

'Mean' girls and boys: the downside of adolescent relationships

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Psychology researchers exploring relational aggression and victimisation in 11-13 year olds have found adolescent boys have a similar understanding and experience of 'mean' behaviours and 'bitchiness' as girls.

In-depth interviews with 33 adolescents who have previously been involved in either relational [aggression](#) and/or victimisation, showed both girls and [boys](#) had personal experiences around unpredictable friendships, social exclusion, or rumour and gossip including the use of notes, phones, email and Internet.

Clinical psychologist Dr Rhiarne Pronk said mean behaviours in girls typically revolved around close friendship groups with 'dirty looks', ignoring and excluding behaviours, and going behind other people's backs.

"In boys, it was more about larger groups, more direct and in your face, and using teasing and other tactics such as exclusion from sporting games or teams," she said.

While the tactics may differ, [girls](#) and boys shared similar views on the reasons for relationally aggressive behaviours.

"They understood issues about power and [social dominance](#), and manipulating friendships to increase social standing or acceptance."

"Relational aggression can also be about jealousy, anger, revenge and insecurity," she said.

Dr Pronk said the research also identified characteristics of adolescents that might put them at risk for victimisation. Negative characteristics included a lack of social appeal or emotional reactivity while positive characteristics such as being too popular or talented also attracted unwanted attention.

Dr Pronk said it was normal for children and adolescents to experience friendship tensions at some stage, and that those challenges typically helped build resiliency and teach social skills.

However the more extreme, frequent and intense forms of relational aggression could cause longer term mental health and relationship problems.

"People can take the hurt through into their adult life, their workplaces and their [romantic relationships](#)."

The research, part of Dr Pronk's PhD thesis at Griffith University, has been published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* (March 2010), Vol 25, pp175-204.

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