

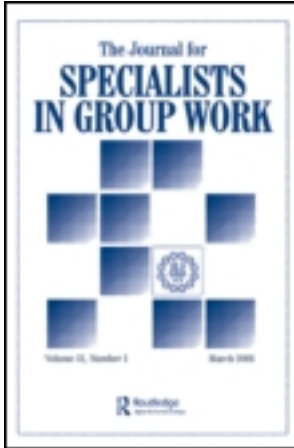
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### A Psychoeducational Group for Aggressive Adolescent Girls

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# A Psychoeducational Group for Aggressive Adolescent Girls

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*This article describes an eight-session psychoeducational group for aggressive adolescent girls. The content of the group sessions is based on research that has identified gender-specific issues related to aggression in adolescent girls, such as gender-role socialization, childhood abuse, relational aggression, horizontal violence, and girl culture. Nonaggressive coping strategies are also discussed. Initial evaluation showed that girls did change some of their attitudes about their aggressive behavior.*

**Keywords:** *aggression; adolescent; girls; relational; psychoeducational*

Although boys still account for the majority of aggression by adolescents, aggression by adolescent girls has been increasing (Acoca, 1998). However, because aggressive adolescent girls are in the minority in many treatment facilities, they have often received treatment with boys in groups that are designed to meet the needs of boys. Even in schools, many psychoeducational groups are more related to aggression by boys such as groups on date rape (e.g., Heppner, Humphrey, Hillenbrand-Gunn, & DeBord, 1995; Lonsway & Kothari, 2000) and violence against women (e.g., Community Education Team, 1999). Recent research (e.g., Hazler & Carney, 2000; Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham, & Saunders, 2001; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001) has shown that some of the variables related to aggression in adolescent girls and boys are different. Thus,

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treatment and psychoeducational groups for girls need to be designed with these differences in mind. Because very few structured groups for aggressive adolescent girls exist, the group described in this article was developed to fill this gap.

A number of authors (Heilbron, Tingley, Cummings, & Leschied, 2002; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000; Pate, 2002; Reitsma-Street & Artz, 2000; Rollin, 2001) have called for gender-specific treatment for aggressive adolescent girls. These groups are not unique simply because membership is restricted to girls. Prescott (1998) argues that effective interventions for girls need to be developed with an understanding of the role that female gender-role socialization plays in aggression with girls. In addition, interventions need to be multidimensional to address the difficulties that these girls experience in many domains, such as social skills and problem-solving abilities.

Research (Leschied et al., 2001) has shown that many factors are associated with aggression in adolescent girls. Three of the more salient factors were chosen for inclusion in the group intervention presented here: relational aggression, gender-role socialization, and abuse history. Nonaggressive coping strategies were also highlighted. The rationale for focusing on each of these areas and associated research will be discussed briefly.

When considering aggression with adolescent girls, research has shown that although some girls use verbal and physical aggression, the most frequent form of aggression among girls is relational (e.g., Cummings & Leschied, 2002; Pakaslahti & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1998; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Simmons, 2002). Relational aggression is defined by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) as manipulation of others with the goal of causing harm to the relationship and the victim through behaviors such as: (a) excluding a girl from a social group, (b) gossiping about another girl so that other girls will reject her, or (c) threatening termination of a friendship unless a girl does what the aggressor wants. This form of aggression is different from the more direct forms of verbal and physical aggression that are used by boys. However, most girls are unaware that this type of indirect, relational behavior is a form of aggression. It is understandable that girls use relational aggression more than boys, given the socialization experiences of girls in North American culture. For this reason, it is important to encourage aggressive girls to become aware of what relational aggression is and the impact it has on others.

Through gender-role socialization, girls are encouraged to value close relationships with other girls and discouraged from expressing overt anger (Brown, 1998). Thus, it is not surprising that when girls are angry with each other, they often punish their target indirectly

with what each girl values most: namely, being connected in an intimate friendship or group. At the same time, adolescent girls are socialized to perceive other girls as competitors for boys. Tanenbaum (2000) believes that girls' groups are an ideal forum for girls to deal with their socialization through changing the way that they relate to one another by overcoming their competitive impulses and viewing other girls as potential allies rather than as enemies.

Self-in-relation theory from the Stone Center (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) describes the development of identity and self-concept in girls as occurring within the context of relationships. Given the relational needs of girls and the need to help them to explore how they relate to each other, groups may well be the most beneficial treatment mode for aggressive girls. In addition, one study (Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995) found that positive relationships with adults constituted a protective factor against aggression in adolescent girls. It is likely that adult female role models could be helpful in deterring adolescent girls from aggressive behavior by providing girls with the opportunity to witness positive ways of being a female in this culture. For this reason, it is recommended that this group for aggressive adolescent girls be facilitated by female counselors.

Aggressive adolescent girls need better coping strategies for dealing with anger and conflict with their peers. To achieve this end, a thorough knowledge about the meanness of girl culture is needed by both girls and group facilitators. Both Tanenbaum (2000) and White (2002) researched how adolescent girls use sexualized labels such as "slut" and "bitch" to attempt to keep other girls "in their place," which also provokes fights among girls. Brown (1998) contends that these labels are not really about sexuality, but are used for revenge or to control girls who are different or threatening. Thus, a counseling group for aggressive girls needs first to show girls how to resist messages that try to silence them through rigid expectations for behavior. A counseling group for girls requires a focus on nonaggressive strategies for dealing with slurs and putdowns (Basow & Rubin, 1999).

Finally, Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1992) estimate that about 33 percent of girls experience physical or sexual abuse in childhood. However, this rate rises dramatically with aggressive girls. Cummings, Leschied, and Heilbron (2002) found that 70 percent of 29 adolescent girls in residential/custody facilities had a history of abuse (emotional, physical, and/or sexual) compared to 34 percent of 123 high school girls. It is likely that experiencing a form of abuse in childhood has an impact on later aggressive behavior because girls learn that hurting and aggression are acceptable ways to deal with anger and conflict between people. These links need to be made for aggressive girls so

that they can see that harmful cognitions and behaviors learned in their homes can be changed to reflect more supportive, nonconflictual cognitions and behaviors when they interact with other teens. Although a number of authors (e.g., Artz, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999) have called for the inclusion of abuse recovery in treatment for aggressive girls, few counseling groups to date have included this component.

## **A RELATIONSHIP GROUP FOR AGGRESSIVE ADOLESCENT GIRLS**

### **Goals of the Group**

This group is a structured psychoeducational group as defined by the Association for Specialists in Group Work (2000) classification system. Each session has an educational component of presenting new information or perspectives to group members, as well as a psychological component designed to promote personal growth. It was developed for adolescent girls who had past experiences of being verbally, physically, and/or relationally aggressive with their peers or for girls who were at risk of becoming aggressive in the future. Although aggression between adolescent girls and boys is also of importance, it was beyond the scope of this group to address relevant issues for both genders.

The psychoeducational group was designed to meet the following six goals: (a) to educate girls about the effects of their gender-role socialization on their interaction patterns with other girls; (b) to teach girls about various forms of aggression, especially verbal and relational aggression; (c) to examine the impact of violence in their lives, both inside and outside of the home, and how these experiences relate to their aggression with others; (d) to teach girls nonaggressive coping strategies for dealing with stressful interpersonal situations that regularly occur in their lives; and (e) to provide girls with a safe place to explore what it means to be an adolescent girl in this culture; and (f) to encourage development of more positive self-images. The theoretical base for choosing these six topics is self-in-relation theory (Jordan et al., 1991) and a feminist understanding of abuse and gender-role socialization (Brown, 1998; Pate, 2002).

### **Group Format and Membership**

The group experience was composed of eight one-hour sessions. It was decided to deliver these sessions twice a week over four weeks

to improve learning and to lessen the potential for dropout by having a shortened time commitment. Both snacks and objects to hold, such as stuffed animals and stress balls, were provided for each session to help group members relax.

Two graduate counseling interns who had previous experience working with adolescents were the cofacilitators for the group. With such a high needs group of girls, it was important to have two facilitators to monitor the needs of individual group members during the group experience. The two facilitators used a leadership style that was semistructured, but still allowed for much free discussion time by participants. They had a person-centered, feminist theoretical orientation that emphasized respect and empowerment of the girls. Training on the use of a manual which described each session in detail was provided to the facilitators by the first author. Facilitators also received weekly supervision from the first and third authors while the group was in progress to process any personal issues that might arise from dealing with difficult topics such as abuse. It is very important that facilitators do not unconsciously do their own work in a group of this nature. Supervision also focused on treatment fidelity and making minor revisions when needed to increase treatment effectiveness. The manual, *A Girls' Relationship Group: Group Treatment for Aggressive Adolescent Girls* (Cummings, Tingley, & Leschied, 2002), is available from the first author on request.

Group members were eight aggressive adolescent girls from a residential custody facility for adolescent girls. The girls ranged in age from 12–16 years ( $M = 14.7$ ); six were Caucasian and two were Native. All of the group members had experienced abuse in their homes (physical, sexual, emotional, and/or witnessing). Six girls reported being in physical fights and two girls reported being in verbal fights (yelling, swearing) with peers. However, all group members were referred to the group by staff of the facility on the basis of who they identified as needing a group on aggression and who could cope with a group experience. It was important to screen out girls who were volatile and would disrupt the group process for other participants. The group occurred at the facility during the last period of their school day and was voluntary for the girls.

One of the group facilitators interviewed each participant before the group began to gather the above information about each girl, to explain the goals of the group, and to obtain signed informed consent from each girl. Informed consent was also obtained from the guardian of each participant. Facilitators also used this opportunity to explain to participants that their role in the group would include being an active participant by disclosing what was comfortable for them, by helping other group members, and by listening carefully to feedback.

Each group session began with a check-in focused on how the girls were feeling that day, a personal sharing related to the topic of the session, something positive about themselves, or any unfinished business they had from the previous session. Each session also closed with a check-out that was focused on how they were feeling at the end of the session, what they learned from the session, or what they had not said in the session that they now wanted to say. Both of these experiences provided a structured opportunity for each girl to speak briefly about herself and helped orient the group facilitators to how each member was feeling at the beginning and end of each session. The following section details the content of each weekly session.

*Session 1—Who Am I?* The goals of the first session were to orient the girls to the group experience; to establish group guidelines for confidentiality, communication, and safety; to begin building trust; and to begin exploring the difficulties of being a girl. Although the girls already knew each other, these particular eight girls had not been together in such an intimate format. Thus, after the facilitators provided a summary of what would be covered in the sessions, they led an open discussion about the guidelines that the girls needed to feel safe in the group. The facilitators ensured that the guidelines included confidentiality, no putdowns or hurting of others, and participants having control over what they said and the option to pass at any time.

The next activity used a wagon wheel which comprised an inner and outer circle with the girls facing each other. The pairs talked for a few minutes about eight sentence prompts and then changed to a new partner for the next sentence prompt. Examples of sentence prompts included the following: what I like/dislike about being a girl, what I would change about being a girl, what I find hardest about being with my group of friends, how I show I feel comfortable in a group. This activity was followed by an open discussion about the difficulties of being a girl and being part of a group, both a peer group and a counseling group.

In this first session, facilitators had difficulty in getting the girls to talk openly. Because they were in a custodial facility, the girls were skeptical about having confidentiality from staff in the facility and were very concerned about the safety of disclosing in the group. It was important for facilitators to spend time addressing these issues with the girls as a way of beginning to build trust and cohesion in the group.

*Session 2—Why is it so hard to be an adolescent girl?* The goal of this session was to help girls become aware of the impact of gender-role socialization on their behavior and feelings about themselves. After check-in, the facilitators led an open discussion about gender-role expectations by asking the girls, "What messages did you get from



adults in your home about being a girl and/or how would life have been different for you in your family if you had been a boy?" During this discussion, facilitators were encouraged to insert concepts about different gender expectations for boys and girls within families (e.g., differences in curfews, housework, freedom of movement, expression of anger, care of younger children). The girls were then directed to consider, "What messages do you get from other girls about how you have to behave to be accepted?" Facilitators added some of the following examples if the girls did not mention them: leave other girls' boyfriends alone, do what the group tells you, have a perfect body, if you get out of line you'll be called a slut. Facilitators had the girls define emotionally charged labels such as "slut" and think about whether or not there was a comparable word for boys.

To help the girls identify messages they received about being a girl from TV, movies, magazines, and video games, the girls made a joint collage from old teen magazine pictures of what was portrayed in the media as "hot" and who was portrayed as "cool." During discussion about the resulting collage, facilitators inserted concepts about being adolescent girls, such as sex object, being submissive, passive, not in charge, needing to be rescued, and the goal of life being devoted to good appearance. This discussion closed with the girls being queried, "Given these messages from family, friends, and media, why is it so difficult to be an adolescent girl in this culture?" If needed, facilitators included ideas about girls not being allowed to be their true selves, not feeling accepted for who they really are, and having lower expectations for themselves.

The girls readily took part in the discussion in this session and seemed to have lost the reluctance that was expressed in the previous session. Girls without brothers had a hard time imagining that boys' experiences in families might be different from girls' experiences. However, girls with brothers were able to think of many examples of differential treatment. The collage activity was particularly effective with the girls becoming quite animated and easily identifying the portrayal of the perfect image. It was helpful to have a total group activity in this second session to continue building group cohesion and to provide a more active learning mode.

*Session 3—Why do they keep calling me names?* The goal of this session was to make girls aware of the different types of aggression and why girls fight with each other. The facilitators asked group members to describe verbal and physical fights in which they have been involved. As they talked, facilitators queried how the fight started and what caused it to get worse. Were they victims or starters of the fight? How did they feel in each role? As the girls described their experiences, facilitators made connections with other girls who had

similar experiences and labeled the experiences as direct verbal or physical aggression.

Facilitators then defined relational aggression and gave examples such as excluding a girl from a group, backstabbing, or gossiping about a girl behind her back. They then asked group members to talk about their experiences with this more indirect form of aggression and how they felt in those situations as victim and instigator. The facilitators asked the girls to consider the causes of relational aggression and then introduced the idea of horizontal violence, i.e., when a group of people feel that they have less power, they turn anger toward each other as a safer target. During this discussion, facilitators included some of the following ideas and questions if needed: competition among girls for boys' attention as part of horizontal violence, girls controlling each others' behavior through relational aggression (e.g., name calling) resulting in a narrow band of acceptable behavior, girls viewing other girls as the enemy rather than as allies, and who benefits from girls believing these ideas?

The girls again talked easily in this session about the fights they had experienced. However, they found it much easier to identify with the victim role than the perpetrator role. They were surprised that the examples of relational aggression were considered to be aggression because that behavior was so much a part of their daily lives. The idea of horizontal violence was also new to them, and there was some resistance expressed about both of these ideas. It is typical for group members to experience and express resistance at this point in a group experience (Corey & Corey, 2002). Thus, facilitators need to be prepared that they may only be able to introduce these concepts in this session, rather than achieving change in cognitions.

*Session 4—Hurting in my home.* The goal of this session was to help girls talk about the effects of experiencing violence in their homes and explore how these experiences translated to their own interpersonal experience. The word *hurting* was used purposefully in this session rather than *abuse* or *violence*, because often girls do not label their experiences as abuse or violence, but they are more able to acknowledge that hurting occurred. Because this topic was sensitive, it was important for facilitators to emphasize that group members share only information that felt comfortable and safe, to pass on anything, and to "space out" if needed. The intent in this session was not for the girls to tell their stories in detail, but rather to talk about the effects that hurting in their homes had on them.

The facilitators were given eight discussion leads and told to use as many as time allowed. This was a large group discussion, but it could also have been done in pairs if leaders thought that would be better for their particular group members. Examples of discussion leads

included: (a) What happened when adults in your home disagreed or argued? (b) Who in your family was allowed to be angry? (c, d) When my mother (stepmother)/father (stepfather) got angry, she/he ... (e) How did you feel when adults in your home got angry and/or hurt each other? As girls shared their answers to these leads, facilitators made connections among other girls with similar feelings and experiences.

Time was left at the end of this discussion to ask group members what they learned from witnessing or experiencing hurting in their homes. If needed, facilitators talked about learning that hurting and aggression are acceptable ways to resolve conflict and anger between two people, learning to be a victim, not to trust people, that they have no power, and learning that they cannot set boundaries between themselves and others. Facilitators left them with the message that if they can learn one way of dealing with conflict, they can also learn a different, better way.

This session was the deepest of the eight sessions because many of the girls disclosed experiences of abuse. Some girls opened up for the first time in the group. Even girls who did not disclose were noticeably affected by others' stories. They all took the session very seriously and were quite supportive of each other. Thus, the group was at the working stage of group process where cohesion was high and depth issues were processed.

*Session 5—I can make different choices.* The goal of this session was to help girls link their current aggressive behavior to prior experiences in their homes. If it is necessary to continue the discussion from the last session on hurting in the family, that discussion takes first priority for this session.

Facilitators opened a discussion by introducing the idea that *one* cause of the girls' aggressive behavior might be due to what they learned in their families and a result of the anger that they still felt about those experiences. Next, facilitators asked the girls to brainstorm other ways of dealing with conflict in families, e.g., how did they wish adults in their lives would handle their anger? As part of this brainstorming, safety plans were developed for girls who needed them for when they were with their families.

Then a few of the family situations were role played so that the girls could practice ways of handling family conflict, both when they were involved in the conflict and when they witnessed conflict. In the debriefing after the role plays, facilitators encouraged members to discuss the acceptability of hurting other people as a means to resolve conflict in families. They ended the session with the message that even though girls learn patterns in families, they can now choose not to be in abusive relationships, can choose not to give away power by being

victims, and can choose not to be an abuser like the adults in their lives.

The girls again had difficulty accepting the new ideas introduced in this session about different ways of dealing with conflict in their families. They felt such lack of control and were so used to blaming themselves for their family conflict that they had difficulty believing that there were other options for them to try. Role playing avoidance and de-escalating strategies were helpful in giving the girls a different perspective.

*Session 6—There's got to be a better way.* The goal of this session was to have girls problem solve how to deal with their most difficult interpersonal situations with peers in nonaggressive ways. After check in, the girls were asked to describe the types of situations where they had the most difficulty being nonaggressive. With each situation, the group was asked to problem solve nonaggressive ways of dealing with it; e.g., walking away, humor, shrugs, negotiating, changing the topic. Facilitators first modeled through role play how to diffuse a situation with a nonengagement technique such as agreeing with part of a putdown; e.g., someone calls you a stupid bitch and you say, "You're right—sometimes I do act stupid" as you walk away. Then, several of the members role played one of their situations using a nonaggressive method. After the role play, the group evaluated whether that was an effective method or whether they should try a different nonaggressive approach.

After several role plays, facilitators asked the girls to describe situations where they were afraid that they would be victims of aggression and had them problem solve ways to deal with those situations. Several of these situations were chosen for role play to practice nonaggressive ways to handle a situation. For these girls, it was a novel idea that they could walk away from a conflict. Although there was some resistance to the idea during this session, several of the girls listed this strategy on their evaluation form as something they would try the next time they were tempted to fight. There was much laughter during the role plays which was helpful after the previous two heavier sessions.

*Session 7—TGIF: Thank Goodness I'm Female!* The goal of this session was to celebrate the positive aspects of being a young woman. Because earlier sessions had focused on the difficult aspects of being a young woman in this culture, it was important to help the girls feel more positive about being a woman. It was also hoped that through their experience of connecting closely and positively with seven other girls, individual group members would begin to feel more positive about girls more generally, to counter the meanness that is part of girl culture.

A Circle of Appreciation or Strength Bombardment was used in this session. One girl volunteered to be first. All other group members told her what they thought her strengths were. After they finished, the girl responded to what she heard the other members say. Every group member took a turn receiving her strengths from the other members. One of the facilitators wrote down the strengths as they were delivered so that each girl had a written copy to keep. After this activity, the facilitators led a discussion on how the girls could use their strengths to be nonaggressive with their peers. The session ended with a short discussion about what they would like to do for the last session.

This session began the termination stage of group work with members giving and receiving feedback from each other, an important goal identified by Corey and Corey (2002) for this stage. The girls found the exercise to be very positive and were quite good at giving positive feedback to each other. When some of them wanted to downplay being able to use their strengths outside of the group, other group members were able to counter that negativity with encouragement.

*Session 8—Where do I go from here?* The goals of this session were to consolidate learning from the previous sessions and plan for transfer of learning outside of the group, two additional goals of the termination stage (Corey & Corey, 2002). Facilitators asked the girls to talk about what they had learned in the group. If needed, facilitators reminded members about what relational aggression was, the effect of societal messages on their aggression, the unhelpful models of dealing with conflict they saw in their families, and nonaggressive ways of dealing with conflict and putdowns from peers. Each girl was asked to speak briefly about what she would take with her from the group experience, what she still needed to work on, and any changes she would make if she were leader of the group. The group ended with informal time of eating pizza and socializing. The girls were quite “up” with high energy in this last session. All of them reported that they had learned to be less aggressive from the group experience. What stood out the most for them from the group was learning about what it meant to be a woman in North American culture.

## EVALUATION OF THE GROUP

Furr (2000) advocates evaluation by group members as a necessary component of any group experience. At the end of the group, members completed a six-item evaluation form that included the following questions: (a) What did you like about these group sessions? (b) What did you dislike about the group sessions? (c) What did you learn about yourself? (d) What did you learn about being a female in today’s

world? (e) What do you think causes girls to be aggressive? (f) The next time you feel like fighting, what will you do?

Group members reported liking the openness of the group, hearing others' stories, being able to express anger, and having fun. Some girls disliked the behavior of some members, and two did not like hearing stories of assault. They learned that they were not the only one with problems, that they could talk instead of fight, and that they "should not get into fights over stupid things." With respect to being a female in today's world, they reported learning that girls "are expected to be something else," and that they "get judged more than guys." They saw the causes of aggression in girls as being family life, gossip, not fitting in, and feeling out of place. When asked what they would do the next time they felt like fighting, most girls said that they would walk away, think before acting, try to talk about it, and/or overlook minor things. Two girls said that if it was major, they would still fight.

Quantitative evaluation was provided by the girls completing (both before and after the group) the Beliefs and Attitudes Scale (Butler & Leschied, 1997), a measure of antisocial beliefs and values for adolescents. A t-test between pretest and posttest total score was significant ( $t(7) = 1.97, p = .05, 1$  tailed) with scores decreasing between pretest ( $M = 34.0$ ) and posttest ( $M = 30.5$ ), indicating that the girls reported fewer antisocial beliefs after the group experience.

Even though the group members provided evidence of learning ideas that were targeted in the group experience, we believe that additional sessions and time would be helpful in future groups to accomplish behavioral change outside of the group. Ideally, 12 sessions over six weeks would provide an opportunity to have more sessions devoted to childhood abuse recovery and more sessions to deal with different types of situations with peers that can lead to aggression. With this population, there is a fine line between the number of sessions that girls are willing to commit to attending and the number of sessions needed to affect change in behavior.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

Although this group was delivered in a residential facility, it is also an appropriate group to be delivered to high-risk adolescent girls in mental health facilities, middle schools, and high schools. If it is used with girls who do not have abuse histories, the session on Hurting in the Home could be changed to an additional session on nonaggressive strategies with peers. Because research (e.g., Hoffman, 2003; Lindeman, Harakka, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1997) has shown that reported

aggression by girls is lower in late adolescence as compared to early and middle adolescence, it is important that this group experience be provided for younger teens, rather than waiting to intervene after aggression becomes more serious.

Adolescent girls need safe opportunities with other girls to address their anger and frustration and to learn nonaggressive strategies for dealing with their peers. However, it is not enough simply to try to change their aggressive beliefs and behaviors in a group experience. These girls also need to have an understanding of how they have been affected by their gender-role socialization and various forms of victimization so that they can make better choices when faced with difficult interpersonal situations. Group facilitators can be instrumental in this process.

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