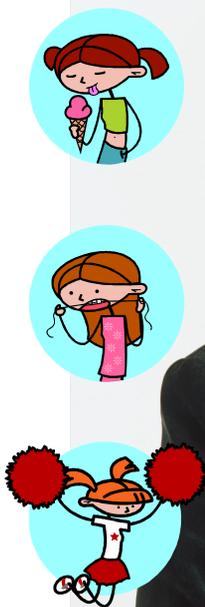


# Understanding Girl World:



by **Trudy Ludwig**

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Children's advocate, speaker, and author Trudy Ludwig specialises in writing picture books that help children navigate through their complex social world. She has received rave reviews from educators, parents, experts, and organisations for her passion and compassion in addressing relational aggression. For more information about her work, visit:

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What are little girls made of?  
Sugar and spice,  
and all that's nice;  
That's what little girls are made of.

Author unknown.

Contrary to this old nursery rhyme, girls aren't just made of sugar and spice. They can be tough as nails ...and mean.

## Friendships, Cliques & Power Plays

According to the latest research on bullying, girls – from pre-schoolers to college students – are just as aggressive as boys, but they express it differently. Instead of using physical force to display their aggression, girls are more likely to employ relational aggression – the use of relationships to emotionally manipulate and hurt others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Gossiping, spreading rumours, giving the silent treatment, intentional exclusion, threats, and intimidation are the relational aggressor's weapons of choice. And these weapons are often used in covert ways that go below the radar of parents and teachers.

This is not to say that relational aggression affects only girls. Boys are targets, bystanders, and aggressors as well. And, unfortunately, this is a growing problem for both girls and boys in our schools and communities. But what makes this form of emotional bullying particularly harmful and insidious for girls is that they experience significantly greater levels of relational aggression *within* their friendship circles (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

## Redefining Bullying to Encompass Relational Aggression

Up until the early 1990s, bullying research was limited, focusing primarily on boys and their direct acts of physical aggression, threatening or teasing. It wasn't until 1992 that Norwegian researchers Kaj Bjoerkqvist and Pirkko Niemala published an unprecedented study in which they found girls to be aggressive, but displayed it differently from boys ("New Trends in the Study of Female Aggression", *Of Mice and Women: Aspects of Female Aggression*, Academic Press, 1992).

Dr Nicki Crick, director of the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development in the US, is one of the leading pioneers in this field of study (she originally coined the term 'relational aggression' in 1994). Over the past 13 years, numerous US researchers, in addition to Dr Crick, have conducted substantive studies which conclusively show that *relational aggression is harmful – with long-lasting, negative effects*.

Below are some additional research findings worth noting, including those compiled and reported by *The Ophelia Project*® ([www.opheliaproject.org](http://www.opheliaproject.org)), a leading US resource on relational

aggression:

- Relational aggression is evident as early as pre-school (Crick, et al., 1999).
- Pre-school girls (2.5—5 years of age) are significantly more relationally aggressive than boys during early childhood years (Crick, Ostrov, Burr, Cullerton-Sen, Jansen-Yeh & Ralston, 2006).
- In pre-schoolers, high socio-economic status (SES) children rate higher on relational aggression than low SES children (Bonica, et al., 2003).
- Relational aggression appears to escalate during adolescence (Werner & Hill, 2004).
- Children who use high levels of relational aggression are likely to show serious adjustment and relationship problems (eg. jealousy, lack of trust) that worsen over time (Crick, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).
- Kids in secondary school and high school find relational aggression *more harmful* than physical and verbal aggression (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Werner & Hill, 2003).
- Aggressors are at risk – they can suffer from depression, loneliness, peer rejection, anxiety, substance abuse, self-mutilation, lack of school connectedness and eating disorders.
- Targets are at risk - bullying can result in school avoidance/absenteeism, headaches, stomach-aches, depression, eating disorders and violence – toward self (self-mutilation, substance abuse, suicide) and toward others (school shootings).
- Bystanders are at risk – they don't feel safe at school and suffer similar somatic symptoms as targets (eg. stomach-aches, headaches, anxiety). They also feel helpless and powerless and exhibit poor coping and problem-solving skills.

What has been dismissed for years by many as normal rites of passage (“girls being girls” type behaviour) can no longer be treated as such. We now know for a fact that relational aggression is harmful. And, as *The Ophelia Project* reports on their website, “In some cases, the lasting effects of relational aggression are considered *more hurtful* than those of physical aggression”.

Consequently, more primary, secondary, and high schools are now addressing in their anti-bullying curricula not just physical aggression (behaviours that harm through physical damage) and verbal aggression (threats, teasing, and name-calling) but relational aggression as well. Relational aggression can be verbal (“I won't be your friend if you're friends with her”) or non-verbal (the silent treatment, a disdainful look, a rolling of the eyes whenever you speak). It can be direct (saying something intentionally hurtful and then hiding behind the words “just kidding”) or indirect

(sending a harmful email or gossiping behind the target's back).

## Bullying in Australia's Schools\*

One in six children was bullied at school on a weekly basis.

About 20% of children who were bullied frequently stayed away from school.

About 50% of children who were bullied considered staying away from school.

Forty percent of bullied boys and 25% of bullied girls did not tell their friends.

The emotional scarring caused by schoolyard bullying is equivalent to the psychological damage caused by child abuse.\*\*

\* The first four bullying statistics listed above were cited in the 1997 report *What children tell us about bullying in schools* by Dr Ken Rigby at the University of South Australia. More than 26,000 Australian school children, from ages 8 to 18, were surveyed. For more information, visit:

<http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/childtelus.htm>

\*\* Dr Jean Healey, SELF Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, 2006.

## Understanding the Nature of Girls and Friendships

To comprehend the growing prevalence of relational aggression in girl world, we need to look at how girls connect and engage with one another. Dr Kenneth Rubin, author of *The Friendship Factor* (Penguin Books, 2003), has spent over two decades studying children's friendships. He, along with experts Dr William Pollack, author of *Real Boys* (Owl Books, 1999) and Dr Michael Thompson, co-author of *Best Friends, Worst Enemies* (Ballantine Books, 2002), cite noticeable differences in the nature of girls' friendships and boys' friendships.

In summary, girls are into “being” together, having face-to-face encounters. Boys are into “doing” together, engaging in side-by-side relationships and using action-oriented behaviour to express their connection to other boys. Girls have the tendency to socialise in pairs, with dyads existing within larger cliques. Boys often socialise and play in packs or tribes. Girls solidify their friendships verbally, sharing confidences and feelings. Boys tend

to bond non-verbally, with camaraderie enhanced by affectionate insults.

Dr Charisse Nixon, assistant professor of psychology at Penn State Erie, is a relational aggression expert and the director of research for *The Ophelia Project*. Nixon reports that girls in our culture are inclined to engage and connect with one another by sharing troubles – their own and those of others. Such connections, she adds, provide a fertile ground for relational aggression to take root and spread like wildfire. The shared secrets and confidences whispered to a friend can later be used as a weapon against her in the other friend's efforts to up her social status among her peers. Relational aggressors treat friendship as a commodity; it's a means to the aggressor's end. It's no longer about sharing confidences; rather, it's about building alliances and acquiring power over others.

## The Power of Girls' Cliques

*“The common definition of a clique is an exclusive group of girls who are close friends. I see it a little differently. I see them as a platoon of soldiers who have bonded together to navigate the perils and insecurities of adolescence.”*

Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees & Wannabees*

If you want to enter the mind of today's adolescent female and understand what she faces in her efforts to navigate through her complex social world, *Odd Girl Out*, by Rachel Simmons, and *Queen Bees & Wannabees*, by Rosalind Wiseman, are definite must-reads. Simmons' book uncovers the hidden culture of aggression in girls within their tightly knit networks of friends. Wiseman's book offers insight into the hierarchy of girls' cliques and the importance of belonging. While Wiseman sates that cliques are natural and there is nothing overtly wrong with them, she does raise the warning flag with respect to the dangerous ways in which girls bond together in cruel competition.

Think of bad popularity (popularity through dominance, as opposed to popularity through acceptance) as a game called 'Power Play', in which individual clique players have certain roles to uphold and specific game moves they employ (eg. gossip, exclusion, hurtful teasing, putdowns, etc.) to weaken other girls' friendships and usurp their power. In so doing, the winners of this game often are able to maintain and acquire more power and influence in the social hierarchy.

So who are the key players in this game? Wiseman has identified

seven clique players: the Queen Bee/Power Broker (the ruler of the clique whose popularity is based on control, intimidation, and fear); the Sidekick/Enabler (the second-in-command who defers to the Queen Bee on all issues); the Banker (she gets girls to confide in her and chooses when to dispense sensitive information at opportune times for her own benefit); the Floater (the one whose self-esteem isn't tied to the group and who can move freely between different groups) the Torn Bystander (the girl caught in the middle between her allegiance to the clique and her basic need to do the right thing); the Target (the one set up by others to be the recipient of intentional emotional cruelty); and the Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger (the one who will do anything to impress the Queen Bee and her Sidekick – even if it means losing her own sense of self in the process).

## Relational Aggression & Cyber-bullying

E-mail, social networking websites, cell phones, and other interactive and digital technologies are quickly taking relational aggression to a widespread level. *NetAlert*, Australia's Internet safety advisory body, reports that cyber-bullying incidents are on the rise. In a 2006 Australia-wide survey, 42% of over 13,000 adolescent girls had experienced some form of cyber-bullying (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 2006).

In the US, over 50% of 1,000 students aged 9–14 polled monthly have been involved in a cyber-bullying incident (*The Oregonian*, 2005). And approximately 58% of kids in grades 4–8 have not told their parents or an adult of hurtful/mean things sent to them online (iSafe America, 2004).

According to Nancy Willard, Executive Director of the *Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use* ([www.cyberbully.org](http://www.cyberbully.org)) and author of *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats* (Research Press, 2007), the profile of the cyber-bully can run the gamut – from 'put-downers' (kids who harass and demean others) and 'get-backers' (targets who retaliate against their tormentors online) to attention-grabbers and hurtful jokers. She describes the "you can't see me – I can't see you" mentality of Internet users. They perceive themselves to be invisible or anonymous, which, in most cases, they're not. And they remove themselves from seeing the direct impact of their actions on the target, making them empathically disengaged.

Parry Aftab, Executive Director of **WiredSafety.org**, cautions schools in the handling of cyber-bullying incidents that take place off-campus and outside school hours. She explains on her website that there have been numerous schools in the US, for example, which have been sued and subsequently lost for exceeding their authority and violating the student's free speech

right. But that doesn't mean this is a hopeless cause. Schools and lawmakers are now taking more proactive measures to address the growing problem of cyber-bullying – both on and off campus – to protect the rights and safety of students on campus. Experts recommend schools include in their acceptable use policy a provision that gives the school authorities the right to discipline students for off-campus actions which have an intended harmful effect on the well-being of other students while at school.

Students also need to be educated on the do's and don'ts of Internet etiquette. Rachel Simmons, author of groundbreaking book *Odd Girl Out* (Harcourt, Inc., 2002) and founding director of the *Girls Leadership Institute* ([www.girlsleadershipinstitute.org](http://www.girlsleadershipinstitute.org)), compares the Internet to a bathroom wall: "Secrets and privacy don't exist online," she says (Wiseman, *Parade*, 2007). Many experts, therefore, advise students not to send online anything they wouldn't say to a person, face-to-face. And when students intentionally harm others online, they need to be held accountable for their actions. If that means taking away their cell phones and computers until they earn back their rights and are able to use these communication devices in a more ethical manner, so be it. For more information about cyber-bullying and a free educator's guide, visit [www.cyberbully.org](http://www.cyberbully.org).

## Stopping Social Cruelty

Reducing aggression in schools requires a systematic, comprehensive approach which includes setting clear standards for acceptable behaviour, implementing consistent consequences for actions that are likely to hurt others, and providing education about bullying to every student. Everyone in the school community needs to be on board – from parents and students to educators and administrators to playground/lunch monitors to school bus drivers and custodial staff.

Stan Davis, author of *Schools Where Everyone Belongs: Practical Strategies for Reducing Bullying* (Research Press, 2005) and founder of [www.stopbullyingnow.com](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com), offers educators practical advice of what works and doesn't work when it comes to addressing bullying in schools. Some examples of what doesn't work include blaming the target (*You're too sensitive – toughen up*), giving bad advice (*Ignore her and she'll eventually stop*), and inconsistency in the staff's enforcement of rules.

Some examples of what does work in schools include establishing clearly defined, concrete, school-wide behaviour expectations; employing predictable and escalating consequences for aggression; maintaining a positive emotional tone between adult and youth, providing aggressors with opportunities for restitution, empowering bystanders to support the target and discourage the

bullying; and protecting targets and bystanders from further retaliation by aggressors. For more information on how to build a more caring school, add Davis's book to your recommended reading list.

## Bibliotherapy: Using Children's Literature to Address Bullying

For many years, children's literature has been used to help guide a child's thinking, instill moral values, strengthen personal character, and shape behaviour. Recently, however, it has taken on an additional role – empowering young minds with critical thinking skills to address emotional/social conflicts. The technique is called "Bibliotherapy", a term originally coined in 1916 by Dr Samuel McChord Crothers. Researchers Riordan and Wilson define bibliotherapy as "...the guided reading of written materials in gaining understanding or solving problems relevant to a persons' therapeutic needs" ("Bibliotherapy: Does It Work?" *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 67, 1989:506).

Bibliotherapy is not a sole, 'cure-all' for young readers' problems. Rather, studies indicate that bibliotherapy is most effective when used as an adjunct tool by teachers, counselling professionals, practitioners, or parents in helping children cope with problems. (For those children with deep-seated issues and psychological problems, more intensive therapeutic interventions by qualified professionals are strongly recommended.)

Children's literature offers wonderful teachable moments that allow readers to emotionally connect with and discuss tough issues like bullying in a safe social environment. It also enables young readers to: *identify* with the story's protagonist and the events of the story; *acquire insight* into the thoughts, feelings and actions of the story's characters in relation to the bullying problem; release pent-up emotions (ie. *catharsis*), realising that they are not the only ones who experience this problem; and *share personal experiences* as a natural progression of discussion.

As a children's author specialising in anti-bullying books (*My Secret Bully*, *Just Kidding, Sorry!* and *Big Mouth* – available in 2008), I have to comment that while some children's books do an effective job dealing with the bullying issue, there are others which do not. When considering which books to select, look for well-written stories that are developmentally age appropriate – both in terms of content and reading level – for your particular reader(s). Make sure the story honestly portrays the human condition, with a storyline that's relevant and realistic. Also focus on books that explore realistic problem-solving techniques – particularly those offering non-violent strategies.

## Making a Positive Difference in your School Community

Building a caring school community requires community support. Students – regardless of their age – need the help and support of the adults in their community to address bullying. If the adults in the school community believe that bullying is a part of growing up, that children who bully will grow out of it and that children should resolve their own conflicts without adult support, they are essentially condoning bullying. Adults need to change their social norms and attitudes in order for the children to change theirs. When it comes to creating safe social and learning environments for our youth, Mahatma Ghandi said it best:

“Be the change you wish to see in the world”.

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