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Research on 'Mean Girls' Probes Middle School Manipulation

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The 2004 movie Mean Girls still strikes a nerve for anyone who's been involved in school clique psychological warfare. Research by professor Dianna Murray-Close explores the social manipulation portrayed in the film that's common among middle-school girls and what might be done to stop it. (Photo: Sally McCay)

When Dianna Murray-Close, assistant professor in psychology, shows the movie *Mean Girls* in her developmental psychology course her students tend to identify with the main character who learns the hard way that manipulation, rumor spreading and backstabbing are common tools for moving up the teenage social ladder. "In girl world," declares actress Lindsay Lohan, "all the fighting has to be sneaky." The movie has a happy Hollywood ending with everyone becoming friends and Lohan declaring that "girl world was finally at peace."

Murray-Close, however, who worked as a graduate student in the lab that produced the research used in the book *Mean Girls* was based on, knows that all is not well in real girl world. Her current research on relational aggression — any form of manipulation intended to hurt or control another child's ability to maintain rapport with peers — shows that its

frequency increases during middle childhood and can cause depression, academic problems and peer rejection.

In an article in the *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, Murray-Close used results of tests she conducted on heart rate assessment, blood pressure and sympathetic nerve system activity among 5th graders to show that heightened cardiac reactivity to provocation is associated with relational forms of aggression among girls. She's convinced that if girls can control their reactions at the point of increased cardiac activity, they can prevent committing acts of relational aggression.

"We have girls re-live a stressor and measure how their body reacts," she says. "One of the arguments here is that if you are someone who gets very physically worked up, this may be a pre-disposition to then respond to aggression. Ultimately, I'd like to develop some coping skills for girls. There's been a lot of research on physical aggression, especially among boys, but not much on what to do about relational aggression. You'd like to think your research will ultimately help children."

Taking the research to another level

Murray-Close is expanding her research this fall at UVM's social development lab in John Dewey Hall by going into local elementary and middle schools to collect data on fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh grade girls who have been victims of relational aggression and those who have committed acts of it. Graduate student Julia McQuade will focus on the role of working memory and how that might relate to social problem solving, while fellow grad student Erin Shoulberg will look at status goals and whether girls who have a desire to be popular see relational aggression as a way to climb the social ladder.

Evolutionary theorists argue that getting control over your environment by being aggressive towards other people is a way to establish dominance. Murray-Close says some students not only gain power in this way, but in some cases gain popularity. Although most kids who do this are disliked, she says, there's a subset who are perceived as extremely popular not unlike Lohan and her three A-list friends in the movie.

"Essentially we ask these kids who does this in their class," says Murray-Close. "We'll use data to see if students who engage in this are more depressed, more victimized, even more popular, so we can see the patterns of what might put someone at risk for engaging in these behaviors. There's evidence that shows the aggressors are at risk and more likely to develop depressive symptoms, be disliked by peers and have problems with their friends later in life. We want to figure out what can be done to help them so they don't stay at risk. We also want to help kids who are victimized

because they are also at risk."

Reducing relational aggression through culture change

In addition to developing and teaching individual coping skills, a cultural change at school and community levels is necessary to reduce relational aggression, says Murray-Close. One of her current studies focuses on child adolescent friendships at Point O'Pines Camp for Girls in Brant Lake, N.Y., a camp Shoulberg attended and worked at for 16 years and currently co-directs. Girls attend the camp for two months starting as early as age eight and often go back every year into their teens. They learn important leadership skills and how to deal with conflict in a setting that discourages relational aggression and fosters dealing with issues as they occur.

"One of the things I think is interesting about this study is that with the group of girls at the camp we did not find that popularity was related to relational aggression," says Murray-Close. "One of the reasons we think that's the case, and one of the things we want to look at in the future, is how we can change the classroom environment so it's not cool to be relationally aggressive. There's a lot of social problem solving going on at the camp. Counselors help girls deal with conflict as it comes up in a really healthy way. The girls that are relationally aggressive at the camp are not among the popular. We think that when you really change someone's context, you can make it so that it's not cool to do these things, and that's something we should really strive for in schools.

Murray-Close realizes this won't be an easy task for schools where instances of physical aggression are on the rise among girls and are often the focus of school systems. Advancements in technology have made acts of relational aggression easier to commit, but harder to monitor. No longer do rivals or ex-friends have to manipulate, name call or spread rumors about each other when in school; they can do it via -email, Twitter, Facebook or text message.

"There should be a safe way for these kids to communicate what's going on in their environment," says Murray-Close. "Teachers are aware that it's a problem, but it's not as overt as physical violence. How do you prove that someone spread a rumor or that they are ignoring someone? Schools aren't sure what to do. Ultimately, it will take a culture change like at the camp. Ideally, our research will provide some ways to help make that happen."