physiological arousal	<u>12</u>	4	0	1	70.6
6	Choices	3	0	1	<u>13</u>	76.5
7	Attributions and intentionality	0	<u>7</u>	2	8	41.2
8	Choices	<u>10</u>	0	4	3	58.8
9	Attributions and intentionality	3	0	<u>14</u>	0	82.4
10	Choices	0	0	3	<u>14</u>	82.4
11	Physiological arousal	4	<u>4</u>	5	4	23.5
12	Attributions and intentionality	2	<u>10</u>	2	3	58.8
13	Choices	0	0	<u>16</u>	1	94.1
14	Physiological arousal	1	10	0	<u>6</u>	35.3
15	Choices	<u>9</u>	0	8	0	52.9

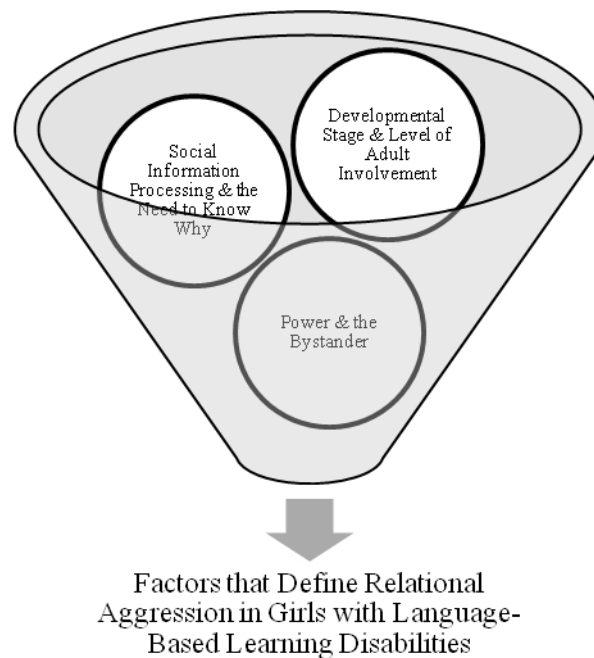
*Note: A, B, C, D = Multiple choice options. The correct response is underlined and boldfaced*

An analysis of these responses suggests that the subjects in this study at times may have trouble understanding how to recognize arousal and remain calm in stressful social situations (Questions 3, 11, & 14). While they may understand the importance of controlling their anger, they do not always seem to know how to control it effectively. With regard to choices, a number of the subjects in this study expressed a reliance on adult support for solving friendship problems (Questions 1, 3, 5, & 13). They believed that adult intervention is a way to remain calm, a way to resolve differences, and a way to handle difficult bullying situations. When asked to identify intentionality or to understand another person's reasons for being relationally aggressive, many of the subjects in this study seemed to have difficulty reading social cues and the nuances of social situations to determine if someone is trying to be mean (e.g. looking at someone's face and body language, assuming something is an accident; Questions 1, 7, 12, & 14). Finally, almost half of the girls failed to recognize the immediate effect of relational aggression on someone who is treated meanly. That is, they were not able to empathize or understand that the person's feelings would be hurt first (Question 15).

### **Summary**

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the three major factors that were found to define relational aggression in adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities. As the funnel suggests, these factors combine to create a formula for what this type of bullying looks like, how it happens, and what girls with language-based learning disabilities do when faced with a relationally aggressive situation. The result is a unique blend or mixture of developmental differences, social information processing

weaknesses, and issues surrounding the concept of power. Adult involvement also was found to be an integral part of this formula.



*Figure 1.* Factors that define relational aggression in girls with language-based learning disabilities.

Overall, results suggest that girls in this population differ with respect to their views of friendships and the level of adult support they require when faced with friendship problems. Younger (fifth and sixth grade) girls view friendships and friendship problems very concretely and they are quick to turn to the adults in their lives to assure that their aggressor is punished for treating someone badly. They turn their friendships off and on when these problems occur. Older (seventh and eighth grade) girls

are not as concrete. They generally are able to take the other person's perspective and can hypothesize why someone might be relationally aggressive. While they demonstrate some understanding of the situation, they are not always able to handle these problems effectively. Consequently, they also rely on adults for support and intervention. All of the girls, regardless of age, place a great deal of value on their relationships with others.

Secondly, an analysis of their responses suggest that girls with language-based learning disabilities have difficulty with the encoding and interpretation stages of social information processing. Their ability to attend to external and internal cues and their ability to interpret these cues accurately is oftentimes compromised. They are confused by ambiguous situations and they struggle to find the words to accurately describe their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. They have a strong need to understand conflict situations, as if understanding them will make them go away.

Lastly, power appears to be an important ingredient in this relational aggression mixture. An imbalance of power and motives which centers around one person taking power away from another by damaging her relationships. They also at times feel powerless when they are involved in a problem situation, either as a victim or as a bystander. When they are bystanders, they do not realize that they contribute to this imbalance and are unable to see that they have the power to do something about it. Once again they turn to the adults in their lives for protection, support, and guidance.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the understanding, experiences, and perceptions that adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities have about relational aggression. Although existing studies have examined the frequency and occurrence of relational aggression in the general population, there is a limited amount of information about how children actually describe their experiences with relational aggression is limited (Mishna, et al., 2006). Even less information is available regarding how children with language-based disabilities describe their experiences. While studies have shown that children with learning disabilities are found to be more often victimized by their peers (Baumeister et al., 2008; Mishna, 2003), there is only a superficial understanding of how these children perceive and typically respond to relationally aggressive behavior. Therefore, investigating the perceptions that adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities have about relational aggression was deemed worthwhile.

Return for a moment to Creswell's (2007) analogy comparing qualitative findings to an intricately woven fabric. Because the fabric can be composed of many threads, textures, colors, and materials, it is complex and multifaceted and, therefore, not easily described. The fabric analogy also implies that the results of a qualitative investigation need to be woven together to create an integrated "tapestry" of what relational aggression looks like in this special population. For the purpose of this qualitative study, the themes that emerged from the girls' stories about their own personal experiences, combined with



their responses to the vignettes and questionnaires, are the threads that make up this complicated fabric called relational aggression.

Seventeen adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities at the Academy in Manayunk (AIM) participated in this study. The girls were in Grades 5 through 8, and ranged in ages from 10 to 13 years. More than 586 minutes of interview time yielded an abundance of rich and meaningful information about the girls' experiences with relational aggression. Their voices were heard clearly and their integrated story, which follows, provides insight into the nature of the difficulties that these girls have with aggressive peers and the kinds of skills that they need in order to navigate relationally aggressive situations more effectively.

In their stories, the girls described relational aggression from three different perspectives. Occasionally, they told stories about being the victim, most often their stories were from the perspective of bystander, and less frequently (possibly because they did not want to admit to doing something wrong) they told stories about being the bully. As the victim, the girls told stories that portrayed themselves attempting self-defense, feeling confused and angry about the act, and questioning why the incident happened in the first place. Bullies' motives were described as an intent to damage a person's reputation, create drama, or exclude someone; and their rewards were attention, popularity, and power. It is important to note that, in their stories, the girls most frequently portrayed themselves as the bystander. Their responses to relationally aggressive acts in this role took the form of moralizing, defending, or feeling sorry for the victim. They described attempts to resolve the conflict by recognizing the behavior was

wrong and confronting the bully. Occasionally, they would ignore the incident, typically out of fear of being victimized themselves or as a result of confusion about what to do. In either case, their responses were ineffective in that the relational aggression continued.

From each of these perspectives, three major themes emerged in their stories. These themes were found to permeate the responses of almost all of the girls, with specific threads connecting one story to the next and one girl to another. They seemed to be central to the occurrence of relational aggression in girls with language-based learning disabilities; therefore, the answer to the initial question of what relational aggression looks like in this population is believed to lie within these themes.

#### **Developmental differences and reliance on adults.**

As mentioned earlier, female psychosocial development places a high value on relationships. As a result, a girl's sense of self often is connected closely to her relationships with peers. Regardless of age, girls become extremely distressed when their friendships are threatened, even to the point of experiencing a substantially higher than normal level of physiological arousal (e.g., blood pressure, respirations; Leff, Cassano, et al., 2010). For this reason, it is imperative to a girl's well-being that relational aggression be taken seriously.

There does, however, appear to be an age-related component to the manner in which girls' friendships are defined by this population. In this investigation, the younger girls, that is, those who were in the concrete-operational stage of development, viewed their friendships in a very dichotomous manner. Friendships could be turned on or off;

they were evaluated as good or bad, and peers could be seen as friends or foes. Fifth grader “Cindy” describes a typical dynamic and how she handled it:

*Well, um...I remember a time when, that my friend (name) was being mean to my friend (name) and she was joking around that this boy liked her and she like [turned] back and she felt uncomfortable... (Name) is like the popular girl in school, and she kind of wants to be popular and get all of the attention...I think they're just being selfish and they're not thinking about what they say before they say it out loud, because it might hurt someone's feelings...I feel sad for the person that got hurt and I don't really feel like playing with that person that made the other person feel bad because they might do it to you. .... I would say, (name), I think (name)'s feeling uncomfortable. You should stop.*

As girls move into the formal operations stage of development, their views become a little more abstract. For the older girls (seventh and eighth grade) in this investigation, friendship problems could be seen from different perspectives, and peers could be “friends” who can be supportive in some ways, and cause heartache in other ways. “Olivia,” a seventh grader, described her perception of the change from fifth grade to seventh grade:

*Like, in fifth grade somebody spread a rumor that I was a nerd.... Cause I wear glasses. Yeah, it was one of my friends, sort of, 'cause we like fought every single week. And then like one time she like spread a rumor that I was a nerd or something. Cause like, we always like fight and we always like we, we used to always like fight, and then we would always like be mad at each other and we*

*would try to do stuff to get each other back.... was like different things each week cause like we weren't similar with each other. Like we weren't like, it was like, sometimes we would fight about, "Oh you didn't tell me that! I'm going to tell everybody this!" or something. It was kinda like every single day we would like make up and then the next week we would fight and then the next week we would make up... I was like, I walked up to her and was like, "Why were you spreading that rumor about me?" And she was like, "Oh, it wasn't me." Yeah, but I knew it was her cause everyone was like, "Oh yeah she said it." ...I kind of just like let it go and then, cause I kind of knew that we would make up again, I kind of just let it go and then like the next day it was better. (But you don't see her everyday or do you?) I do, but we don't fight anymore. (Why?) Umm...it was, umm...'cause we got like older.*

At every age, however, there is still a strong reliance by this population on adults for guidance and intervention. Younger girls turn to adults more quickly, suggesting that they have very little understanding of how they should resolve the situation. If they make an effort to stop the bullying (e.g., telling the bully she is wrong or standing up for the victim), and her efforts do not work immediately, they turn to the adults in their lives to punish the perpetrator, as opposed to problem solving the situation. Additionally, they see relationally aggressive acts as rule breaking, and they expect the aggressor to be punished accordingly. Girls at this age sometimes get caught up in negative feelings surrounding jealousy and competition for friendships. Rather than address their

discomfort and anxiety, younger girls take a more direct approach to resolving these uncomfortable feelings by going to an adult for relief.

Results of this investigation indicate that older girls also rely on adults to some degree. They are not as quick as the younger girls to have an adult intervene; however, they do eventually seek out adult intervention seemingly for structure and guidance. While they will make an attempt to problem solve the situation or possibly go to a friend for advice, these efforts are often futile. Additionally, if their initial attempt to resolve the issue is ineffective, or if the situation is serious, they typically turn to their mothers for help. Apparently, this population of girls needs an adult to help them process the situation accurately and decide on a plan of action.

With regard to resolving some of these relational problems, the older adolescent girls differ from the younger girls in several ways. The older girls appeared to have some ability to take the other person's perspective and could hypothesize why someone might behave in a relationally aggressive manner. When they saw this behavior occur, these girls were able to say they felt badly about the relational aggression, and they oftentimes knew what the appropriate response should be. However, they were not always capable of following through. The older girls, also recognized that relationally aggressive behavior was morally wrong and they experienced discomfort when they were involved. "Melanie," in eighth grade, described a frightening experience:

*Yeah...Oh my goodness...at my old school, there was a girl and she was like...I found out afterwards, like after she had left the school that she had, like, her family was like really complicated and then I felt bad, but I mean she was so*

*mean to me. Like my whole...from kindergarten to fifth grade, and she was really mean and she... She hated me...she cut my hair! In second grade, she cut my hair! And I was so mad, and I was crying and she was horrible and she called me names and she pushed me around and it was like...and I think one time I called her a name in front of all my friends and she got really upset and um I was kind of like, "Oh well you do this to me all the time!" So....But then again I did feel really bad that I had done it...after I found out about (whisper) her family.*

With regard to friendships, very few of the older girls related incidents in which they felt like they were competing for someone's friendship. They did not view friendship as something they might have one day and then not have the next. The stories that were elicited by each vignette reflected a view of friendship as one that means being accepted and included in a certain group. They placed a great deal of value on their connections with their social group, and when these connections were threatened, they felt distressed. Their experience with relational aggression, therefore, typically took the form of exclusion and rumors.

Based on the girls' responses, rumors and exclusion are the most common ways to damage someone's relationship with her social group. Interestingly, many of these girls seemed to feel as if they had very little control over rumors. Once a rumor was started, they appeared to believe that it was "out there," there was very little they can do to stop it, and everyone would automatically believe it was true. They also have a needed to know if a rumor was true, as if truth would make it justifiable. Additionally, many of these girls seemed to feel that as long as they did not start the rumor, they could talk

about it amongst other people as if doing so would not perpetuate the rumor. “Betsy,” a seventh grader, explained what happens when conflict arises and how rumors get started. She hesitated to admit that when she and her friends fight, they typically tell other people about the fight, thereby complicating the issue even more:

*Um, I mean, sometimes we (she and her friends) get in like, yeah sometimes we'll get in fights and we'll tell every..., not everybody about it, but we'll tell all our other friends about the fights.*

“Lisa,” a sixth grader, described her rather concrete impression of a rumor:

*Yeah... I pay attention more to like what the rumor actually is...like if it's something like, oh um, like so-and-so like eats this type of food...like so what!*

“Pamela,” a sixth grader, disclosed her relationally aggressive behavior and offered an analogy of the harm a rumor can cause:

*...and then I made a rumor that says umm...she, I forgot what the rumor was about, like that she did something really terrible to one of my friends and my friends did to agree to help me with it. And this is about like third grade. Yeah, it worked. But a lot of people believed me, but people still liked her, they just didn't trust her as much as they used to, so I got at least, let's say you're looking at a rose and one petals fell off of trust and when all those petals go away no one will like her. So I got one petal off. And umm...my friend made a rumor about her but I was never involved with it. But she made a rumor about me and she never asked permission to do it. And she made a rumor that says umm...the girl who was always rude, she was mean to me and she at least brought me down and spread*

*these rumors about me and then there was another petal off the rose...(Did you do anything to make her friends not like her?) I did once, just as I said like the petal, the rose petal. Like a lot of leaves fell off, like a lot of petals fell off from her rose.*

It is interesting to note that in this population and environment, boys sometimes are involved in the perpetuation of a rumor. They appear to participate in the relational aggression, but as the research suggests, they are not as emotionally reactive to it (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). They appear to engage in it for the excitement, or perhaps the “drama” that it creates, possibly not realizing the harm it can do to everyone’s psychosocial well-being. “Elizabeth,” a seventh grader, described her story about being the target of a rumor started by a boy:

*Ummm...A couple people, umm, (pause) made up (long pause). I forget it. (the rumor) Umm...(long pause)...it was a guy, he did it. Umm...(pause). I forget. And then, people sent me text and like they, umm, e-mailed me about it. Like, my friends e-mailed me and texted me about it. They told me, umm, “Did you hear what’s been going around school about you?” and I said, “Yeah”. And then, umm...then other people, girls and boys, came up to me and were like, they told me like, they tried, they like made up names about me. Yeah. Yeah, and I said it’s not true...They could see like how, like, how I told them, like what my expression was and that I was not happy about it. Umm...I just tried to let it go and if it ever came back to me I would like I would also tell a teacher again. So, I could really have like help and like, to stop the rumor from going around. Ummm...I was really curious of how it even started, like, how the person like, how they even*



*thought of that thought about me. Yeah. Umm...I was trying to think who would even start that and why would they, like I was trying to think of, um...Who it was, 'cause I was really shocked because umm...(pause)...because possibly it could, possibly one of the boys that came up to me could have been the one that started it. But I just didn't know and that, I was just, I was just wanting to know who it was but whatever. It really annoyed me 'cause I couldn't, I didn't know who it was and I really, I really wanted to know. But I couldn't cause no one would tell me. I don't know, ummm...It's either because he didn't like me or he tried to get my attention because he could have been the one that got excluded from someone and they wanted to do something to someone to gain more reputation.*

“Kelly,” in seventh grade, gave her reaction to the incident that “Elizabeth” described:

*Yeah, and then they pulled me to the side, the two boys, to ask me what I saw. And I really didn't know what to do... And then...I think this it was a rumor because the girl came up to me and like said, “Can you tell the boys to stop because, um?” No, she turned around and told the boys to stop, and she wanted me to help her get them to stop because it wasn't true, and she didn't want it to be...like it was a long time ago, and she just wanted to like...(to forget about it?) Yeah! And not make such a big deal about something that didn't really happen. I'm like really confused...And, I really didn't know what to say because I like really didn't know what happened. Um...Then we went back into the room and then everybody just kind of stopped and dropped it.*

The inability of these girls to understand this type of situation and react to it in an appropriate manner is significant. Not only did they feel powerless against the rumor, their interaction with the boys suggests that they felt powerless against them, also. This type of interaction with boys indicates that any type of intervention for relational aggression must address boys *and* girls, their attitudes towards each other, and the manner in which they treat the opposite sex. As adolescents, their thoughts about sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual relationships are just beginning to emerge, and this development seems to play an important role in this type of rumor-spreading behavior.

### **Social Information Processing and the Need to Know Why**

Results of this investigation indicate that many of these girls, when faced with a relationally aggressive incident, would immediately question, “Why did she do that?” Their responses reflect a limited understanding of the motives for relationally aggressive behavior and difficulty with interpreting the situation in a manner that would enable them to generate an effective response. They wondered what the bully’s intentions were, and if they did something wrong, and they expressed feelings of confusion, anger, and, at times, guilt.

“Elizabeth,” a seventh grader, describes the confusion she feels about a friend who is bullying her:

*Umm..I don't know. She does talk behind my back a lot, even though she tells me that she doesn't, she umm...doesn't do it secretly, she does it in public and whenever I walk to my other friend she's telling about me I hear her, and she's*

*like, "I'm not talking behind your back at all!" But she does... I just forget about it, 'cause if I do something then she's gonna do something back to me 'cause it's happened before.... I feel devastated and umm...really upset because it means that she really doesn't care about me being her friend. And umm...she also does it to my other friends, too, which also tells me she doesn't like any of us. She just wants to do, she just wants....Umm...(pause) I think she just wants to..ummm...I think, she probably feels like she's, gets like lonely a lot and that she wants friends but she doesn't know how to really, how to like tell each other she wants to be our friend and that stuff, But she has to do it in a way that hurts us and that she really doesn't understand..... (Did you ever call her on it?) No, not yet. But I did, me and my friends talk about it. And we try to figure out how we are suppose to solve this and what we are suppose to do because we want to talk to her first before we tell a teacher.*

As defined earlier, Crick and Dodge's (1994) model of social information processing defines the specific mental steps that children take when faced with social situations. Steps 1 and 2 of this process involve the encoding and interpretation of social cues. Encoding requires attention, focus, and immediate perception of both internal and external cues. Interpretation is a somewhat complex process involving mental representation, evaluation of self and others, causal analysis, and inferences about attributions and intent. Additionally, all of these processes are guided by previous experiences, images, and schemata that are stored in the person's long-term memory

(Crick & Dodge, 1994). In short, a child develops an understanding of the situation during these first two steps.

Girls with language-based learning disabilities appear to have significant difficulty with these first two steps. It is important to note that virtually none of the girls interviewed mentioned that they ever paid any attention to the facial expressions or body language of the other parties involved in bullying incidents. Based on their responses to a scenario involving a person rolling her eyes, only two girls indicated that they had seen this happening, and one of them admitted that she didn't really understand *why* the person would roll her eyes. The reasons for this lack of observation and confusion remain unclear. Their ability to attend to these cues and to focus on the necessary information possibly is compromised by their diagnosed learning disabilities and, in the case of seven of the girls, their Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. They may have actually noticed the nonverbal and contextual clues; however, they did not know how to interpret them or they did not recognize the importance of using them to resolve an interpersonal problem. Whatever the case, the difficulties that these girls experience socially is clearly affected by the difficulties they have with language. They struggle with processing and understanding complex interactions and with producing an accurate mental representation, either visually or verbally, of the possible meaning of the interaction.

“Lisa,” a sixth grader, described how misreading cues can complicate the situation and confuse everyone involved:

*Um...probably like, I mean sometimes you can tell if it's a joke or not. Like, if they...yeah, sometimes it's a joke, so you kind of know it's a joke. And you're like,*

*“Oh! Ha ha!” It’s kind of funny but really...don’t do that again. Yeah. (So you’d have to figure out if it was done in fun or if it was done on purpose?) Well, I’d kind of be like, “Ha! Ha!” And then like just go talk to the person that like got their... like, that was the victim. And I’d be like, “Hey! What’s up? Are you OK?”*

Crick and Dodge (1994) mentioned that much of the process of encoding and interpreting social cues is guided by experiences, images, and schemata that are stored in a person’s long-term memory. These images, experiences, and schemata have been learned in the past and are considered to be part of the child’s learned cognitive, behavioral, and emotional repertoire. This point is significant in that girls with language-based learning disabilities oftentimes have difficulty with retrieving previously learned information. This deficit might significantly compromise their ability to acquire and maintain a repertoire of appropriate and effective behavioral responses. While they clearly have the cognitive abilities to learn these skills, their ability to retrieve them quickly and efficiently is impaired. Not surprisingly, these girls, when confronted with a social problem-solving situation, immediately wonder, “Why did she do that?” It is also not surprising that they are unable to generate an immediate, albeit effective, response. As with learning any type of academic skill, these girls definitely require a specially designed intervention in social information problem-solving that is characterized by direct and intensive instruction, opportunities for practice, and clear and immediate feedback.

**Power and the Bystander**

This theme is probably the most important finding because of its implications for intervention. Coined by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), relational aggression is a term used to describe behaviors that are intended to damage another person's social status or social standing in her peer group. It is proactive or instrumental in that it is used in anticipation of self-serving outcomes (Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). Generally speaking, relational aggression is also about an imbalance in power. In an attempt to damage someone's social standing, the relational aggressor creates the imbalance. Essentially, she is solidifying the rules of the "in" group by taking power away from the victim. The result is that relational aggression strengthens one person's relationship to the group by damaging someone else's. When asked why someone would exclude another person from a party, "Pamela's" understanding of power clearly illustrates this dynamic:

*...because they just want to hurt me and take my power away to make me the weaker one and make me feel terrible about myself. And then that person feels good about themselves that they just did that.*

In this investigation of girls with learning disabilities, the bystander clearly, and oftentimes unintentionally or unknowingly, contributed to this imbalance of power. With these girls, the bystander saw relational aggression happen, she knew it was wrong, but she could not seem to do anything about it. At times, she made an effort to defend herself or the victim and put the bully in her place. Other times, she preferred to just stay out of the bully's way, as if acting like the bully's friend was easier than risking getting involved and becoming a potential victim. In the case of several bystanders, this lack of

involvement may be due to a diffusion of responsibility or possibly an acceptance of the behavior as if it was something over which she had little control. It could also reflect a passive acceptance of the act as if this type of power-driven behavior was just part of the natural order of things. Whatever the case may be, if the bystander can contribute to the imbalance of power, one may infer that she can take power away from the aggressor as well. "Elizabeth," a seventh grader, described the pressure she felt and the power that a bystander must have to stand up to a relational aggressor:

*Umm...well they kind of, like, other people have been putting pressure on me to tell that person to exclude them because they don't like the person that I'm trying to exclude. So, like, I don't mean to exclude the person and I'm.... Yeah. 'Cause I was, they were with me when it happened and I was crying at that point because I really didn't want to do it because it was a close friend that they don't like. So, and they kind of forced me to do it.*

Let us return to the rose petal and power analogy that "Pamela used to explain why she started a rumor about another person:

*Let's say you're looking at a rose and one petal fell off of trust and when all those petals go away no one will like her. So I got one petal off. And umm...my friend made a rumor about her but I was never involved with it. But she made a rumor about me and she never asked permission to do it. And she made a rumor that says umm...the girl who was always rude, she was mean to me and she at least brought me down and spread these rumors about me and then there was another petal off the rose.*

In addition to contributing to the imbalance of power, this subject clearly understood the dynamics involved in relational aggression. Although her view can be seen as dysfunctional and somewhat antisocial, it also reflects the maladaptive patterns of behavior that can result from incidents of relational aggression. At the risk of sounding somewhat cliché, this type of belief (rose) must be “nipped in the bud.”

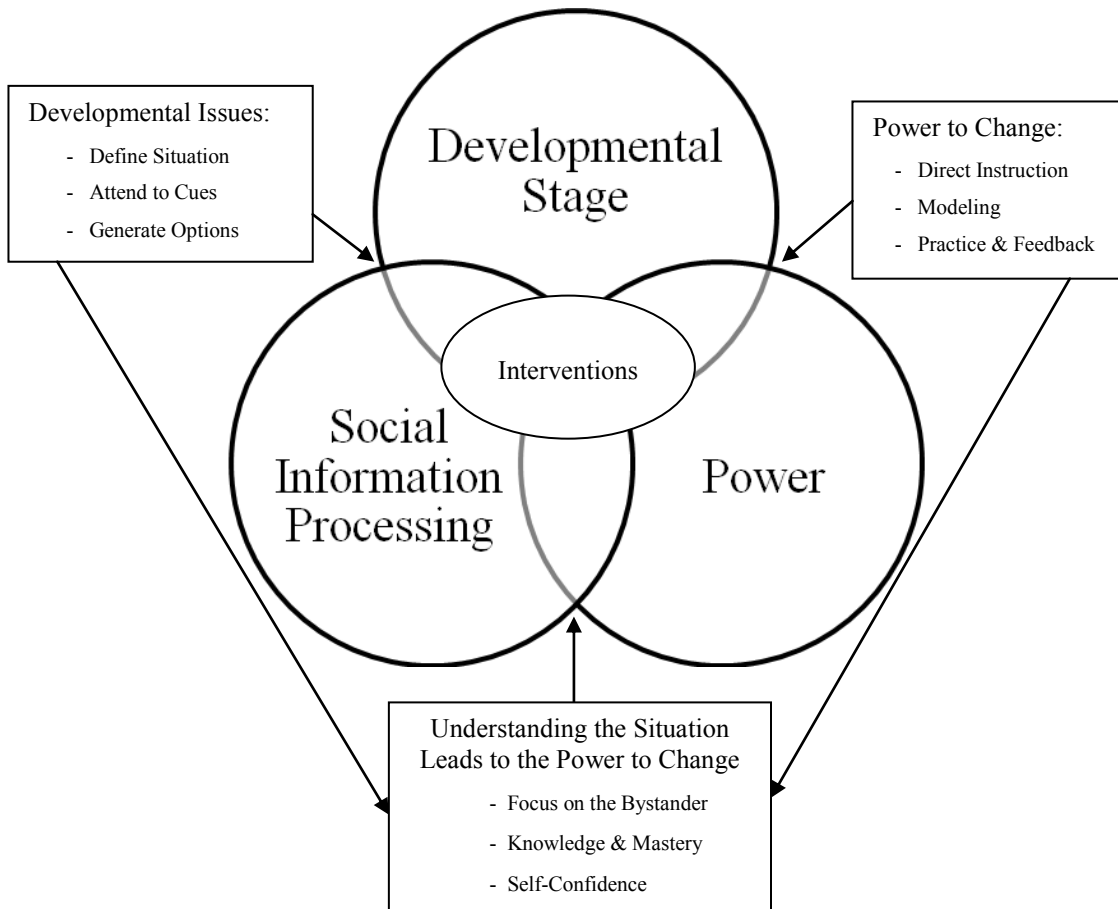
### **Implications and Interventions**

Figure 2 provides a visual representation and conceptualization of what relational aggression looks like in adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities. It presents the three major themes emerging from their stories, and it also outlines the types of interventions that would address the primary needs of these girls. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the three themes combine to create a mixture of unique patterns of behavior, attitudes, and weaknesses. The diagram outlines specific interventions designed to target the overlapping areas.

Generally speaking, all three components and their interactions with each other need to be addressed both separately and together. For example, the deficits that these girls exhibit in social information processing tasks cannot be remediated without considering their age and developmental level. Being able to accurately define the situation, to attend to internal and external cues, and to generate options in an age-appropriate manner are critical to effective social information problem solving and are skills that must be taught explicitly. At this point, younger girls appear to be more likely than older girls to rely on adults for guidance and intervention. These girls need adult support in developing an age-appropriate understanding of relationally aggressive



situations in terms of learning how to identify situational cues, determine intentions, and generate alternative responses.



*Figure 2.* Conceptualization and interventions for relational aggression in girls with language-based learning disabilities.

Similarly, the girls' attitudes and understanding of the notion of power must be addressed within the context of their developmental level. They need direct instruction through media such as videos, modeling, and role play. As in academics, these skills

need to be taught at an appropriate instructional level, with special consideration given to the unique learning styles of these girls. Instruction needs to be unambiguous and scaffolded so that more advanced skills can be built upon previously learned skills. Given their difficulties with processing spoken language and also with retrieval of previously learned information, instruction needs to be multi-modal (e.g., presented in a variety of formats) and many opportunities must be provided for modeling, practice, and immediate feedback.

Once these two themes are addressed, intervention should focus on combining their acquired knowledge and skills into behaviors that will empower these girls to interrupt the cycle of relational aggression. Ultimately, the girls will be able to construct an objective understanding of relationally aggressive situations and recognize the role that they play in the dynamics. They then will be able to identify their goals or what outcomes they would like to achieve, and then utilize these skills to disrupt the imbalance of power that exists with relational aggression. With suitable instruction, practice, and feedback, they will become more confident in their own abilities and recognize their own power to affect change.

**Parent and teacher intervention.** Given the dependence that these girls have on the adults in their lives, intervention needs to focus on parent and teacher education. Training programs that increase awareness and help parents and teachers to understand the dynamics of relational aggression are necessary. While most of the girls in the present study had a very good understanding of behavior that is right and wrong, they did not always know how to respond when someone did something to hurt them or another

person. The parents and teachers of these girls clearly are teaching them the importance of treating others with respect; however, the girls were not always able to generalize this knowledge to their everyday social interactions. For example, standing up to a bully is effective only when it is done consistently and with clear indication that such behavior is socially unacceptable. Girls with language-based learning disabilities need to be taught that their reactions to bullies directly affect the likelihood that the bully will be mean again, and that oftentimes their responses clearly give the bully the power she desires. Parents and teachers need to be cognizant of this common dynamic and make sure that the girls who come to them really understand what this behavioral dynamic means.

Similarly, when these girls find themselves in social situations involving more than one peer, these girls need to understand the effect that their own behavior can have on the entire group. Being able to “stand up to a bully” in front of other people, and then know what to do to make sure the situation does not get out of hand (as it does so often with rumors), is an important skill. For example, these girls need to recognize that talking about a rumor, even if they did not start it, is just as harmful as starting the rumor in the first place. Interventions that focus on empowering girls to make their own decisions and giving them the language they need to navigate these types of social situations independently are of primary importance.

Parents and teachers also need to be conscious of the effect their own behavior has on these girls. Role modeling can be a very powerful intervention tool. Using sarcasm, playful teasing, and even constructive criticism can all be very confusing to girls with language-based learning disabilities. Seeing the adults in their lives teasing one

another or talking about each other behind one another's backs can create a very bad cognitive schema in these girls. They will learn that this kind of behavior is acceptable in adult situations. When adults, especially parents, allow their girls to hear them talking about another adult or suggesting that another adult has done something questionable, these girls will learn that this type of conversation (e.g. gossip) is acceptable. If these interactions happen frequently, the girls might eventually believe that this kind of behavior "works" for adults, as it ultimately allows them (the adults) to get what they want.

**School-based interventions.** The school cafeteria was reported to be the most common place for relationally aggressive behavior to occur. As with most unstructured settings, the cafeteria is where most social interactions occur, as it is the place where girls share their thoughts and feelings with their friends. While on one hand, the cafeteria gives these girls an opportunity to practice their social problem-solving skills in a real life setting, it also can be the place where someone can be victimized easily. Teachers need to be vigilant in these settings, as oftentimes girls who look like they are "just having fun" also might be laughing at someone else's expense. Providing teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize this kind of dynamic is important.

With respect to schools, three levels of intervention should be considered. At Tier I, programs that are preventative in nature (e.g., character education, social emotional learning programs, parent awareness workshops,) would help to prevent the occurrence of relational aggression. Specific school-wide anti bullying programs or positive behavioral support programs also would serve to decrease the incidence of relationally

aggressive behavior. In the case of AIM, the school-wide *A.C.E.* positive behavioral support program provides incentives and recognition for students who demonstrate behavior that reflects character, responsibility, and independence.

At the Tier II level, girls who are at risk for relationally aggressive behavior can be involved in targeted school-based interventions that will help them learn the skills necessary for effective social problem solving. A cognitive behavioral approach, such as that employed in the Friend-to-Friend Program (see Leff et al., 2010) has been shown to improve peer likeability, decrease relational aggression, and reduce feelings of loneliness and hostile attributions with girls who are relationally aggressive. Although this intervention was developed for a predominantly urban African American population, its methodology and content might be adapted to fit the needs of girls with language-based learning disabilities. A benefit of the program is its manualized design that includes not only girls who are at risk but also prosocial girls who may or may not play the role of bystander. The knowledge and skills gained through an intervention such as Friend-to-Friend would help to guarantee the appropriate use of power by both the bully and the bystander.

Finally, at the Tier III level, girls who have impacted significantly by the effects of relational aggression, as a bully, as a victim, or as a bystander, may require more intensive intervention that addresses the underlying thoughts and emotions surrounding relational aggression, including feelings of loneliness and symptoms of anxiety or depression. In these cases, individual and/or family therapy might be warranted. School

professionals, such as school psychologists and school counselors, must be able to identify those girls who are in need of this level of intervention.

### **Summary**

The results of this investigation suggest that practitioners and parents need to recognize the importance of the bystander role within this population of girls with language-based learning disabilities. Since most of the stories of the participants in the present study focused on their role as a bystander, these girls must be empowered to use this role to break the bullying cycle. Parents and teachers can support these girls by being appropriate role models, assisting them with their social problem-solving, and offering them emotional support when necessary. Through everyday, real-life practice, parents and educators can assure that the girls have the knowledge, confidence, and self-esteem needed to make a difference.

### **Limitations**

A grounded theory study challenges a researcher because preconceived theoretical ideas must be set aside in order to allow the theory to emerge. Despite the subjective nature of this investigation, the researcher had to recognize that a grounded theory study is rooted in a systematic approach to research with specific steps in the analysis of the data (Creswell, 2007). The investigator, who has known many of the subjects for more than 1 year, had to remain objective and unbiased. Additionally, the investigator had to use caution when conducting the interviews by utilizing a format that would encourage discussion, stimulate thoughtful responses, and provide the subjects with a safe place to tell their stories. However, the fact that the investigator did have a previous relationship

with many of the subjects increased the likelihood that they would offer a full and honest self-representation. Also, when coding the transcribed interviews, analyzing themes, and defining categories, the investigator had to remain consciously objective and unbiased. The validation team, being blind to different variables, assisted with this process by providing objective observations and interpretations of the girls' stories.

Another limitation of qualitative approaches to data analysis is that the findings cannot be extended to wider populations. In this study, the subjects were a sample of convenience. They were all enrolled in a small private school exclusively for children with language-based learning disabilities and where tuition costs are significant and the climate of the school is such that the socioeconomic class of most students is high. While there was some racial and ethnic diversity among the subjects, the sample size remains very small and not representative of the larger population.

Much of the research on bullying and learning disabilities focuses on children with learning disabilities in a public education environment, whereas research suggests that children with learning disabilities are more-frequently bullied than their non-disabled peers (Baumeister, et al., 2008; Estell, et al., 2009; Mishna, 2003). In this current study, bullying by nondisabled peers literally has been "controlled for." The fact that there were no nondisabled peers enrolled in this school represents a significant limitation in that it limited the daily interactions of these girls to only other disabled peers. It is not surprising, therefore, that a large portion of the girls' stories about relational aggression came from their previous experiences in public school.

A final limitation lies in the fact that the researcher has known many of the girls in this study for more than one year. While this familiarity may have elicited more openness, honesty, and trust, it also could have produced some unintentional bias in the analysis of the girls' stories and the themes that have been identified.

### **Future Research**

As with any type of research, future investigations should focus extending this study to more diverse populations. Future studies might include girls of different ages and with different types of disabilities (e.g., emotional disturbance), to determine if their experiences are similar or, if not, how they differ. Since boys were found to be involved in many of the girls' stories, an examination of how boys perceive relational aggression would also be very interesting. Manualized intervention programs, such as the Friend-to-Friend Program mentioned earlier, then can be developed to meet the individual needs of these diverse populations.

Relational aggression presents a very complicated dynamic. As this investigation has shown, it can be even more complicated for girls with language-based learning disabilities. Given the nature of their disabilities and the difficulty they have with receptive and expressive language, processing written and spoken language, and retrieving information, this population is unique in that the dynamic is not always clear or easily understood. In an effort to address the language issues that these girls have, future studies should be aimed at giving them the language they need and then asking them to use that language to guide their behavior.



To this end, future studies and interventions also need to explore ways to help girls with language-based learning disabilities understand the dynamics of relational aggression. In an effort to help them recognize its nuances and subtleties, asking them the reverse question also might be beneficial. Instead of asking, “Why does someone bully?” We might ask, “If you wanted to feel empowered, what would you do?” Would they be able to recognize that they do not have to damage someone’s reputation or relationships to feel empowered? Would they be able to generate prosocial ways to reach this goal? Since they do seem to know the difference between right and wrong, would they be able to recognize the successful use of power to affect change? Future research should provide answers to these questions.

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## **Appendix A**

### **School Description**

The Academy in Manayunk (AIM) is a private school for children with language-based learning disabilities. AIM was founded in 2006 and currently enrolls approximately 154 students in grades one through twelve. Table 1 represents the enrollment and gender distribution for each grade. Located in Philadelphia, AIM's student body includes students from Philadelphia School District and also students from several suburban Pennsylvania and New Jersey districts. The majority of AIM's students are enrolled privately and their tuition is paid for by their parents, 7% are placed and funded by their home school districts; and 14.9% receive financial support through specific grant, scholarship, or benefactor programs.

AIM's curriculum is modeled after the academic program of The Lab School of Washington D.C. It is flexible to meet the needs of individual students and uses research-to-practice techniques, such as the Wilson Language System, and various assistive technologies to address academic deficits. Each student's program is individualized to include instruction in all required subjects (e.g. English, social studies, math, and science) as well as remediation and intensive instruction in specific areas of need. Additionally, AIM incorporates visual and performing arts with academic subjects to meet the individual learning styles of its students. Support services include speech and language therapy which focuses on the development of receptive and expressive language skills and cognitive-communication skills especially as they relate to academic performance; occupational therapy to address fine motor skills, visual-motor

coordination, general body strength and endurance, sensory organization and processing, attention, self-care activities, peer interaction and social behavior; and psychological services, including data analysis and progress monitoring, psychological assessment, social and emotional support, and academic and behavioral consultation.

The Academy in Manayunk is also considered to be a center for professional development designed to provide educators throughout the area with resources and instruction in the latest research-based interventions for educating students with learning disabilities. AIM has affiliations with several regional colleges and universities allowing its students and staff to benefit from additional post-secondary training programs.

Students who are admitted to AIM have a diagnosed reading, writing, or math disability which interferes with their ability to make adequate progress in a regular education program. That is, AIM students typically have average to above average cognitive abilities but are achieving at a level that is below what would be expected. AIM's admission policy states that "AIM's program is *not* appropriate for students whose difficulties are the result of a visual, hearing, or motor handicap; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; autism spectrum disorders; or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage." Like many students with a language-based learning disability, many of AIM's students also have a co-morbid diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. From a philosophical standpoint,

*"AIM's mission and philosophy are based on the belief that students enrolled at AIM have the capacity to achieve academic success and to realize individual learning potential. AIM is committed to developing a sense of inquiry and love of learning in each student. We focus on remediating the areas of reading, oral and written language, math and motor skills. Social studies and humanities are taught*

*through a unique program incorporating art, music, drama and hands-on learning experiences. Our young people must also learn to function effectively in society using tailored social pragmatics and an understanding of how they best learn. Knowing the appropriate behavior in a given situation, how to approach the unknown and how to interact with other people constitute skills critical for success. The focus of the high school is to prepare students for higher education and to assist them in acquiring the necessary 21st century workforce skills of problem solving, inquiry, and collaboration” (www.aimpa.org, 2011).*

*Table 3. AIM demographic for the 2011-2012 school year.*

GRADE	Male	Female	Total
1	4 (100%)	0	4
2	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	10
3	11 (85%)	2 (15%)	13
4	15 (55.5%)	12 (44.5%)	27
5	6 (37.5%)	10 (62.5%)	16
6	12 (54.5%)	10 (45.5%)	22
7	8 (53%)	7 (47%)	15
8	7 (54%)	6 (46%)	13
9	10 (71%)	4 (29%)	14
10	10 (83%)	2 (17%)	12
11	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	3
12	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5
TOTAL:	95 (62%)	59 (38%)	154

Appendix B

*CONFIDENTIAL*

*RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AND LEARNING DISABILITIES*

*Record Review Form*

\*\*\*\*\*

Pseudo name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age as of Sept. 2011: \_\_\_\_\_

Placement (private vs. district): \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

**DEVELOPMENTAL INFORMATION:**

Pregnancy and Delivery: (check all that apply) \_\_\_\_\_ Full-term \_\_\_\_\_ Premature

(week) \_\_\_\_\_ Induced \_\_\_\_\_ Vaginal \_\_\_\_\_ Cesarean \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Complications (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Developmental Milestones (age): Walk: \_\_\_\_\_ Talk: \_\_\_\_\_ Toilet: \_\_\_\_\_

Medications: \_\_\_\_\_

Illnesses: \_\_\_\_\_ Injuries/Hospitalizations: \_\_\_\_\_

**RELEVANT FAMILY HISTORY:** (yes/no)

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning Disability \_\_\_\_\_ ADHD

\_\_\_\_\_ Autism/Asperger's \_\_\_\_\_ Emotional Disturbance

Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

LD Classification: \_\_\_\_\_ Date identified: \_\_\_\_\_

Secondary Diagnosis: \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Services: \_\_\_\_\_

Outside Therapy: \_\_\_\_\_

**COGNITIVE ABILITIES:**

VCI: \_\_\_\_\_ PRI: \_\_\_\_\_ WMI: \_\_\_\_\_ PSI: \_\_\_\_\_ FSIQ: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Testing: \_\_\_\_\_

**RELEVANT ACADEMIC ABILITIES:**

Reading Comprehension: \_\_\_\_\_ Listening Comprehension: \_\_\_\_\_

Oral Expression: \_\_\_\_\_ Written Expression: \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER: \_\_\_\_\_

**STANDARDIZED BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT : (Clinically Significant Scores)**

*BASC:* \_\_\_\_\_

*BRIEF:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Conners:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Other:* \_\_\_\_\_

**CURRENT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM:**

SUBJECTS: *English* \_\_\_\_\_ *Math* \_\_\_\_\_ *Science* \_\_\_\_\_ *History* \_\_\_\_\_

*Comprehension* \_\_\_\_\_ *Wilson* \_\_\_\_\_ *Word Study* \_\_\_\_\_ *Latin* \_\_\_\_\_

*Other:* \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### *STUDENT INTERVIEW (Vignettes)*

*NAME:* \_\_\_\_\_ *DATE:* \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*

#### *Vignettes*

I. You are walking up to your group of friends before class. You hear them talking about a party they went to over the weekend. When they see you, they stop talking and turn away from you.

II. Your teacher says that she will be assigning partners for a class project. She tells you and another classmate that you will be working together. The classmate looks at you and says “Oh no!” then rolls her eyes and makes a face in front of all your friends. All your friends then laugh.

III. You find out that a close friend has spread a rumor about you that is not true. Everyone thinks it is true, including your other friends.

Questions:

Scenario #1:

1. Why might the person do this?
2. What might the person achieve from doing this?
3. Can you think of a time when someone in school has been mean to another person? Tell me about it.
4. What do you *think* when someone does something like this to you?
5. How do you *feel* when something like this happens to you?
6. What do you *do* when something like this happens to you?
7. We have talked about a lot of different ways kids can be mean to each other. Is there anything else that you might want to share with me about this topic?
8. (*Debriefing*) I’m wondering if any of these questions might have made you sad or upset. Would you like to talk about how this experience made you feel?



## Appendix D

### Close-Ended Questionnaire

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*

*STORY: You hear two classmates talking about a party someone is having. You overhear them saying that they don't want you to go. They plan to tell everybody that you did something awful in hopes that you won't be invited.*

1. What do you think are the **two** most likely motives for someone to do something like this?

- a. They need to feel like they are in power/control.
- b. They want to be accepted by a certain group
- c. They think it will improve their popularity
- d. They are seeking revenge on another person
- e. They are trying to improve their own negative feelings
- f. They feel like putting someone else down

2. How often does this kind of thing happen in your peer group?

Never          Rarely          Sometimes          Often          All the Time

3. How often have **you** done something like this?

Never          Rarely          Sometimes          Often          All the Time

4. How often has something like this happened to you?

Never          Rarely          Sometimes          Often          All the Time

- 2) Has anyone ever done any of the following to you? (Circle all that apply)

- a. Spread a rumor about you
- b. Talked about you behind your back
- c. Excluded you from an activity or event.
- d. Called you a name
- e. Put you down in front of other people
- f. Sent you a nasty email or text

- 3) If so, what do you think their reasons were?
  - a. They need to feel like they are in power/control.
  - b. They want to be accepted by a certain group
  - c. They think it will improve their popularity
  - d. They are seeking revenge on another person
  - e. They are trying to improve their own negative feelings
  - f. They feel like putting someone else down

- 4) Have you ever done any of the following to someone else?
  - a. Spread a rumor
  - b. Talked about someone behind their back
  - c. Excluded someone from an activity or event.
  - d. Called someone a name
  - e. Put someone down in front of other people
  - f. Sent someone a nasty email or text

- 5) If yes, what were the reasons?
  - a. You wanted to feel like you are in power/control.
  - b. You wanted to be accepted by a certain group
  - c. You thought it would improve your popularity
  - d. You were seeking revenge on another person
  - e. You were trying to make yourself feel better
  - f. You just felt like putting someone else down
  - g. The other person was annoying or bothering you.

6) Do you tell your mother when something like this happens to you? Yes/No

Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

7) If so, what does she tell you to do?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8) If you see something like this happening to someone else, what do you do?

\_\_\_\_\_

9) Where does this kind of thing happen to you the most?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E*****Knowledge of Anger Processing Scale (KAPS)***

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years at AIM: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*

*Directions:* Circle the *BEST* answer for each question below.

1. If you can't tell if someone did something on purpose, what is the best thing to do?
  - a) Tell the person to leave you alone.
  - b) Assume it was an accident.
  - c) Tell an adult.
  - d) Start a rumor about the other person.
  
2. If you hear that other kids are spreading rumors about a classmate, (that is, talking about her behind her back or saying mean things about her), what is the best thing you can do?
  - a) Tell the kids you are going to fight them if they don't stop spreading rumors.
  - b) Ignore it.
  - c) Tell the kids, "I'm not going to be mean. I'm not going to spread rumors."
  - d) Spread a rumor to get back at them.
  
3. Which of the following is the best way to stay calm (not get upset) if someone is mean to you?
  - a) Stomp your feet.
  - b) Hit a pillow.
  - c) Count to ten.
  - d) Tell an adult.

4. At lunch, your friends are all sitting at the table talking, but you want them to go outside to the park instead. What is the best way to get them to stop talking and go outside?
- a) Tell them that going outside is much more fun than sitting at the table.
  - b) Take someone's lunch bag so they will have to follow you outside.
  - c) Wait until they seem tired of talking, and then ask them if they want to go outside.
  - d) Hang around and see if someone else suggests going outside.
5. Ariel is standing in line in the lunchroom. Kelly bumps into her from behind. Ariel feels angry. What should Ariel do next?
- a) Try to calm down and think about what to do.
  - b) Tell the teacher
  - c) Push Kelly back
  - d) Say to Kelly, "Watch where you're going!"
6. If you have an argument with your best friend, what is the best way to deal with it?
- a) Just ignore it and the problem will probably go away.
  - b) Tell other kids not to be friends with her.
  - c) Tell her that you're angry with her and that you won't be her friend.
  - d) Think about what her side of the story is.
7. In the lunch room, one of the kids says there is not room at the table for you. How can you tell whether this kid is being mean or not?
- a) Ask other kids at the table what they think.
  - b) Look at the kid's face and body language to learn more about the situation.
  - c) Ask an adult for help.
  - d) Tell the kid you should be able to sit at the table too, and see if she lets you.
8. You want to play basketball after lunch. The game has already started. What should you do?
- a) Wait until the game has stopped and then ask if you can play.
  - b) Watch the game until the other kids notice you.
  - c) Jump into the game as soon as possible.
  - d) Ask an adult to tell the others to let you play.

9. When you are having an argument or disagreement, what is the best reason to pay attention to the other kids face and body?
- a) So you can tell an adult exactly what happened.
  - b) Because you need to be prepared to fight.
  - c) Because it can help you figure out what she is feeling.
  - d) So you can make fun of her.
10. Which of the following is the best way to stay out of a fight?
- a) Only hang out with kids you know.
  - b) Don't back down if someone is picking on you.
  - c) Make sure you sit with your friends at lunch.
  - d) Stop and think before you do things.
11. What is the best way to keep calm (not get upset) in an argument?
- a) Walk away from the situation.
  - b) Take deep breaths.
  - c) Talk to a friend.
  - d) Talk to an adult.
12. Crystal bumps in to Amber in the hallway. When Amber looks at Crystal, Crystal has a surprised look on her face. Do you think Crystal bumped Amber...
- a) On purpose.
  - b) By accident.
  - c) Out of fun.
  - d) I can't tell.
13. A kid from another classroom is bullying your friend. What is the best way that you can help stop the bullying?
- a) Look for something else to do.
  - b) Ignore it.
  - c) Talk to an adult about it.
  - d) Tell the bully if she doesn't leave your friend alone, she will have to fight you.

14. You are waiting to play a game in gym class. Someone cuts in line ahead of you. What should you do first?
- a) Get back your place in line.
  - b) Ask the other kid why she cut in line ahead of you.
  - c) Tell an adult.
  - d) Figure out how you are feeling before you do anything.
15. Brittany tells you a secret. She has a crush on the new boy in class. You tell the secret to some other kids. What do you think will happen next?
- a) Brittany's feelings will be hurt.
  - b) Nothing. Brittany is probably used to having other kids tell her secrets.
  - c) Brittany will be sorry that she has told you her secret.
  - d) Nothing. Brittany probably won't find out.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Answers: 1) b, 2) c, 3) c, 4) c, 5) a, 6) d, 7) b, 8) a, 9) c, 10) d, 11) b, 12) b, 13) c, 14) d, 15) a*

*Adapted from: Knowledge of Anger Processing Scale (KAPS)*

Leff, S. Cassano, M., Paquette-MacEvoy, J., & Costigan, T. (2010). Initial validation of a knowledge-based measure of social information processing and anger management. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 38, 1007-1020.

**Appendix F**

34<sup>th</sup> Street and  
Civic Center Boulevard  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-4399  
215-590-1000  
www.chop.edu

September 9, 2011

Dear Christine,

Thank you for including me in your dissertation research. As you know, I developed and validated a measure called Knowledge of Anger Problem Solving (KAPS), on which we published an article in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* in 2010. This letter serves as written permission for you to utilize the KAPS in your study.

I am happy to provide mentorship for your dissertation and wish you luck with the research!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Stephen S. Leff, Ph.D.'.

Stephen S. Leff, Ph.D.  
Licensed Psychologist, PA  
Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology in Pediatrics  
The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia  
University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine

## Appendix G

### Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



PHILADELPHIA · COLLEGE · OF · OSTEOPATHIC · MEDICINE

October 12, 2011

Rosemary Mennuti, Ed.D.  
Department of Psychology  
Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine  
4190 City Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19131

RE: **Relational aggression: what does it look like and how does it feel for children with language-based learning disabilities** (student research by C. Barbone)

Dear Dr. Mennuti:

At the October 12, 2011 meeting of the Institutional Review Board, the documents for your above-referenced study were reviewed. Attached are the required modifications identified by the Primary Reviewers.

These changes must be consistent throughout all of the materials. The forms are to be page numbered and have the date of the current revision. Any recruitment materials need to be reviewed by the IRB before they can be utilized. Please submit two (2) copies of the modifications to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

Your project is therefore accepted conditionally. *Before* the study can commence, documentation of these modifications and of completion of the online training program for the Principal Investigator and all Co-Investigators must be submitted to and *approved by* the Board. The link to the online training can be found on Nucleus under the Research and Sponsored Programs Group. You will then receive full approval, an official stamped consent form, and a letter authorizing you to begin.

Sincerely,

Eugene Mochan, Ph.D., D.O.  
Chairperson



**Appendix H****AIM Permission for Research**

Institutional Review Board  
Philadelphia college of Osteopathic Medicine  
4170 City Line Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19131

RE: Christine M. Barbone, Ed.S. NCSP  
School Psychology Doctoral Intern

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

This letter is to inform you that Christine M. Barbone, School Psychologist Doctoral Intern has permission to conduct her dissertation research at the Academy in Manayunk (AIM). As per her doctoral internship contract, she is permitted to carry out the following qualitative study:

*Relational Aggression: What does it look like and how does it feel for children with language-based learning disabilities?*

We understand that she will be obtaining informed consent and will perform a brief record review of eligible girls. The study will involve conducting 30 to 60 minute interviews with girls in grades five through eight which may occur during regular school hours. It is expected that the results of her study will benefit our students by providing valuable insight into their experiences with relational aggression and also by informing specific areas for intervention.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

Grace C. Ashton, Ph.D.  
Licensed Psychologist and Supervisor

Dick Baroody, Principal  
Academy in Manayunk

## Appendix I

### Parent Letter and Email



January, 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Perhaps the most frequently discussed change during adolescence is the increase in importance of peer groups, friendships, and peer-related activities. For adolescent girls, friendships seem to fulfill a need for intimacy, making friendships quite valuable to most adolescent girls. Unfortunately, girls' friendships, rather than fulfill this need, can often become a source of pain and frustration. Victims are targeted by aggressive children in an effort to gain popularity and acceptance. This aggression, termed *relational aggression*, is a very subtle form of bullying behavior but has been found to be just as harmful as overt forms of aggression. In an effort to damage a person's reputation and social standing, relational aggression often takes the form of name-calling, exclusion, rumors, or gossip.

As part of my School Psychology Doctoral training at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, I am conducting a qualitative study on relational aggression in girls with language-based learning disabilities. The purpose of this study is to examine the occurrence of relational aggression among these girls, as described by their personal experiences and observations. The goal is to obtain a better understanding of what relational aggression looks like in this population so that a theory may be developed and interventions can be informed.

I would like to invite your daughter to participate in my study. Her participation would provide valuable information regarding an issue that is becoming more and more of a concern in schools today. The attached informed consent form outlines the details of the study, including the purpose, procedures, potential benefits and risks, confidentiality, and nature of participation.

If you would like your daughter to be a part of this study, *please sign the consent form and return it to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope.* If you do not want to your daughter to participate, please return the consent form to me unsigned, indicating that you have read it but do not want her to participate. If you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at the number or email address below.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Christy Barbone, Ed.S. NCSP  
School Psychologist  
Academy in Manayunk  
1200 River Road  
Conshohocken, PA 19428  
215-483-2461  
cbarbone@aimpa.org

**Appendix J**  
**Follow-Up Letter and Email**



January, 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Several weeks ago, you received a letter inviting your daughter to participate in a study that I am conducting at AIM as part of my School Psychology Doctoral training. It is a qualitative study that examines the occurrence of *relational aggression* in adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities. Relational aggression is a very subtle form of bullying behavior that has been found to be just as harmful as overt forms of aggression. In an effort to damage a person's reputation and social standing, relational aggression often takes the form of name-calling, exclusion, rumors, or gossip.

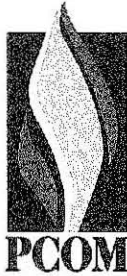
I would like to invite your daughter, once again, to participate in my study. Her participation would provide valuable information regarding an issue that is becoming more and more of a concern in schools today. The attached informed consent form outlines the details of the study, including the purpose, procedures, potential benefits and risks, confidentiality, and nature of participation.

If you would like your daughter to be a part of this study, *please sign the consent form and return it to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope*. If you do not want to your daughter to participate, please return the consent form to me unsigned, indicating that you have read it but do not want her to participate. If you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at the number or email address below.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Christy Barbone, Ed.S. NCSP  
School Psychologist  
Academy in Manayunk  
1200 River Road  
Conshohocken, PA 19428  
215-483-2461  
cbarbone@aimpa.org

**Appendix K**

PHILADELPHIA · COLLEGE · OF · OSTEOPATHIC · MEDICINE  
Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY  
215-871-6442  
215-871-6458 FAX  
psyd@pcom.edu E-MAIL

Institutional Review Board

Approval Date: 10/12/11

TEMPLATE REVISED 10/11/09  
Expiration Date: 10/11/12 CII 2009

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM****TITLE OF STUDY**

Relational Aggression: What Does It Look Like and How Does It Feel for Children with Language-Based Learning Disabilities?

**TITLE OF STUDY IN LAY TERMS**

"I'm having a party and you're not invited!": How pre-adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities describe relational aggression.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this research is to find out how girls with language-based learning disabilities describe their experiences with relational aggression. Relational aggression is a form of bullying that includes actions like spreading rumors, exclusion from a group, and, "giving someone the silent treatment." The purpose of this kind of behavior is to destroy another person's reputation, hurt their feelings, and damage their self-esteem.

Your child is being asked to be in this research study because she is a pre-adolescent girl in grade 5 through 8 at the Academy in Manayunk with a diagnosed language-based learning disability. If your daughter has a diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder or if her primary language is not English, your child can not be in this study.

**INVESTIGATOR(S)**

Principal Investigator: Rosemary Mennuti,  
Ed.D.

Co-Investigator: N/A/

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Responsible (Student) Investigator: Christine M. Barbone, EdS., NCSP

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The interview your child is being asked to volunteer for is part of a research project.

If you have questions about this research, you can call Dr. Rosemary Mennuti at (215) 871-6414.

If you have any questions or problems during the study, you can ask Dr. Mennuti, who will be available during the entire study. If you want to know more about Dr. Mennuti's background, or the rights of research subjects, you can call the PCOM Research Compliance Specialist at (215) 871-6782.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCEDURES

If your child decides to be in this study, your child will be asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Individual interviews will be conducted in private during regular school hours, before school, or after school. Depending on schedules, the location of the interview could include a private office in school, the student's home, or a location that is mutually agreed upon by parents, child, and interviewer. During the first part of the interview, your child will be presented with questions about why friends are sometimes mean to each other. This first part of the interview will be audio-recorded. During the second half of the interview, your child will complete two brief questionnaires about children's friendships. Before beginning the interview, each girl will be reminded that her participation is voluntary and that her identity will remain confidential. She will be told that she has the right to not answer any questions that makes her feel uncomfortable and that she may stop the interview at any time if she does not wish to continue.

The study will take about 1 hour for each session. There will be 1 session(s) over the course of 1 week, for a total of 1 hour of your child's time.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The benefits of this study include gaining a better understanding of how girls with language-based learning disabilities describe and experience relational aggression. Your child may not benefit from being in this study. Other people in the future may benefit from what the researchers learn from the study.

### RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

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Your child may experience feelings of discomfort when asked to think and talk about relationally aggressive acts. This might illicit an emotional response such as sadness, frustration, or low self-esteem.

**ALTERNATIVES**

The other choice is to not be in this study.

**PAYMENT**

Your child will not be paid for being in this study.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information and records relating to your child's participation will be kept in a locked file. Only the researchers, members of the Institutional Review Board, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration will be able to look at these records. If the results of this study are published, no names or other identifying information will be used.

**REASONS YOUR CHILD MAY BE TAKEN OUT OF THE STUDY WITHOUT YOUR CHILD'S CONSENT**

If health conditions occur that would make staying in the study possibly dangerous to your child, or if other conditions occur that would damage you or your child's health, the researchers may take your child out of this study.

In addition, the entire study may be stopped if dangerous risks or side effects occur in other people.

**NEW FINDINGS**

If any new information develops that may affect your child's willingness to stay in this study, you will be told about it.

**INJURY**

If your child is injured as a result of this research study, your child will be provided with immediate necessary care.

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However, your child will not be reimbursed for care or receive other payment. PCOM will not be responsible for any of your child's bills, including any routine care under this program or reimbursement for any side effects that may occur as a result of this program.

If you believe that your child has suffered injury or illness in the course of this research, you should notify the PCOM Research Compliance Specialist at (215) 871-6782. A review by a committee will be arranged to determine if the injury or illness is a result of your child's being in this research. You should also contact the PCOM Research Compliance Specialist if you believe that you have not been told enough about the risks, benefits, or other options, or that your child is being pressured to stay in this study against your child's wishes.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

You and your child may refuse to be in this study. Your child voluntarily consents to be in this study with the understanding of the known possible effects or hazards that might occur during this study. Not all the possible effects of the study are known.

Your child may leave this study at any time.

If your child drops out of this study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is entitled.

I have had adequate time to read this form and I understand its contents. I have been given a copy for my personal records.

I agree to allow my child to be in this research study.

Signature of Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ AM/PM

Signature of Investigator or Designee \_\_\_\_\_  
(circle one)

Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ AM/PM



## Appendix L

### Student Assent Form

***TITLE: "I'm having a party and you're not invited!"***  
***How do pre-adolescent girls with language-based learning disabilities describe relational aggression?***

***What is the study about?***

This study is about friendships and why some girls your age can be mean to one another. Being “mean” includes things like spreading rumors, excluding someone from a group, or “giving someone the silent treatment.” I am interested in how you feel about this topic, what you think about it, and what you have done when someone does something mean to you.

***What will happen to you if you are in the study?***

If you decide to be in this study, you will participate in an interview which will be conducted in private. The interview may be in school, before or after school, or some place that is arranged with your parents. Part of the interview will be audio-taped, and part will be completing two short questionnaires.

***How long will the interview take?***

Each interview will last about 45 minutes. You don't have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. If you say yes now and change your mind later, you can stop at any time. Just tell Ms. Barbone that you want to stop. Nobody will be angry with if you say no. Everything you say will be confidential.

***What if you have questions?***

You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later.

- I was given enough time to read this form and ask questions.
- I understand the study.
- I have been given a copy of this form to keep.
- I agree to be in this study.

Student's Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

Signature of Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

## Appendix M

### Interview Script

#### ***I. Introduction:*** (for 5<sup>th</sup> graders who do not know who I am)

- Name and Title
- Internship and Dissertation
- Upper School Responsibilities

#### ***II. Review Assent Form***

- What the study is about
- What will happen if you are in the study
- How long it will take?
- What if you have questions?
- Sign form
- *Remember: What I really want to know is how you think about this.*

#### ***III. Student Interview (Vignettes)***

- *The first questionnaire consists of three short stories. I will read the story to you...I want you to think about the situation, imagine it happening to you, and then I'm going to ask you a few questions.*
- ***Story # 1:***
  - *You are walking up to a group of friends before class.*
  - *You hear them talking about a party they went to over the weekend.*
  - *When they see you, they stop talking and turn away.*
- ***Story #2:***
  - *Your teacher is assigning partners*
  - *She tells you who you will be working with.*
  - *Your partner looks at you, says "Oh no!" rolls her eyes, and makes a face*
  - *Everybody laughs*
- ***Story #3:***
  - *A close friend has spread a rumor about you.*
  - *It isn't true.*
  - *Everyone thinks it's true.*

- **Questions for each story:**

- 1) *Why would someone do this?*
- 2) *What would someone get from doing this?*
- 3) *Has this ever happened to you? Think of a time when someone in school has been mean. Tell me about it.*
- 4) *What goes through your head? What do you say to yourself?*
- 5) *What feelings do you have? What emotions? Can you explain them more?*
- 6) *What would you do? What else? What would someone else do?*
- 7) *What you're saying to me is very important. Is there anything else you want to add or that you think would be helpful?*

**IV. Remember:** *What I really want to know is how you think about this, OK?*

- *Tell me more...*
- *Give me an example...*
- *Think of a time...*
- *Imagine this happening to you...*

**V. Student Interview (Self Report):**

- *The second questionnaire has just one story. I will read it to you and then ask you some different questions. Here it is...just follow along with me, OK?*

**VI. Student Questionnaire**

- *The third questionnaire has questions about how you would handle different situations. I will read the question to you, just follow along, and then select the BEST answer.*