

Strong Moms Strong Girls Project Statement of Philosophy

Recent media accounts and popular press publications raise alarm about how girls can hurt each other through acts of relational aggression (RA). These painful dynamics peak during the middle school years--a stage of development during which adolescents are particularly self-conscious, peer-focused, and sensitive to rejection or exclusion by other teens. The University Center for the Child and the Family's Strong Moms Strong Girls project, supported through the generosity of the Junior League of Ann Arbor, aims to raise community awareness of this issue and to teach skills which can promote healthier peer interactions amongst girls beginning in late elementary school and continuing through middle school and beyond. Mothers, and other adult role models, can play a central role in helping girls to develop genuine and supportive coalitions with each other.

While experiences of relational aggression certainly cause emotional distress, and can be damaging, the research literature does not support the hypothesis that rates of RA are actually going up. Rather, it is attention to accounts of relational and physical aggression amongst girls that are increasing. A number of sources and complex dynamics may contribute to this phenomenon. Some theorists hypothesize that the focus on female aggression represents, in part, a backlash against feminism. Specifically, it may signal an attempt to problematize what happens when girls are given access to greater power and freedom of expression—they become as aggressive as boys are presumed to be—albeit, through different means. In addition, media portrayals of female violence have gained greater prominence both through hip hop culture and through mainstream films and television programming. While women more frequently play roles as strong and fighting characters, these behaviors are tolerated and celebrated, however, largely to the extent that men also view them to be sexy, sometimes vulnerable, and erotically pleasing (e.g. Charlie's Angels, Buffy the Vampire Slayer).

Similarly, we are struck by the dilemma that images in the popular press of girls as “queen bees” or as “mean girls” can run the risk of perpetuating sexist images of females at the same time that they strive to help free girls and women from painful roles and interactions. It is the philosophy of the Strong Moms Strong Girls project that instances of relational aggression do not constitute evidence that “girls will be girls” or that there is an evolutionary basis for young women's competition with each other. Competition, jealousy, and anger are human emotions. We must accept these feelings in girls (and boys) while not tolerating expressions of them which are harmful or violent towards others. In addressing issues of relational aggression or violence amongst females it is imperative to support healthy female development while not inadvertently falling in the trap of reinforcing negative or sexist stereotypes.

The Strong Moms Strong Girls project strives to create interventions which are sensitive to issues of how culture shapes both girls' relationships with each other as well as it influences our understanding of the positive and negative aspects of these interactions. Friendships exist as an important source of strength and, at times, conflict for adolescent girls. At a crossroads in development when peer interactions take center stage, how a girl experiences her connections and interactions with other girls can significantly impact her self-esteem, self-concept, coping capacities, and overall physical and mental health. Cultural expectations of gender, as well as of race, class, and sexual orientation, powerfully shape how girls see themselves and others. Unfortunately, our culture tends to endorse only a very narrow, and often contradictory, view of how teenage and adult women can act in order to be regarded as meeting contemporary standards of appropriate and adequate femininity. Cliques among girls can serve a function of dictating and enforcing culturally prescribed and gendered behaviors. Rumors and gossip, in part, are used to punish those who deviate from these norms. Socialization practices which reinforce girls to be "nice", ironically, also fuel relational aggression amongst girls and women. When society discourages physical violence and silences avenues of direct communication about negative feelings or anger, girls may express these emotions more covertly through hurting others by tactics such as talking behind their backs and by excluding them.

A number of strategies can help to decrease the risk of relational aggression amongst girls while simultaneously enhancing the adaptive aspects of their friendships and connections with each other. First, it is important that girls develop a capacity to think critically about their culture so that they can identify, and challenge, the unachievable ideals which culture imposes on them and which they impose on each other (e.g. to be unrealistically thin in a culture which promotes obesity; to be sexy without being seen as sexual; to achieve a "white" standard of beauty regardless of one's race or ethnicity). Second, girls can benefit from encouragement to communicate clearly and assertively about a range of emotions and concerns. Third, mothers and adult female mentors can model and reinforce positive expectations of female friendships as they teach girls about the power of female allies in their own lives. Fourth, girls can practice skills (e.g. offering empathy, being an active bystander, challenging cruelty, taking social action, seeking support from adults) which can help to prevent or to ameliorate relational aggression. The Strong Moms Strong Girls project intends to offer programming to girls in the fourth through seventh grades, to parents, and to school and other community groups in order to help prevent relational aggression and to promote safe, authentic, and effective coalitions amongst girls.