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Girls Today: Improving Adolescent Relationships by Addressing Relational Aggression in a Community Program

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Abstract
Many adolescent girls struggle with peer victimization, relational aggression, and interpersonal conflict. The purpose of the current study was to determine whether a brief intervention could potentially reduce relational aggression by teaching girls social problem solving skills for dealing with relationships. This study utilized a convenience sample obtained from a day-long conference called the Girls Today Program. Participants included 19 girls who were studied at the beginning of the conference, at the end of the day's activities, and one month later. Kirkpatrick’s Learning Evaluation Model was employed to evaluate participant’s reactions, learning and demonstration of skills, intention and perceived ability as related to social problem skills for dealing with relational aggression. In general, girls in the current study denied experiences of relational aggression. They reported that they enjoyed the conference, learned new skills, and intended on using the skills. However, girls reported low levels of perceived ability for dealing with relational aggression and were unable to demonstrate improvement in social problem solving skills in this study. The present findings suggest that although girls enjoy talking about topics related to peers, a one-day intervention may not be sufficient to create behavioral change. Suggestions are presented, for enhancing the efficacy of community programs that target girl’s relationships, including accounting for social desirability, facilitating perceived ability, providing continued support and skill building, and enhancing organization.

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GIRLS TODAY: IMPROVING ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS BY ADDRESSING RELATIONAL AGGRESSION IN A COMMUNITY PROGRAM

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

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ABSTRACT

Many adolescent girls struggle with peer victimization, relational aggression, and interpersonal conflict. The purpose of the current study was to determine whether a brief intervention could potentially reduce relational aggression by teaching girls social problem solving skills for dealing with relationships. This study utilized a convenience sample obtained from a day-long conference called the Girls Today Program. Participants included 19 girls who were studied at the beginning of the conference, at the end of the day’s activities, and one month later. Kirkpatrick’s Learning Evaluation Model was employed to evaluate participant’s reactions, learning and demonstration of skills, intention and perceived ability as related to social problem skills for dealing with relational aggression. In general, girls in the current study denied experiences of relational aggression. They reported that they enjoyed the conference, learned new skills, and intended on using the skills. However, girls reported low levels of perceived ability for dealing with relational aggression and were unable to demonstrate improvement in social problem solving skills in this study. The present findings suggest that although girls enjoy talking about topics related to peers, a one-day intervention may not be sufficient to create behavioral change. Suggestions are presented, for enhancing the efficacy of community programs that target girl’s relationships, including accounting for social desirability, facilitating perceived ability, providing continued support and skill building, and enhancing organization.

Keywords: relationships, relational aggression, bullying, social problem solving, coping.
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REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS, SOCIAL PROBLEM SOLVING, AND GIRLS TODAY

Girls who experience relational aggression are at risk for later problems, such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and loneliness (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002). Relational aggression is a form of aggression that includes lies, secrets, betrayals and other indirect methods to damage the relationships of a peer (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001). There has been more attention given, in recent years, to researching relational aggression and the effects of relational victimization. Girls who have effective skills for coping with relational aggression have fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as improved relationships (Haaga, Fine, Terrill, Stewart, & Beck, 1995; Haugh, 2006). Few studies have described interventions or programs to prevent relational aggression. Researchers who have addressed relational aggression have provided evidence that it is not only difficult to study, because of the difficulty in recognizing when it occurs, but it is also difficult to prevent (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). Relational aggression is potentially damaging to girls. Thus, it is vital that efforts be made to counteract the negative effects of relational aggression on girls. The current study is designed to be exploratory, locally informative and descriptive. The goal of the study is to inform a local nonprofit organization regarding a day-long program, the Girls Today program, designed to foster positive development in female youth. Furthermore, the study will add to the current body of literature on the potential for preventing relational aggression and teaching girls coping skills for dealing with relationship
difficulties. The following sections will include a review of the literature on adolescent peer relationships and factors that may contribute to the risk for poor adjustment among girls. Specifically, gender differences will be discussed as related to peer relationships, conflict and adjustment. Furthermore, social problem solving and coping will be highlighted as factors that may be protective against the negative effects of peer relationship problems. In addition, there will be a review of common programs designed to improve adolescent peer relationships. Finally, the Girls Today program will be discussed as a community program which may be one avenue for improving peer relationships for adolescent girls.

Girls at Risk

Girls are at risk for a wide variety of adjustment problems as they enter the prepubescent and adolescent years. These difficulties include anxiety, depression, low self esteem, stress, loneliness, and other difficulties. Researchers have provided evidence that struggling with peer relationships is a better predictor of depression and anxiety in girls than in boys (Franzoi & Davis, 1985; Friedrich, Reams, & Jacobs, 1988). This connection between peers and adjustment has been investigated with regard to several internalizing outcomes including depression, anxiety, and both of these variables in combination (Haislip, 2006). Studies have included evidence of an interaction between gender and peer relationships, such that girls are more likely than boys to experience depression, anxiety or adjustment problems after experiencing problems with peer relationships (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004; Storch, Phil, Nock, Masia-Warner & Barlas, 2005). Because of the potential negative impact of peer relationship problems on adolescent female functioning, it is important that researchers understand the unique
qualities of relationships between girls, how girls behave when experiencing conflict, and how this conflict affects adjustment. Furthermore, it is important to understand ways in which girls may cope with conflict in relationships. Adolescent peer relationships are discussed in the following sections as related to conflict, adjustment and gender.

Adolescent Girls and Peer Relationships

In general, friends and members of the peer group play a large part in adolescents’ lives. Adolescents spend more time with peers at school, sporting functions and other activities than with their parents (Gavin & Furman, 1989; Hortacsu & Gencoz, 1993). It is at this age that peers may begin to play a greater role relative to parental influence on emotional stability. Adolescents experience “individuation” from parents, meaning attachment to peers may become more salient than attachment to parents during this developmental period (Selman, 1981). Thus, adolescence is an important developmental period for peer relationships. In fact, relationships become particularly important to girls during adolescence. Girls tend to be more focused on interpersonal relationships than boys and incorporate the state of their friendships into their sense of identity (Maccoby, 1988; Simmons, 2002). Although girls and boys are similar in some aspects of their relationships, they tend to differ in terms of what they see as most important to the relationship. Boys tend to include companionship and involvement in mutual activities as primary to friendship whereas girls seem to value self disclosure and affection in friendships (Berndt, 1985; Clark & Ayers, 1993; Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Maccoby, 1998). Because of the importance of relationships to girls, particularly during adolescence, it is vital to address adolescent girl’s relationships. Specifically, peer
conflict has a particular impact on adolescent girls’ peer relationships and is described in the following sections.

Understanding Peer Conflict: Definitions and Risk Factor Relations

There are several different ways of conceptualizing peer conflict in adolescence. Conflict frequently occurs when relationships are perceived to be unequal or imbalanced in terms of costs and benefits (Laursen, Hartup & Koplas, 1996). Peer conflict may include many types of aggressive acts and is associated with terms such as relational aggression, physical aggression, teasing, bullying, peer victimization and indirect aggression. Prior studies have focused largely on bullying, which in many cases included primarily physical aggression. In recent years, relational aggression has emerged as an important aspect of peer conflict. Some researchers in the field of bullying have started to include relational aggression, as well as physical aggression, in their definition of bullying (Schoiack-Edstrom, 2002). Although peer conflict can be conceptualized in a variety of contexts, the focus of peer conflict in the current study will be relational aggression and victimization. The following sections provide an overview of peer aggression and bullying, gender differences in aggression, and a more thorough look at relational aggression which is a type of bullying most common for girls.

Peer Aggression and Bullying

Several studies have found evidence of widespread relationship problems in childhood. Ladd and Ladd (2001) found that 76.8% of the children they studied at ages 9-12 were bullied at some time in their schooling. Bullying has been defined by a number of researchers (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Leary, 1990; Olweus, 1996) to describe various forms of aggression towards peers. Olweus (1996)
described bullying as “saying mean or hurtful things, purposefully and completely ignoring or excluding someone from a group of friends, hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, telling lies, spreading false rumors, sending mean notes, trying to make others dislike someone, and other hurtful acts” (p. 6). Although there are multiple behaviors that can be referred to as bullying, there are ways of differentiating between types of bullying.

Aggressive behavior can be defined as overt or covert as well as direct or indirect. Although some researchers have focused specifically on physical or verbal aggression, bullying can be either direct or indirect. According to Juvonen and Graham (2001), direct bullying includes physical and verbal aggression, whereas indirect bullying includes relational victimization, such as social isolation and the spreading of false rumors. Bond et al. (2001) also described the difference between covert and overt aggression. He described covert aggression as being indirect and included behaviors such as teasing, rumor spreading and exclusion. Overt aggression includes direct conflict such as physical threats or violence. These two types of aggression are particularly relevant to the following discussion of gender differences among adolescents in relationships.

*Gender Differences in Bullying*

Adolescent girls may be at risk for compromising their wellbeing in order to maintain peer relationships. Specifically, peer conflict may be avoided in order to maintain a relationship. Regardless of conflict in friendships, adolescents may be more positively affected when with friends than with family members or classmates (Laursen et al., 1996). Adolescents may experience anger, but replace the anger with positive affect in order to keep friends and remain emotionally invested in the friendship. It is possible that while conflicts with friends may benefit the relationship, by providing the
adolescent with social problem solving skills, conflicts with those who are not friends may lead to poorer adjustment and sense of self (Krappmann, 1993). According to Laursen et al. (1996), since conflict may potentially end a peer relationship, adolescents may avoid situations that have the potential to create conflict and therefore decrease the amount of closeness in the relationship. When this occurs, the relationship may end anyway resulting in unhappiness, dysphoria or depression (Berscheid, 1983). Avoidance appears to be a problematic way of dealing with conflict. Because of the impact of relationships on girls’ sense of identity, and the tendency for some girls to wish to avoid peer conflict in order to maintain relationships, girls may be more likely to use more covert means of dealing with conflict (Simmons, 2002). This wish to avoid conflict, which appears to occur most commonly among girls, may contribute to gender differences in aggression.

Gender differences have been noted in the use of overt and covert forms, as well as between direct and indirect, forms of aggression. Overt or direct aggression appears to be more common for boys whereas covert or indirect forms of aggression tend to be more common for girls (Bond et al., 2001; Graczyk, 1998). A study by Roth et al. (2002) on college students’ memories of teasing provided evidence that even though both men and women recalled similar amounts of teasing from their youth, the men were more likely to have been directly verbally teased or physically bullied, whereas women were more likely to have been socially excluded. Following is a description of relational aggression, a covert type of aggression most common among adolescent girls.
Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is important to study related to girls’ experiences of relationships. It is estimated that every girl will at one time in her youth experience each of the following roles related to relational aggression: victim, aggressor and bystander (Simmons, 2002). Crick, Nelson, Morales, Cullerton-Sen, Casas, and Hickman (2001) conducted a study on relational victimization in childhood and adolescence. In their study, 70% of girls and 15% of boys experienced some form of relational aggression. Relational aggression, more common among girls as compared to boys, includes attempts to cause, or threaten to cause, harm to peer relationships, friendships, or feelings of social inclusion. Relational aggression also includes active social isolation (exclusion), the spreading of rumors, name-calling, verbal abuse, tricking, hurting feelings and joking in a negative way. Relational aggression has also been referred to as indirect aggression, alternative aggression, social exclusion, social victimization, teasing, or bullying. (Hawker & Boulton, 2001; Werner & Crick, 1999). Although relational aggression can take on these many forms, the primary indicator of relational aggression is the intention of the aggressor to harm a peer’s relationships.

According to Crick and colleagues (2001), relational aggression can take place on various levels. These behaviors range from occasional ignoring, which may not cause significant harm, to being the frequent target of relational aggression. In the latter case it was suggested that relational aggression could lead to internalizing and antisocial behaviors as well as peer rejection. Finally, they concluded that some children might be able to successfully cope with a certain amount of teasing without experiencing negative repercussions whereas other children may internalize their feelings and become severely
affected by the same amount of teasing. It is important to note that although relational aggression is often described as indirect, specific relationally aggressive behaviors can be either direct or indirect (Olweus, 1996). An example of direct relational aggression includes telling someone, “You can’t be my friend unless…” (Olweus, 1996, p. 198). Indirect relational aggression includes the spreading of rumors and telling other children not to be the victimized person’s friends. Victims of relational aggression are often targets of rumors and may be socially excluded from their peer groups. The impact of relational aggression is far reaching and may damage girls’ sense of identity and level of adjustment. Following is a summary of research findings that have linked difficulties in relationships, particularly relational aggression, with poor adjustment.

Peer Relationships and Adjustment

Difficulties with peers may be a risk factor for poor adjustment. Several outcomes have been identified in relation to difficulties with peer relationships. According to Ladd and Ladd (2001), 14% of children who were bullied believed that they were negatively affected in one or more aspects of their adjustment including social, emotional or academic functioning. In the current body of literature, the construct of general adjustment or emotional wellness has included emotional stability, self esteem, lower levels of stress and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Claes, 1992; Grant, Elliot, Giger, & Bartolucci, 2001; Hussong, 2000; Storch et al., 2005). Conflict in adolescent peer relationships may be related to symptoms of depression or anxiety alone, or symptoms of both depression and anxiety at the same time (Kovac & Devlin, 1998). Peer difficulties are described below as related to adjustment, including depression and anxiety, as well as how these difficulties are related to gender.
**Depression, Anxiety and Peer Relationships**

Difficulties in adolescent peer relationships are related to increased symptoms of depression and anxiety (Claes, 1992; Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995; Field, Diego & Sanders, 2001; La Greca, 2001; Leary, 1990; Roth et al., 2002). In a study on depression, anxiety, and peer relationships during adolescence, by Gaspar de Matos, Barrett, Dadds, and Shortt (2003), youth who reported the most problems in peer relationships also reported significantly more symptoms of depression and anxiety than their peers. Depression and anxiety symptoms are often comorbid, occurring at the same time in an individual (Kovacs & Devlin, 1998). Thus, it is important to consider both of these aspects of adjustment in concert. Following is a description of how depression and anxiety have been linked to youth who do not have friends, are rejected by peers, and those with peer relationship problems such as conflict and relational victimization.

Difficulties with adolescent peer relationships are considered among researchers to be related to psychological distress. In a study by Jackson and Finney (2002), negative life events and psychological distress were studied among young adults. Researchers in this study looked at a diverse group of college students that included African Americans, European Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans. Out of the various undesirable, uncontrollable or unpredictable negative life events that impacted this age group (e.g., problems with school, interpersonal relationships, finances, sexual coercion, and sexual deviance), problems with peer relationships, (i.e., a decrease in opportunities for affiliation with peers), significantly predicted an increase in depression and psychological distress. Several types of difficulties with relationships have been studied as related to psychological adjustment.
Adjustment problems have been linked to adolescents who do not have friends or have been rejected by their peers. Individuals who do not have friends have been found to experience more symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who do have friends (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Duck, 1983; Kessler & McLeod, 1985; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Adolescents, who have fewer friends, poorer peer relationships, and less popularity than their counterparts, are at a higher risk for developing symptoms of depression (Field et al., 2001). Adolescents who reported being rejected by their peers also reported having significantly more symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who were accepted by their peers (Graczyk, 1998). Leary’s study (1990) also provided evidence for this link between depression, social anxiety and exclusion. It appears that adolescents who lack friends, or are rejected by peers, experience significantly more depression and anxiety than same aged peers. Thus, adolescents who are rejected by peers are at risk for poor adjustment.

In addition to general symptoms of depression and anxiety, peer rejection and peer neglect have been linked to social avoidance and inhibition (La Greca, Dandes, Wick, Shaw, & Stone, 1988; La Greca & Stone, 1993). If relationships become threatened due to experiences of social exclusion, a sense of anxiety is likely to be the result (Baumeister & Tice, 1990). Roth et al. (2002) defined social anxiety as the experiencing of social situations as unsafe. Specifically, those who are victims of peer aggression are likely to feel that the world is unsafe. Thus, adolescents who are rejected by peers are likely to experience social situations as unsafe and develop symptoms of social anxiety (Neal, 2003). Furthermore, adolescents experiencing rejection may be more likely to demonstrate behaviors of withdrawal and avoidance, which may increase
the likelihood of lost socialization experiences and increased difficulties with peers (La Greca, 2001; Neal, 2003). Thus, difficulties with peers, such as social anxiety, withdrawal and avoidance, are likely to be the result of social exclusion.

Adolescents who experience relationship problems, such as peer conflict and victimization, are likely to experience poor adjustment. Bond et al. (2001) found that peer victimization was related to both depression and anxiety in adolescents. Furthermore, relational victimization was strongly correlated with depression, and other negative personality characteristics such as rapid changes in mood, unstable interpersonal relationships, impulsivity, instability in affect, instability in self image and antisocial behaviors (Crick et al., 2001). In the study by Hussong (2000), adolescents who reported the highest levels of depression also reported the most negative relationship qualities including conflict, hostility, abrasiveness and negative engagement. It has been shown that adjustment, particularly depression and anxiety, is linked to relationship problems. Following is a description of how these difficulties particularly impact girls.

*Gender Differences in Peer Relationships and Adjustment*

There are several mechanisms by which peer conflict leads to problems with adjustment. Whereas relationships have an impact on adolescents regardless of gender, the connection is particularly problematic for girls. Studies have shown that girls tend to experience more adjustment problems than boys when experiencing relationship problems (Hussong, 2000). In addition, girls tend to place higher importance on relationships than boys do. Thus, it follows that the effect of difficulties in peer relationships would be more problematic for girls (Franzoi & Davis, 1985; Friedrich et al., 1988). According to Hussong (2000), failing at relationships may be more damaging
to a girl’s sense of identity than it is for a boy’s. This research suggests that it is likely that girls will consider problems in relationships as more damaging than boys because of the impact that peer approval and conflict have on their sense of self. Relational victimization deprives girls of opportunities to gain social skills and confidence in social situations due to a lack of acceptance and close relationships. The lack of social opportunities may be more likely to make the victims feel negatively about themselves and may lead to internalizing problems which are related to the development of poor adjustment later in life. Thus, more girls than boys are likely to experience adjustment difficulties, such as depression or anxiety, as a result of peer relationship problems.

Social Problem Solving and Coping in Relationships

It is understood that peer relationships are important to girl’s sense of identity, and that peer conflict can damage this sense of identity, therefore contributing to poor adjustment. The question remains; how do we protect girls from the negative impact of conflict on relationships? Studies have shown that girls who are equipped with problem solving skills, or who have adequate coping strategies, may be protected against the negative consequences of conflict (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Thus, whereas problematic peer relationships have been shown to be related to poor adjustment, social problem solving skills and coping styles have been shown to be related to positive adjustment in adolescence. The protective nature of social problem solving and coping skills are outlined below.

*Coping with Relationships*

Coping in relationships includes several kinds of responses to difficult relational situations. Coping refers to “the various cognitive and behavioral activities by which the
person attempts to manage stressful demands, as well as the emotions that such stress generates” (Chang, D’Zurilla & Sanna, 2004, p. 172). There are two general coping styles that have been studied in relation to adolescents. These coping styles have been identified as problem-focused and emotion-focused. The term problem-focused coping includes the individual’s attempts to change the stressful situation. Problem-focused strategies include behaviors such as seeking outside support (social or instrumental) or deliberately creating a plan of action. A general definition of social support refers to seeking resources provided by other individuals. Within this definition, instrumental support describes seeking tangible assistance with a specific problem whereas social support may involve seeking advice (Williams & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2000). In contrast, the term emotion-focused coping refers to an individual’s attempts to manage the emotions associated with the difficult situation (Chang et al., 2004). Emotion-focused strategies include avoidance, withdrawal or expressing oneself negatively (Williams & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2000). Very few studies have evaluated these styles in relation to relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Individuals are thought to utilize problem-focused coping when the stressful situation is perceived as controllable and emotion-focused coping when the situation is thought to be unchangeable or out of control. Thus, problem-focused coping is often described as more effective than emotion-focused coping (Lazarus, 1991). In general, coping strategies may include social problem solving skills, distancing, avoidance, and support seeking.

According to Phelps (2001), there are gender differences in strategies used for coping with relational aggression. Girls reportedly use problem solving skills and support seeking whereas boys tend to use more external strategies (Phelps, 2001). Remillard and
Lamb (2005) summarized several other researchers who studied gender differences in coping with relationships. According to these researchers, girls may be more likely to rely on themselves, seek spiritual support or engage in demanding activities (Chapman & Mullis, 1999), utilize wishful thinking, tension reduction (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993), ignoring the situation (Phelps, 2001) or self-comforting strategies that are interpersonal, intimate, emotional, gentle and contemplative (Horton, 2002). Girls may also seek social support (Bird & Harris, 1990; Chapman & Mullis, 1999; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Phelps, 2001). In contrast, boys may be more likely to participate in recreational activities (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). Overall, the research suggests that there are differences between adolescent boys and girls in coping styles.

In addition to general gender differences, it is important to note that there are specific factors that may contribute to what type of coping skill girls are likely to use. Remillard and Lamb (2005) suggested, in their study on female victims of relational aggression, that when girls felt the most hurt by a relationally aggressive act they were most likely to use passive and avoidant coping strategies. However, those who felt closer to their friends after the aggressive act were more likely to seek social support from their peers. Thus, whereas girls may utilize social problem solving or support seeking, they are less likely to do so when they feel the most hurt. This is particularly relevant given the specific impact of relational aggression on adolescent girls, and the potential for hurt feelings and difficulties with adjustment. Thus, adolescent girls are less likely to seek social support when they feel most hurt by their peers.

There are several coping strategies, both helpful and problematic, that have been identified as typical for dealing with relational aggression. Although these factors are
likely to impact how adolescents cope with relational aggression, there are ways for
individuals to purposefully choose how to best cope with relational aggression. Following
is a description of social problem solving as one way in which adolescents can directly
and purposefully determine how to cope with relationship problems.

Social Problem Solving

Social problem solving is a “self-directed cognitive-behavioral process by which
an individual, couple, or group attempts to identify or discover effective solutions for
specific problems encountered in everyday living” (D’Zurilla, Nezu and Maydeu-
Olivares, 2004, p. 12). D’Zurilla and Goldfried (1971) were the original theorists who
described social problem solving as including problems that take place in the natural
environment and have the potential to impair functioning. A problem is defined as “any
life situation or task (present or anticipated) that demands a response for adaptive
functioning but no effective response is immediately apparent or available…because of
the presence of one or more obstacles” (D’Zurilla et al, 2004, p. 12). Specifically, social
problem solving can be used to generate solutions for impersonal, intrapersonal,
interpersonal or societal problems (D’Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). Although social
problem solving can be utilized for a variety of real life situations, the focus of social
problem solving for this study is on interpersonal problems due to the focus on relational
aggression.

The solutions generated through social problem solving include specific coping
responses or response patterns. The specific goal of the solution may be to change the
problematic situation (problem-focused coping), decrease the negative emotions
associated with that problem (emotion-focused coping), or both. Furthermore, the most
effective solution is one for which the benefits outweigh the consequences (D’Zurilla et al., 2004). The objective of solution generation for interpersonal problems is typically to find a resolution that is acceptable to all individuals involved (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Following is a description of a specific model of social problem solving that can be used for relational aggression.

The model of rational problem-solving, identified by D’Zurilla and Goldfried (1971), is described as rational, deliberate and systematic involving four specific steps aimed at understanding the problem and generating solutions to the problem. The first step is problem definition and formulation. The second step includes generating alternative solutions, or specific coping skills, in response to the problem. The third step is making a decision about which solution to pursue. Finally, the fourth step is implementing the specific solution and verifying whether the solution was effective.

Because social problem solving includes the process of generating multiple solutions to a problem, the likelihood is stronger that the individual will choose the most effective solution from those generated (D’Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). This rational style was described as superior to other “dysfunctional” problem solving styles, such as an impulsivity-carelessness style and an avoidance style. The impulsivity-carelessness style is characterized by impulsivity, narrow, careless and incomplete strategies where only a few solutions are considered. The avoidance style is characterized by procrastination, passivity, inaction and dependency where the individual attempts to avoid the problem (D’Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). According to these authors, rational problem solving is superior to impulsivity-careless or avoidance styles of problem solving.
Social problem solving is an important tool that can be utilized to address relational aggression, a real life problem, which tends to affect adolescent girls. Social problem solving skills, as related to relational aggression or peer conflict, refer to an adolescent’s ability to generate appropriate problem solving strategies when faced with relational aggression or victimization. Specifically an adolescent would apply the steps of social problem solving (e.g., generating solutions, evaluating the options and deciding on a resolution) to a problematic situation with peers. For example, when a girl experiences relational victimization (e.g., having a rumor spread about her by a friend), she would purposefully identify the problem and then list solutions to the problem. Such solutions may include (1) talk to that friend, (2) talk to her parents, or (3) seek social support from other peers. She would then evaluate all of the different options, identifying the benefits or drawbacks of each one, pick a solution and follow through with it. Thus, children and adolescents who are capable of social problem solving may be more protected against the harmful effects of peer victimization or other forms of conflict.

When adolescent girls experience relational victimization, such as having a rumor spread about them or being excluded from activities with their friends, they are likely to feel hurt and may not know what to do. As discussed above, girls who feel the most hurt by the aggressive act are most likely to use distancing or avoidance strategies, which may only exacerbate their hurt feelings. However, when adolescent girls utilize social problem solving skills for dealing with relational victimization, they are more able to deal effectively with these difficult situations (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). The impact of coping and social problem solving on adjustment is described in the following sections.
The Impact of Coping and Social Problem Solving on Adjustment

In general, we know that girls are more likely to be victims of relational aggression than other types of more overt aggression, as compared to boys. Studies have been conducted specifically on children’s responses to overt and relational aggression and have shown that coping responses exhibited in reaction to relational aggression tend to include more distancing and avoidance strategies as compared to coping responses to overt aggression (Phelps, 2001). The types of coping strategies that adolescents use are relevant to this discussion of relational aggression because of the implications for adolescent adjustment. Phelps (2001) hypothesized that distancing and avoidant coping strategies may be attempts to avoid the hurtful situation. These girls may be more likely to experience poor adjustment than those who can generate solutions and seek support. Thus, the type of strategy that girls use, when faced with a relationship problem, is likely to effect adjustment.

Coping strategies have been studied as related to adjustment. Specifically, distancing and avoidant coping strategies have been shown to negatively impact adolescent adjustment (Phelps, 2001). Although in some situations it may be adaptive to ignore a peer’s aggressive act, the child then has less opportunity to have their feelings recognized and addressed by peers (Phelps, 2001). When children cope with difficulties in social relationships by distancing and avoiding, they may also be at a higher risk for developing symptoms of depression or anxiety. Adolescents appear to utilize distancing and avoidant coping strategies, when experiencing relational aggression, as attempts to avoid the hurtful feelings. However, these strategies may actually contribute to development of a mood disorder, or related symptoms (Phelps, 2001). Thus, it seems to
be most beneficial for victims of peer aggression to cope by using problem-oriented strategies, seeking support from others, or utilizing social problem solving skills.

Social problem solving has also been linked with adjustment, such that individuals with poor social problem solving skills are more likely to experience maladjustment or psychopathology including depression (Marx, Williams, & Claridge 1992; Nezu & D’Zurilla, 1989), suicide (Linehan, Camper, Chiles, Strosahl, & Shearin, 1987), anxiety (Nezu, Wilkins, & Nezu, 2004), anger and physical symptoms (Nezu & D’Zurilla, 1989). Furthermore, social problem solving skills are associated with positive adjustment such as self-esteem, subjective well-being, life satisfaction and positive affect (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). Adolescents who have difficulties with social problem solving may be more likely to experience poor adjustment, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety (Haaga et al., 1995; Haugh, 2006). Specifically, those children who are unable to generate appropriate solutions to social dilemmas appear to be at higher risk for symptoms of depression or anxiety. It follows that preparing girls with social problem solving skills will facilitate adjustment by decreasing risk for anxiety, depression, stress and poor self-esteem.

Adjustment problems related to social problem solving skills include difficulties in relationships. Adolescents who have poor social problem solving skills are more likely than their peers to experience difficulties in relationships. There is a relationship between social problem solving skills, interpersonal relations, and social support (Nezu & D’Zurilla, 1989). Specifically, individuals who have poor social problem solving skills are more likely to have more relationship problems (Hepner, Hibel, Neal, Weinstein & Rabnowitz, 1982), lower levels of social support (Grant et al., 2001) and less social
acceptance by peers (Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2001). When faced with a social dilemma or social exclusion they may struggle more than their peers. As noted, problem-solving may both precede and follow relational aggression. It follows that preparing girls with social problem solving skills will facilitate interpersonal relationships and social acceptance.

In general, it is concluded that teaching girls to utilize social problem solving skills will have an impact on their overall adjustment. Specifically, girls who are able to generate solutions to a common social dilemma may be less likely to experience depression or anxiety as a result of relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005).

Although the tendency is for girls to avoid difficult peer situations when they feel particularly hurt, teaching problem solving strategies may provide girls with more coping resources. These girls may be less likely to utilize distancing and avoidant coping strategies. Instead, they may identify seeking support from their peers, family, or teachers as a viable option. Thus, programs that teach social problem solving skills are likely to foster improvement in coping strategies and therefore improve girls’ peer relationships.

Improving Girls’ Relationships

Relational aggression is difficult to study as it is often hidden and harder to observe than physical forms of aggression. Furthermore, relational aggression has a particularly problematic effect on girls. Although many of the evaluations of bullying prevention programs have included female participants, few researchers have included relational aggression as a focus of intervention. One study found that classic school-based anti-bullying programs were less effective for girls (Eslea & Smith, 1998) and stated that this may be due to the typical program focus on physical aggression rather than relational aggression. Furthermore, it has been shown that teachers are more adept at recognizing
physical aggression than relational aggression, and that many do not identify social
exclusion as a form of bullying. Because it is more difficult to recognize relational
aggression, this type of aggression may be more difficult to treat and prevent than other
types of bullying (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). Because of the impact on adjustment, it is
important that researchers identify ways that may effectively intervene in girls’
relationships. Thus, research on current programs may inform the development of future
programs for addressing relational aggression.

Existing Programs: Bullying and Relational Aggression

There are various types of interventions that have been utilized within the school
to prevent or change bullying attitudes and behaviors. It is important to note that different
conceptualizations of the target problem (i.e., bullying or relational aggression) have led
to differences among programs. Many programs have focused solely on physical
aggression. However, researchers have recently started to include relational aggression in
their programs on bullying. Bullying programs vary in their characteristics, length of
program, and results found; however, there are several commonalities among bullying
programs. Many programs are school based and are facilitated by teachers. In terms of
length, many programs are long term and can take up to three years to complete. In
addition, there are several common goals among anti-bullying programs. These goals
often include changing attitudes about bullying, improving social competence and social
interaction skills, fostering coping skills and improving stress management. In addition,
many anti-bullying programs aim to decrease aggression and peer rejection, improve
compliance and foster empathy and perspective taking amongst students (Eslea & Smith,
1998; Frey, 2000; Limber, 2004; Mikami, 2005; Olexa & Forman, 1984; Olweus, 1991,
In addition to the common goals among intervention programs, following are common interventions found in anti-bullying programs.

Several commonalities were found among interventions in anti-bullying programs. Common interventions included implementation of anti-bullying policies and curriculum at schools. Specific curriculum topics often included education about empathy, social problem solving and anger management. Teachers often utilize discussions, role-plays, skills training, modeling, coaching and reinforcement when teaching students new skills (Olweus, 1991, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2004). Whereas some programs are primarily didactic, others utilize cooperative games and teamwork. Evidence has shown that classroom programs that utilize cooperative games and teamwork may more effectively decrease peer rejection and foster social acceptance than those that are primarily didactic (Mikami, 2005). Finally, some schools provide specific help to victimized students in the form of counseling (Olweus, 1991, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2004; Stevens et al., 2000) or interventions for children who bully, those who are bullied, and parents of these identified children (Olweus, 1991, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2004; Stevens et al., 2000). A review of programs, which utilize common interventions, to address bullying attitudes and behaviors are outlined below.

Whereas several programs have focused primarily on direct bullying (physical and verbal aggression), other programs have begun to include relational aggression as a target for intervention. Typical anti-bullying programs have focused primarily on physical or overt aggression in their conceptualization of bullying. One school-based anti-bullying program, the Flemish school-based anti-bullying intervention program
(Steven et al., 2000), was focused primarily on direct bullying and included three modules that intervened within the school environment and peer group. In the first module, a no-tolerance anti-bullying policy was implemented. In the second, an anti-bullying curriculum was added to improve peer support. Finally, help was given to students who were victims of peer aggression (Stevens et al., 2000). Similarly, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program included reinforcement of school-wide rules against bullying, classroom meetings to increase knowledge and empathy, interventions for bullies and victims, and informational meetings for parents (Olweus, 1991). Finally, Second Step included relational aggression as a target for change. Second Step was similar to other programs as it was facilitated by teachers and included discussion, role plays, skills training, modeling, coaching and reinforcement, education about empathy, social problem solving and anger management (Schaack-Edstrom, 2002). All of these well-known bullying programs were implemented in schools and identified changes in aggressive attitudes and behaviors as primary targets.

Changing Attitudes and Behaviors

Programs that have a focus on bullying have often included decreasing physical aggression and attitudinal change as primary goals. One example of a typical anti-bullying program is the Flemish school-based anti-bullying intervention programme which was based on the principles of a Scandinavian school-based anti-bullying program (Stevens et al., 2000). The Flemish program included both attitude and behavior as targets for change regarding bullying behavior. The desired effect of the program was to reduce bullying behaviors, and increase supportive behaviors, as well as change attitudes such that bullying was not tolerated in school (Stevens et al., 2000). Similarly, the
Olweus anti-bullying program also focused on reducing bullying and other behavior problems including vandalism, fighting, theft, alcohol use, and truancy. In addition, the Olweus program included improving the social climate of the classroom, such as student’s satisfaction with school life, school work, and more positive social relationships, as primary goals (Olweus, 1991; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999).

Although several of these programs focused on changing attitudes and behaviors related to physical aggression, some programs are starting to include relational aggression as a target for change.

Relational aggression is often left out of school based bullying programs. This may be because relational aggression is difficult to recognize, treat and prevent (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). However, because of the importance of relational aggression to girls’ level of adjustment, the inclusion of relational aggression is vital to bullying programs. Second Step was initially a classic classroom based social emotional learning program for bullying prevention that targeted physical aggression. However, Second Step was the first to incorporate relational aggression into the school-based anti-bullying programs (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey & Beland, 2002). Specifically, Second Step was designed to decrease bullying (including relational aggression), increase social competence and change attitudes and perceived ability about relational aggression. In addition, Second Step aimed to enhance prosocial skills such as feeling identification, empathy, and social interaction skills. Specific interventions included anger management training, social problem solving, and facilitated students in practicing behavioral skills (Frey, 2000). Typical bullying programs, whether they focus on direct or indirect bullying, tend to
focus on attitudinal and behavior change. A sample of outcome studies, based on these anti-bullying programs, is reviewed below.

Several program evaluations have been conducted on preventive interventions designed to improve adolescent peer relationships. Many of these evaluations have focused on school based programs facilitated by teachers that address bullying. There are somewhat mixed results among these common bullying programs. Overall, outcome studies have demonstrated a decrease in aggression and improvement in social interaction (Eslea & Smith, 1998; Frey, 2000; Limber, 2004; Mikami, 2005; Olexa & Forman, 1984; Olweus, 1991, 2004; Schaack-Edstrom, 2002; Smith & Ananiadou, 2003; Stevens, Van Oost & de Bourdeaudhuij, 2000). However, differences in efficacy have been found between primary and secondary school participants. Results of an outcome study on the Flemish program indicated that secondary school participants experienced attitudinal and behavior change, whereas primary school students exhibited no significant change (Stevens et al., 2000). Researchers in the study suggested that primary school children may have been too young to benefit from the program. In addition, classic anti-bullying programs have been identified as less effective for girls (Eslea & Smith, 1998). The Olweus Bullying Prevention programs demonstrated efficacy in decreasing bullying and improving the social climate in schools (Olweus, 1991; Olweus et al., 1999). However, some gender differences were noted in one evaluation of the Olweus program, such that there were significant decreases in boys’ and girls’ reports of bullying others and significant decreases in boys’ reports of being bullied and social isolation. This study did not provide evidence for a decrease in girl’s reports of being bullied or socially isolated (Limber, 2004). Furthermore, Second Step was shown to effectively decrease physical
aggression and improve social interaction among students (Frey, 2000). In addition, it is important to note that when relational aggression was added to the program, outcome studies provided some evidence that it reduced relational aggression as well as more direct physical or verbal bullying (Schaack-Edstrom, 2002). Overall, these anti-bullying programs tend to show some effectiveness in decreasing targeted behaviors and attitudes; however, efficacy varies somewhat based on age and gender.

**Problem Solving Training**

It is evident, because of the impact on adjustment, that prevention programs addressing relational aggression are greatly needed. Because of the importance of social problem solving in equipping girls with ways to cope with relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005), social problem solving skills are likely to be a vital component of any program. Given the literature on the association between problem solving skills and adjustment (Linehan et al., 1987; Marx et al., 1992; Nezu & D’Zurilla, 1989; Nezu et al., 2004), programs that provide girls with social problem solving skills may lead to improving relationships, as well as potentially decreasing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Although no programs were found that directly utilized social problem solving to address relational aggression in children and adolescents, there have been prevention programs aimed at facilitating children and adolescent’s use of social problem solving skills. These programs are typically referred to as Problem Solving Training (PST) and have been designed to mediate behavioral problems in children and adolescents (Frauenknecht & Black, 2004). Reviews by Pellegrini and Urbain (1985) and Tisdelle and Lawrence (1986) of several programs, that included PST and interpersonal problem
solving for children and adolescents, have demonstrated relationships between PST and a decrease in social adjustment problems among children. However, these authors all noted that there were significant errors in methodology, such that there were no control groups or longitudinal follow-ups and several programs used measures with poor psychometric properties.

Coleman, Wheeler and Webber (1993) addressed these limitations in their review of Problem Solving Training programs. They described these programs as not sufficient, by themselves, in creating behavior change in social competency. These authors suggested assessing the quality of children’s solutions, and teaching them how best to decide on a specific solution, may be a promising avenue of intervention. Other researchers have also suggested teaching youth specific criteria for deciding on a specific solution may be helpful. Specific suggestions included identifying consequences and determining whether each solution is healthy, legal and does not cause harm (Frauenknecht & Black, 2003; Olexa & Forman, 1984). They also suggested utilizing a pre-test in determining where participant’s deficits are in problem solving, and using that knowledge to guide specific programs. Finally, Coleman et al. (1993) suggested that programs should include a similar training protocol to ensure fidelity of the program. These suggestions would likely be beneficial to future programs that attempt to teach social problem solving.

Girls Today

The Girls Today Program began, in part, as a response to the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation’s (AAUW) article called “How Schools Shortchange Girls” (1992). In the article, the AAUW described how girls
struggle in school because of gender related issues such as sexual harassment, violence and body image. Because of these social problems, one goal of Girls Today is to inspire girls to pursue higher education. The AAUW is a national organization of women who have earned an associate or higher educational degree. The AAUW “promotes equity for all women and girls, lifelong education, and positive societal change.” They “provide funds to education, research, and self-development for women.”

The Girls Today program is different from most programs that intervene in the peer relationships of adolescents. Pacific University’s Center for Women and Gender Equity (now called Center for Gender Equity), founders of Girls Today, is an organization “devoted to research, service, and education around issues of gender equality”. Thus, topics of Girls Today conferences are designed to fit with the primary goal of decreasing barriers that interfere in girls’ attending college. The topics are chosen by the board of the Girls Today program and change every year. The topics are meant to be of specific concern to the students, and include issues such as peer relationships, body image, sexual harassment, violence, bullying, substance abuse, teen sex, race relations, communication and understanding parents. The primary goals of the Girls Today program are outlined below:

1. Address concerns about issues that specifically concern girls’ learning, that the schools cannot regularly address, such as sexual harassment, violence, bullying, body image, substance abuse, teen sex, race relations, communication with and understanding parents.

2. Empower girls and give them a chance to speak out and be heard, reinforcing the strength and confidence young girls develop as pre-teens, which many lose in
adolescence. According to the board of Girls Today, girls in the eighth and ninth grades begin to defer to their male peers and fall behind in critical subjects, restricting their future career options and ability to contribute in a diversity of ways to society.

3. Model for the girls a possible vision for a future in college by putting them in contact with successful female college students, who have taken the same journey the girls will undertake, and having them spend time on a college campus.

4. Help girls develop strategies to deal with troubling issues that detract from the learning environment at school. Keep girls strong and focused on learning.

5. Provide a structure for future mentoring and follow-up to the work done at the conference. Make sure the girls know that there is a support network for them in the community, with teachers and parents, to help them fulfill their potential (American Association of University Women, personal communication, September 12, 2005).

Although conflict in peer relationships, particularly relational aggression, is only one of many subjects that are seen as barriers to attending college, peer conflict was the focus of the Girls Today conference on October 12, 2007. Girls in prior years had requested this topic, as it was viewed as being of vital importance to them. Relational aggression is seen as related to poor adjustment and, according to the leaders of Girls Today, is a barrier to higher education. Specifically, the board of Girls Today maintains that adjustment difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness and low self esteem, are likely to affect a girl’s decision to attend, or to succeed, in college. Thus, relational aggression is identified as a target of change for participants of the Girls Today Program.

Whereas most studies have focused on long term school-based programs facilitated by teachers, the Girls Today program is a single day-long conference, with
monthly follow-up sessions, facilitated by clinical psychology graduate students at a private university. The Girls Today program is for girls, ages 12 to 15 years old, which live in the local county. The program is sponsored by the American Association of University Women and the Center for Women and Gender Equity. The participants in the program are referred by advertisements through school counselors, the newspaper, school papers and word of mouth.

The general format for the Girls Today program is as follows. The activities include psycho-education and information to help build skills that are relevant to the topical issue of the conference. The girls participate in seminars, led by trained facilitators in a local doctoral program who discuss pressing issues with students. The seminars include an opening session, small group sessions about specific issues and a self-defense workshop. Girls are able to express themselves and learn social problem-solving strategies for present concerns. They develop strategies to deal with these troubling issues that may detract from the learning environment. The girls have requested, at the conference prior to this study, more of a focus on adolescent peer relationships as related to conflict and friendships with peers. Because of these requests, the focus of the 2007 Girls Today program was girls’ peer relationships, relational aggression and bullying.

Although classic bullying programs may be less effective for girls (Eslea & Smith, 1998), it is estimated that programs that target relational aggression may be more beneficial for girls than those that do not (Schaack-Edstrom, 2002). It is important to determine what can be done as part of intervention or prevention programs to improve girls’ relationships. Thus, relevant to this discussion on prevention programs for girls, is
how programs promote change. What specifically makes a program work? A description of how programs can create behavior change is reviewed in the following sections.

Understanding Behavior Change

Several factors have been identified that contribute to behavior change. When evaluating programs it is important to identify which aspects of the program facilitate or hinder behavior change. This type of understanding has the potential to inform future programs by enhancing aspects that are working and contribute to insight regarding trouble areas so that changes can be made. Following are two specific models that have been used to identify factors that either facilitate or hinder behavior change.

*Learning Evaluation Model*

Donald Kirkpatrick’s (1998) Learning Evaluation Model (LEM) includes four levels for evaluating training programs. These levels include reaction, learning, behavior and results. Each level is described as necessary for change to occur following participation in a program. The model can be used to inform researchers which factors have limited potential for behavior change, and overall results, for a given program. First, the Reaction Level refers to how participants think and feel about the program. Specifically, participants must enjoy the program, and find it beneficial, for change to occur. Second, the Learning Level refers to the criteria that participants must gain knowledge from the program. Third, the Behavior Level refers to behavior change that occurs as a result of participation in the program. The final level, the Results Level, typically focuses on the overall clinical outcome. Thus, reaction, learning and behavior change are necessary for a change in clinical outcome. For example, if a participant does not like the program, he or she is unlikely to evidence learning or behavior change.
Furthermore, if a participant enjoys the program, but does not learn anything new, he or she will not evidence behavior change. Thus, if one of these necessary levels is missing, the higher levels are unlikely to occur. The LEM can be used to inform future programs in order to improve effectiveness of interventions related to behavior change and clinical outcomes. Another way to conceptualize change is through the theory of planned behavior. This theory identifies the conditions that allow for a behavior to occur and is therefore relevant to this study as it looks to change girls’ attitudes and behaviors regarding relational aggression.

**Theory of Planned Behavior**

Planned behavior refers to any behavior that is planned by an individual (Ajzen, 1991). Specifically, planned behavior can be associated with the third step in rational problem solving (D’Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971), or the implementation of the solution that was generated. When a solution to a problem is established, there are several factors that enhance or hinder the likelihood that an individual will follow through with the solution. According to the theory of planned behavior, there are three conditions that must be met for a planned behavior to occur (Ajzen, 1991). First, an individual must have intention towards using the behavior. Second, the individual must hold the belief that behavior will be beneficial. Finally, the individual must believe that behavior is under their control. Thus, the theory of planned behavior, maintains that for an individual to follow through with a planned behavior they must have intention, believe it will be helpful and endorse perceived ability.

These two models, the LEM and theory of planned behavior, may be used to inform programs of factors that are working, or not working, and what should be changed.
in order to improve efficacy. Thus, these models of change may be useful in determining how bullying prevention programs might intervene in girls’ relationships more effectively.

**Bridging the Gap**

In general, the literature suggests that adolescence is a high risk period for girls because of the impact of relational aggression on adjustment. In addition, studies show that providing girls with better social problem solving skills may enhance girls’ ability to cope with relationships and mitigate the negative effects of relational aggression (Phelps, 2001; Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Because of the potential harmful effects of relational aggression, it is vital to teach girls how to cope in relationships. Prevention programs are needed to facilitate girls’ ability to cope with peer relationships, particularly with relational aggression. The Girls Today program is an effective avenue for studying relational aggression and social problem solving in adolescent girls. There are several factors, outlined below, that suggest the relevance of Girls Today to the study of adolescent peer relationships, relational aggression and coping skills in a community program for girls.

Although programs currently exist for decreasing bullying, the programs are typically large school-based prevention programs that tend to focus on overt bullying. Often relational aggression, a type of bullying more prevalent among girls, is not included in these programs. Thus, typical bullying programs have been shown to be less effective for girls (Eslea & Smith, 1998). Because of the hidden nature of relational aggression, it is more difficult to study and prevent than overt bullying (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). Furthermore, relational aggression often goes unnoticed by parents
and teachers. Because of the importance of relationships to girls, the potential impact on adjustment, and the lack of available effective programs for girls, the current literature suggests better programs are needed for girls. However, little is known about what type of programs would most beneficial for girls who are likely to experience relational aggression.

Although anti-bullying programs exist, many of the current programs are large and expensive. In the current economy, these programs may become increasingly difficult to maintain because of lack of funding. Thus, it appears that it is becoming more important to find quality programs that are effective and economical. Community based programs are likely to become relevant avenues for helping girls cope with relationships and prevent relational aggression. Although few community programs address relational aggression directly, there are programs that may do so indirectly. One way of understanding relational aggression is to look at a program that already exists and addresses the needs of adolescent girls. Community based programs may be utilized to protect girls from the harmful effects of relational aggression. Girls Today fits this description as an existing local community program that addresses protective factors for girls.

Girls Today is a prevention program that was created to promote protective factors for girls, by addressing several topics that are seen as harmful to their adjustment, and decrease barriers to girls’ pursuit of higher education. These barriers have included topics such as sexual harassment, poor body image, and among other areas, peer relationships. The Girls Today program is quite different from other prevention programs because of the specific focus on adolescent girls. Although topics vary by year, the Girls
Today conference in October 2007 was focused on improving adolescent girl peer relationships by targeting relational aggression. Furthermore, the Girls Today program helps girls develop problem solving skills. Because improved social problem-solving skills have been shown to decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety (Haaga et al., 1995; Haugh, 2006; Nezu & D’Zurilla, 1989; Nezu et al., 2004; Marx, Williams, & Claridge 1992), it is likely that helping girls solve problems related to challenges with peers will be beneficial to their adjustment.

The Girls Today program was identified as a potential avenue for effectively counteracting the negative effects of relational aggression. This study was exploratory in nature and sought to determine whether this current local program may already indirectly address relational aggression. The study is a unique opportunity to capture relational information on girls in an environment already designed to enhance the protective factors influencing their adjustment. This was a convenience sample where data collection was feasible, local, accessible and community supported. Participants who attended the Girls Today conference in October, 2007 were adolescent girls, who are seen as the highest risk group for relational aggression, and whom were participating in a current program aimed preventing poor adjustment related to relational aggression, promoting protective factors, and decreasing barriers to higher education.

Results of this study were locally informative for this community program. The Girls Today program is a potential avenue for helping adolescent girls manage relationships. This study includes recommendations for changes that could be made for the improvement of the program. This study evaluated participant’s experiences of relational aggression, attitudes about relational aggression and ability to solve problems
related to relational aggression. Suggestions based on this study would have the benefit of impacting a program that impacts dozens of girls each year. Furthermore, recommendations based on this study add to the current body of literature on relational aggression. Of utmost interest to this researcher is the following question. Can a program, such as Girls Today, have a sufficient effect on girls’ relationships to reduce relational aggression? Furthermore, is a one day conference of sufficient duration and depth to create meaningful change? If not, what findings can be gained from the evaluation of a short-term community program to inform future programs that will help girls address problems with relational aggression?

Hypotheses

Both the Learning Evaluation Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior were instrumental in developing the hypotheses related to the current study. The evaluation component of this study was based on Donald Kirkpatrick’s (1998) LEM. These levels include reaction, learning and behavior. The results level was not evaluated for this study because changes in adjustment would be unlikely to take place immediately following the conference or one month later. Also included in this study are measures of the factors necessary for planned behavior to occur. These factors include intention, helpfulness, and perceived ability. The hypotheses based on these constructs are as follows.

Reaction Level:

1. Likeability: The girls will enjoy the Girls Today Activities. The girls will report a high likeability rating (5-8, on a scale of 1-8) for the Girls Today program.

2. Helpfulness: The girls will report that they found Girls Today to be helpful (5-8, on a scale of 1-8).
Learning Level:

3. Solutions: At the end of Girls Today, girls will be able to list a higher number of solutions (coping with relationships skills) in handling a vignette describing a difficult relationship situation than before the program.

4. Perceived Ability: At the end of Girls Today, girls will report a higher sense of perceived ability or efficacy (on a scale of 1-5) in handling the vignette which describes the problematic relationship situation than before the program.

5. Retention: The girls will be able to list coping with relationships skills one month after the program.

6. Knowledge: The girls will report increased knowledge of content learned (aspects of relational aggression, etc.) during Girls Today.

7. Attitudes: The girls’ attitudes regarding the relationships they have with their peers will be improved after Girls Today.

Behavior Level:

8. Intention: Girls will report intention towards using coping with relationships skills that they learned at the end of the program and at follow-up (one month later).

METHODS

Participants

Participants included 20 girls, ages 11-14, who attended a day-long conference designed to improve adolescent girls’ peer relationships and self-esteem as well as motivate them to attend college. The program in prior years included approximately 50% Caucasian and 50% Hispanic girls. Demographic information (e.g., age, ethnicity) was not assessed at the Girls Today conference; however, this information was measured at follow-up. Thus, some basic demographic data is unavailable. Based on follow-up data, approximately 18% of participants identified as non-Caucasian in the current study.

Procedures

Recruitment

Girls Today participants were referred to the program through advertisements at schools, school counselors, the newspaper, school papers and word of mouth. Advertisements and recruitment materials were developed and distributed by the organizers of the Girls Today conference. No additional recruitment materials were added for the current study. Girls needed parental permission before participating in this study. Parental consent forms for the Girls Today program were included in the registration brochure. Additional informed consent was required for the current study.

According to the organizers of the Girls Today conference, parents who pre-register their daughters for the conference often do not attend, nor drop their daughters off at, the conference. Therefore, parents who pre-registered their child for the conference
were contacted by phone prior to the day of the conference. Parents were given a brief
description of the study and any questions were answered. The investigator also asked the
parent/guardian whether they would be available to sign informed consent documents on
the morning of the conference. This gave all parents the opportunity to talk to the
researcher in person prior to signing informed consent documents. The investigator was
available at the registration table, to answer questions and collect consent forms, on the
day of the conference. All parents had the opportunity to ask questions about the study
before allowing their child to participate. Conference attendees whose parents were
unavailable on the day of the conference (so would not have been available to sign
informed consent documents), were excluded from the study. Parents who registered their
daughters on the day of the conference were eligible to sign consent forms in person.
Participants who did not have informed parental consent were excluded from the study;
however, they were able to participate in all Girls Today activities.

Girls Today facilitators were given a set of instructions regarding recruitment and
data collection. When the participant's parents arrived, facilitators asked them if they
would agree to let their daughter participate in the study. Facilitators assisted parents with
the informed consent procedures, advising them to read and sign the consent forms, and
made sure parents filled out all of the required information (e.g., name, email, phone,
etc.), before girls participated in the study. Facilitators gave parents a copy of the consent
form for their records. Parents were also given a list of low cost mental health resources
should the participants experience any mental health difficulties as a result of the
conference. Facilitators were asked to direct parents to discuss any questions with the
principal investigator. Finally, facilitators helped coordinate administration of the
questionnaires to the participants. Measures of the current study included a Preliminary test (i.e., given at the beginning of the Girls Today Program), Post-test (i.e., End of Day evaluation) and Follow-up (i.e., given one month after the program).

Exclusionary Criteria

There were approximately 35-40 girls, who attended the Girls Today conference in October, 2007. Of these participants, there were 20 girls who were included in the current study. Only girls whose parents had an opportunity to speak with the researcher in person prior to completing consent forms were allowed to participate in the current study. Girls whose parents were unable to provide informed consent due to lack of opportunity, lack of interest, or limited English proficiency were excluded from the study. A criterion for providing informed consent in this study was that parents were able to read English. This requirement, that is more stringent than requiring English speaking proficiency, was added to ensure that parents were able to communicate with the researcher, and have all of their questions answered, before allowing their daughters to participate in the study. Due to the aforementioned exclusionary criteria approximately 2-3 participants were excluded due to lack of parental English proficiency. Thus, there was a slight under representation of Hispanic participants as compared to those who participated in the conference.

Data Collection

The initial data collection occurred at the Girls Today conference on October 12, 2007, at Pacific University. The follow-up data was collected one month later, via Survey Monkey (an online questionnaire), in November, 2007. Data, from both the initial data collection and from follow-up, were de-identified and contained in a locked box. The
survey link for the follow-up was sent electronically to email addresses that the girls’
caregivers provided on the day of the conference. Participants who did not provide email
addresses were mailed the follow-up forms, given self addressed stamped envelopes, and
asked to return questionnaires. Initially, the follow-up due date was Tuesday, November
27, 2007. Nine participants completed the follow-up questionnaires on Survey Monkey
by the initial due date. Those participants who had not returned surveys by December 2,
2007 were sent reminder emails and asked to complete follow-up surveys by December
6, 2007. Two additional participants completed surveys by the second due date. A second
reminder email was sent on 12/13/07 to ask participants to complete follow-up surveys
“ASAP,” for which no additional surveys were collected. One follow-up survey was
returned by fax, and two were returned by post-mail. There were 20 participants who
completed both the pre-test and the post-test. One participant was eliminated from the
analyses due to missing data. A total of 14 (70%) participants completed the follow up
study. All data collection activities were completed by December, 2007.

Measures

The measures included in this study were those found to be relevant based on the
current literature on relational aggression, social problem solving and factors that
contribute to behavior change. The role of relational aggression is particularly relevant to
the study of in girls’ relationships. Thus, the Social Experience Questionnaire (Storch et
al., 2003, 2005) and Attitudes Towards Bullying Scale (Boulton & Underwood, 1992;
Stevens et al., 2000) provide information regarding girls’ experiences of, and attitudes
about, relational aggression. Furthermore, social problem solving appears to be a
protective factor against the negative effects of relational aggression. Thus, the Coping
with Relationships Vignette, a process measure of social problem solving ability, was included. Finally, measurements were included that provided insight as to which aspects of the Learning Evaluation Model (reaction, learning and behavior) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (intention, helpfulness and perceived ability) contributed to behavior change following participation in Girls Today. These constructs related to behavior change were demonstrated by the session rating and Coping with Relationships Scale. Thus, the measures relevant to the current study include an overall session rating, Coping with Relationships Vignette, Social Experience Questionnaire, and Attitudes Towards Bullying Scale.

The measures in the current study were administered at pre-test, post-test and follow-up. Participants’ experiences and attitudes regarding relational aggression, and social problem solving skills, were measured prior to the conference by the pre-test measures. Furthermore, the post-test included items aimed at assessing participants’ reactions to the day, such as likeability, helpfulness and intention to use the skills, in order to determine whether their attitudes had changed across the day and to evaluate how much information they learned. The follow-up test, given one month later, was used to determine what information participants retained from the conference, including reactions, attitudes, learning and behavior change. Table 1 summarizes the measures used, including the measured construct, and corresponding Learning Evaluation Model (Kirkpatrick, 1998) and Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) components.
Table 1

List of Measures, Construct, LEM\textsuperscript{a} and TPB\textsuperscript{b} Model Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>LEM Model Component</th>
<th>TPB Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session Rating</td>
<td>Likeability, Intention</td>
<td>Reaction, Learning &amp; Behavior</td>
<td>Intention &amp; Helpfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge &amp; Helpfulness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with Relationships</td>
<td>Knowledge &amp;</td>
<td>Learning &amp; Behavior</td>
<td>Perceived Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette</td>
<td>Perceived Ability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Experience</td>
<td>Relational Victimization</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>&amp; Pro-social Behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes Towards</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying Scale (Stevens, et al)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a}LEM = Learning Evaluation Model, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Edition (Kirkpatrick, 1998); \textsuperscript{b}TPB = Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)
**Session Rating**

Self-report session rating scales were given twice, at post-test and follow-up to determine participants’ reactions to the Girls Today conference. The LEM Model components addressed by the session rating scales included reaction, learning and behavior. The session rating scales were developed by the current researcher and included items rated on an 8-point Likert Scale. A reaction sheet was given at the end of the day and at the one-month follow-up to assess Likeability, Intention, Knowledge and Helpfulness. The Likeability scale was comprised of three items, including “I found Girls Today to be fun,” and was used to help determine how much the girls liked the program. The Intention scale was comprised of two items, including “I intend to use some of the skills I learned today in my relationships”, and measured the extent to which girls intended to use the skills they’d learned in their relationships. The Knowledge dimension was assessed with one item, which was “I learned more about girls’ relationships”. The Helpfulness dimension was assessed with one item, which was “I found the information today helpful” (See Appendix B).

**Coping with Relationships Vignette**

The girls also completed a coping with relationships vignette, created by this researcher, at pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. The coping with relationships vignette was a process measure of social problem solving (D’Zurilla et al., 2004). Specifically, the measure was a performance test of the participant’s ability to generate solutions to a common problem related to relational aggression. The vignette included a situation, adapted from Rachel Simmon’s nonfiction book entitled Odd Girl Speaks Out (Simmons, 2004). The two scales developed from the vignette included the Solutions and Ability to
Solve scales. Girls were instructed to provide a list of possible solutions (Solutions scale). The sum total number of solutions comprised this quantitative scale. The social problem solving vignette also measured the girls’ knowledge and sense of ability, such that they rated (on a Likert scale from 1-5) how effectively they believed they would handle the dilemma (i.e., Ability to Solve Scale). The LEM Model components addressed by the vignette included Learning and Behavior (See Appendix C).

Social Experience Questionnaire

Participants completed the Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) at pre-test, post-test and follow-up. The SEQ is a self-report measure of overt victimization, relational victimization, and the extent to which participants are recipients of pro-social behavior (Storch et al., 2003, 2005). Although developed for children, this measure has been extended for use with adolescents, and has maintained its validity with this population (Storch et al., 2005). Two scales were derived from the SEQ. The Relational Victimization Scale included five items such as “How often does a girl who is mad at you try to get back at you by not letting you be in their group anymore?” and measured the extent to which girls were victims of relational aggression. The Receipt of Pro-social Behaviors Scale included five items such as “How often do other kids let you know that they care about you?” and measured the extent to which girl’s view positive aspects of relationships with other girls. The LEM Model component evaluated by the SEQ is Behavior.

Attitudes Towards Bullying Scale

Changes in attitudes towards relational aggression were measured at pre-test, post-test and follow-up. Attitudes were measured using a revised scale of Stevens et al.
Boulton and Underwood (1992) identified 25 questions related to attitudes towards bullying, and involvement in solving bullying problems. Stevens et al. (2000) included in their study a list of 10 of these items related to attitudes towards bullying and victimization and 15 questions that evaluated the participants’ strategies to solve these problems. Although the model was developed to identify attitudes specifically about bullying, the current study has been revised to focus specifically on relational aggression. Thus, general bullying content from the original questionnaire was altered to include relationally aggressive situations (e.g., rumor spreading, social exclusion, etc.). In addition, the scale became gender specific, such that peers were referred to as “girls” rather than “students”. Two scales were developed measuring attitudes about relational aggression. The Pro-bully (pro relational aggression) scale measured the extent to which girls had positive attitudes about relational aggression. The Pro-victim (anti-relational aggression) scale measured the extent to which participants disagreed with relational aggression and supported the victims of relational aggression. Attitude scales addressed the LEM Model component of Learning.

**Qualitative Data**

In addition to quantitative data that was collected across each administration, qualitative data was collected on the day of the conference and one month later. Feedback about the Girls Today conference was collected from both participants and facilitators. The reaction surveys include a space for girls to write in specific comments about the conference. These comments were organized into general themes by this researcher. All Girls Today participants completed a reaction survey at the end of the conference. Research participants also provided conference feedback as part of the follow-up study.
Furthermore, small group facilitators met with this researcher at the end of the Girls Today conference and discussed their reactions to Girls Today. Feedback given by conference facilitators was included in this study as they provided valuable suggestions for future conferences. This researcher organized specific comments made by the facilitators into general themes. The feedback provided by participants and facilitators was included in order to inform future Girls Today conferences and other programs that address girls’ relationships.
RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The Girls Today program was identified in this study as a potential avenue for improving girls’ relationships by addressing relational aggression and social problem solving skills. In order to assess whether behavior change is likely, as a result of addressing relational aggression and social problem solving skills in an existing community program, the Learning Evaluation Model (LEM) was used (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Thus, results are organized by three of the four LEM components, including reaction to the conference, learning, and behavior. Means and standard deviations, for all of the variables, including reaction scales (Likeability, Helpfulness, Knowledge, and Intention), social problem solving skills (number of solutions and perceived ability to solve), attitudes towards bullying (pro-bully and pro-victim), and Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ; relational victimization and receipt of pro-social behavior) are presented in Tables 2-5. Overall, the scales showed adequate to acceptable internal consistency, ranging from .61-.91.

Participant’s Relationships

Few participants endorsed experiences of relational aggression. Most participants denied having experienced relational victimization at pre-test, post-test and follow-up. Whereas some girls (17% pre-test; 22% post-test; 15% follow-up) reported that they had experienced relational victimization at least “sometimes”, most girls (83% pre-test; 78% post-test; 85% follow-up) reported that they had “never”, or “almost never”, been victims
of relational aggression. Furthermore, most girls (84% pre-test; 94% post-test; 85% follow-up) reported that they were recipients of pro-social behaviors at least “sometimes”. Few participants (16% pre-test; 6% post-test: 15% follow-up) reported that they “never” or “almost never” were recipients of pro-social behaviors from other girls.

The paucity of experiences of relational aggression among participants may have impacted results of the current study (see Table 2) and this will be addressed further in the discussion section.

Reaction Level

Participant’s reactions to the Girls Today program were measured in terms of how much they liked the program (likeability) and how much they found the information to be helpful (helpfulness). Several participants also provided specific comments regarding their experiences at the conference. The results of these reactions are outlined below.

Participant Feedback

Participants commented on their experiences, particularly related to likeability and helpfulness, at the Girls Today conference. All girls, regardless of participation in the current study, completed reaction sheets. At the end of the day, seven participants (out of twenty) wrote comments about the conference on the reaction sheets. In addition, four girls (who were not part of the study) wrote comments on the reaction sheets. Finally, seven participants wrote comments on follow-up reaction sheets. Following is a summary of written comments.
Table 2

Social Experience Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>Never - Almost (1-2.9)</th>
<th>Sometimes - All the Time (3-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>.942</td>
<td>.651</td>
<td>-.301</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>.782</td>
<td>.381</td>
<td>-1.098</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>.762</td>
<td>.432</td>
<td>-.727</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receipt of Pro-Social Behavior</td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>.748</td>
<td>-.675</td>
<td>.786</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Behavior</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>-.495</td>
<td>1.098</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.856</td>
<td>.253</td>
<td>-.279</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, girls seemed to enjoy the Girls Today conference. Several girls described the conference as being “fun” or “cool.” One participant pointed out that she was “surprised that it was fun, because [she’d] expected it to be boring”. Girls also described the conference as a learning experience. Whereas one participant described the program as “educational,” another girl noted that she had learned a lot about herself. Furthermore, it was indicated that some participants would come back again, even bringing more girls with them. One girl stated that she liked the conference and “told [her] friend about this and asked her to come” next year.

In addition to the positive feedback about the conference, several participants provided constructive feedback and made suggestions for future conferences. Some girls (3 participants) reported that they thought the breakout sessions were “kinda boring”. When discussing the breakout sessions, girls stated that they wished they “knew what to do” in response to relational aggression. Another girl described feeling differently than her peers, stating that she “had way different opinions [such as] gossiping [is] bad, [because], everyone gossips.” Furthermore, two girls stated that they felt a bit rushed during the conference and wished that they had more time to “do stuff.” Some suggestions were made for the next Girls Today conference. Several girls noted that they wish they could have done more physical activities, such as tag or stretching between break-out sessions. Finally, a couple of girls commented on their interactions with their peers at the conference. One participant described feeling as if she is more capable of talking to other people when she doesn’t know them. Another girl stated that she would like to have “gotten to know other peers better”. Overall, girls appeared to enjoy the
conference; however, some participants suggested more activities and further opportunities for interaction with peers.

Likeability

In order to test the hypothesis that the girls would enjoy the Girls Today activities, the girls rated likeability (on a scale of 1-8) for the Girls Today program. The mean likeability rating was calculated using items such as: “I enjoyed the breakout sessions”, “I got bored today” (a reverse-scored item) and “The breakout sessions were fun”. At the end of the conference, 78% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” (5-8, on a scale of 1-8) that they liked the Girls Today conference. At follow-up, 77% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” (5-8, on a scale of 1-8) that they liked the Girls Today conference. Overall, girls reported that they enjoyed the Girls Today conference (See Table 3).

Helpfulness

In order to test the hypothesis that the girls would find Girls Today helpful, the girls rated how much they “found the information today helpful” (on a scale of 1-8). At the end of the day, 72% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” (5-8, on a scale of 1-8) that the information they learned at the Girls Today conference was helpful. At follow-up, 67% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” (5-8, on a scale of 1-8) that the information was helpful. In general, girls tended to report that the information that they learned at the conference was helpful (see Table 3).
Table 3

Reaction Sheet Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Agree (5-8)</th>
<th>Disagree (1-2)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likeability</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>1.320</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>-1.770</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>6.31</td>
<td>1.684</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpfulness</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>1.819</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>-.396</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.907</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>1.757</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1.106</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>1.994</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>1.768</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>-.175</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>1.677</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning Level

It is important that participants not only enjoyed the conference and found it to be helpful, but that the conference promoted learning. The learning level included a subjective rating of whether girls believed they learned more about relationships. In addition, the study included measurements of attitude change and a subjective rating of perceived ability for using the skills. Finally, the current study evaluated whether participants were able to demonstrate learned coping with relationship skills and whether they were able to retain what they learned.

Learning about Relationships

Girls were hypothesized to report increased knowledge as a result of the Girls Today conference, such that they “learned more about girls’ relationships”. In order to test this hypothesis, the girls rated knowledge (on a scale of 1-8) for the Girls Today program at post-test and follow-up. At the end of the day, 67% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” (5-8, on a scale of 1-8) that they “learned more about girls’ relationships” at the Girls Today conference. At follow-up, 69% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” with this same statement. A paired samples (dependent) t-test was conducted, comparing reported knowledge learned from post-test to follow-up. No significant difference was found, between post-test and follow-up, in terms of how much knowledge participants gained, t (11) = 1.106, p = .293. Overall, most girls reported an increase in knowledge about peer relationships at both post-test and follow-up (see Table 3).
Attitudes about Relational Aggression

The hypothesis that the girls’ attitudes, regarding their peer relationships, would improve after Girls Today was tested by having participants rate their attitudes (scale of 1 to 8) at pre-test, post-test and follow-up. The attitude scales included Pro Bully (Pro Relational Aggression) and Pro-Victim (Anti Relational Aggression). Paired sample (dependent) t-tests were conducted, comparing the mean Pro Bully (Pro Relational Aggression) attitudes from pre-test to post, post-test to follow-up, and pre-test to follow-up. There was no significant change in the “Pro-Bully” attitude from pre-test (M=2.17) to post-test (M=2.10), T (17) = .184, p = .856. However, there was a marginally significant change in the “Pro-Bully” attitude from post-test (M=2.10) to follow-up (M=1.79), t (11) = 2.037, p = .066. Furthermore, there was a significant change in “Pro-Bully” attitude from pre-test (M=2.17) to follow-up (M=1.79), t (12) = 2.459, p = .03. There was a significant change in the participants’ attitudes about relational aggression, following the Girls Today. The participants “strongly disagreed” with relational aggression at each administration; however, their “Pro Bully” ratings significantly decreased following the day of the conference (see Table 4).
Table 4

Attitudes about Relational Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Agree (5-8)</th>
<th>Disagree (1-2)</th>
<th>t&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>t&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>t&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro Bully</td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>.871</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>.184a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pro-Rel</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>.777</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>2.037b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.066*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.649</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>2.459c</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.030**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Victim</td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>.992</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>-.928a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Anti-Rel</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>1.032</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>.332b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>1.097</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>-1.026c</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a: pre-test to post-test; b: post-test to follow-up; c: pre-test to follow-up

*marginally significant; **significant at the .05 level
Furthermore, Paired sample (dependent) t-tests were run, comparing the mean Pro-Victim (Anti Relational Aggression) attitudes from pre-test to post-test, post-test to follow-up, and pre-test to follow-up. There were no significant changes in the “Pro-Victim” attitudes from pre-test (M=6.29) to post-test (M=6.48), t (17) = -.928, p = .367; post-test (M=6.48) to follow-up (M=6.54); t (11) = .332, p=.746, or from pre-test (M=6.29) to follow-up (M=6.554), t (12) = -1.026, p=.325. There was no significant change in the participants’ attitudes about relational aggression, following the Girls Today. In general, most participants “strongly agreed” with the victims of relational aggression, and were anti-relational aggression, at each administration (see Table 4).

Coping with Relationships: Learning

Girls were hypothesized to be able to list a higher number of solutions (coping with relationships skills) to a difficult relationship situation, at the end of the day than before the program. Girls were asked to generate solutions at pre-test and at post-test. A paired samples (dependent) t-test was conducted, comparing overall number of solutions at pre-test to post-test. At pre-test, participants had an average of 2.16 solutions. At post-test, participants had an average of 1.71 solutions. The number of solutions decreased from pre to post-test, t (16) = 1.514, p = .150. Contrary to the hypothesis, the participants reported fewer solutions at post-test than pre-test; however, the difference was not significant (see Table 5).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>t&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>t&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Ability</td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.796</td>
<td>-1.623&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.857</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.667&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.024**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.660</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.732&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Solutions</td>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1.500</td>
<td>1.514&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>1.263</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.057&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.067*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>1.974</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.305&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.766</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>: pre-test to post-test; <sup>b</sup>: post-test to follow-up; <sup>c</sup>: pre-test to follow-up

*marginally significant; **significant at the .05 level
**Solution Themes**

General themes, of the solutions generated by participants to the social problem solving vignette, were noted by this researcher. Common themes included direct communication (e.g., talk to the girl), indirect solutions (e.g., ignore her), seeking consultation or support (e.g., talk to an adult or friend), aggressive behavior (e.g., slap her) and attempting to understand the aggressor in the vignette (e.g., thinking “maybe she needs to be left alone”). In the current study, 17-21% of coping solutions were indirect, whereas 53-69% of solutions were more direct. Aggressive acts were noted as solutions during pre-test (5%) and post-test (3%). No girls listed aggressive acts as a solution on the follow-up administration. In addition, there were no “attempts to understand” the relationally aggressive girl at pre-test, 3% at the end of the day, and 19% of solutions incorporated this type of solution at follow up. Furthermore, 2-3% of solutions included consulting with a parent or teacher on the day of the conference (pre-test and post-test) and 16% of generated solutions included talking to an adult at follow-up (see Table 6).
Table 6: Social Problem Solving Skills: Solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Solutions</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Solutions</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Communication</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to her</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be nice to her</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologize</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call her</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email/write her</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve new friend</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect Solutions</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit next to her &amp; see</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a friend talk to her</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore her</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch and wait</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seek consultation/support</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask an adult</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell someone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get new friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aggressive Behavior</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attempt to Understand Her</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Coping with Relationships: Retention

The hypothesis that the girls would retain their ability to list coping with relationships skills one month after the program was tested. Paired samples (dependent) t-tests were used to compare the number of solutions given at post-test to those given at follow-up. In addition, the solutions given at pre-test were compared to those given at follow-up. Participants listed marginally significantly more solutions at follow-up (2.69) than at post-test (1.71); \( t(10) = -2.057, p = .067 \). However, the girls did not report significantly more solutions at follow-up (2.69) than at pre-test (2.16); \( t(12) = -.305, p = .766 \). Although participants retained their social problem solving skills one month after the program, such that they listed at least as many solutions at follow-up as they did at post-test, there appeared to be no change from participant’s skill level prior to program (see Table 5).

Coping with Relationships: Perceived Ability

It was hypothesized that the girls would report a higher sense of perceived ability for handling the problematic relationship situation at the end of the day, and at follow-up, than before the program. In contrast to the hypothesis, the girls rated their perceived ability as low (on a scale of 1-5; where 1 = not well, 5 = very well) at pre-test, post-test and follow-up. Paired samples (dependent) t-tests were conducted, comparing the number of solutions from pre-test to post-test, post-test to follow-up, and pre-test to follow-up. Overall, the girls reported that they were “not sure” how well they would be able to solve the relationship problem at each administration. The mean perceived ability was 3.61 at pre-test, 3.88 at post-test, and 3.46 at follow-up. There was not a significant change in perceived ability from pre-test (3.61) to post-test (3.88); \( T(16) = -1.623, p = .125 \); or from
pre-test (3.61) to follow-up (3.46), T (12) = .732, p=.478. There was, however, a
significant decrease in perceived ability to solve the problem from post-test (3.88) to
follow-up (3.46), T (10) = 2.667, p = .024. Whereas girls reported a slightly higher
perceived ability to solve a difficult relationship situation at the end of the program, they
reported a significantly lower perceived ability to do this one month later (see Table 5).

Behavior Level

*Intention*

Although participant’s behavior change was not specifically measured in this
study; the researcher measured the participants’ intention to use the social problem
solving skills. According to the theory of planned behavior, intention is a predictor of
behavior change (Ajzen, 1991). In order to test the hypothesis that the girls would be
more likely to use the skills that they learned, the girls rated intention (on a scale of 1-8)
for using the skills. The mean intention rating was calculated using items such as: “I will
probably use some of the skills I learned” and “I probably won’t use any of the
information I learned”. At the end of the conference, 83% of girls reported that they
“agreed” to “strongly agreed” (5-8, on a scale of 1-8) that they intended to use the skills.
At follow-up, 85% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” (5-8, on a
scale of 1-8) that they would use the skills. Thus, in general, the participants reported that
they intended to use the social problem solving skills in their peer relationships (see
Table 3).

Facilitator Feedback

A follow-up meeting was conducted, with the facilitators of the relational
aggression break-out sessions, at the end of the conference on October 12, 2007. This
meeting was conducted in order to gain further insight regarding each break session, such as specific problems and inconsistencies among groups. Furthermore, facilitator feedback was essential to the current study because facilitators were able to provide this researcher with information, regarding specific areas of perceived strength and weakness, which may have affected results of the study. Specifically, facilitators discussed what they believed went well, what did not go well, potential areas of growth and suggestions for future Girls Today conferences. This information can also be generalized to inform other future programs for girls.

Several facilitators offered specific ideas about organization of Girls Today. Suggestions were made about planning break-out sessions. One suggestion was to have more variance in breakout session topics, stating that they had a difficult time telling the difference between two of the sessions (Girlfriends and Rumors/Gossip/etc.). Facilitators requested more guidance regarding organizing the breakout sessions and agreed that there appeared to be some variance among the different groups. Specifically, whereas some groups covered several problem solving skills, and some even role-played situations, other groups had more behavior management difficulties and were unable to cover relevant material. In addition, facilitators stated that a short break would be helpful between the two sessions. Furthermore, facilitators reported that they wished they would have known more about their roles as facilitators and specific curriculum for each breakout group before the day of the conference.

The facilitators made suggestions regarding how to assign girls to different groups. They reported believing that smaller groups would have fostered more discussion. They also suggested creating age-specific groups. Some groups had a wider
range of ages (11-15) than other groups. Whereas, some of the younger girls wanted to “go outside and play,” others wanted to talk about topics that [facilitators believed] the younger girls didn’t understand (e.g., sex and drugs). Furthermore, some girls were able to self-select groups, and chose to be in groups with classmates and/or friends. It is possible that girls would have been more forthcoming if they were in groups with girls they didn’t know. This is particularly true given the topic of relational aggression, such that it is possible that girls were in groups with their peers who they may have been experiencing peer difficulties with.
DISCUSSION

Girls who are the victims of relational aggression may be more likely to experience depression, anxiety and academic and social problems than their peers. Because of the particular impact of peer relationships on adolescent girls, it was important to determine the effect of current programs designed to help girls improve their relationships. This exploratory study sought to understand how well the Girls Today program intervenes in adolescent girls’ peer relationships. There have been few programs that have focused directly on girl’s peer relationships, or specifically on relational aggression. However, the focus of the Girls Today conference in 2007 was on adolescent girls’ peer relationships and conflict. Thus, Girls Today was identified as a potential avenue for addressing relational aggression. This study sought to understand whether the conference facilitated girl’s ability to handle relational aggression. This study was intended to be locally informative and add to the current body of research on relational aggression, as well as identify ways of preventing and intervening in relational aggression by teaching girls to utilize social problem solving skills.

In general, girls in the current study denied experiences of relational aggression. They reported that they enjoyed the conference, learned new skills, and intended on using the skills. However, girls reported low levels of perceived ability for dealing with relational aggression and were unable to demonstrate improvement in social problem solving skills in this study. Following is a discussion of several factors that may have affected girls’ reports of attitudes and behaviors related to relational aggression as well as
factors that likely interfered with the ability of this community program to facilitate behavior change.

Relational Aggression and Social Desirability

The impact of relationship problems is particularly relevant for girls because of their tendency to incorporate relationship experiences into their sense of identity. Furthermore, it appears to be more socially desirable for girls than boys to have positive peer relationships (Laursen et al., 1996; Remillard & Lamb, 2005; Simmons, 2002). Thus, girls may deny negative experiences in relationships in order to maintain a positive identity. Previous studies have included evidence that girls may avoid conflict with peers, or be positively associated with peers regardless of conflict, because they replace anger with positive affect in order to keep friendships (Laursen et al., 1996). Furthermore, adolescents may avoid situations that appear to have potential for creating conflict in order to avoid losing closeness in relationships (Laursen et al., 1996). This tendency to view relationships positively, regardless of negative experiences, is likely to affect how girls experience and define their relationships. It is possible that this general tendency may have impacted girls’ self-report of peer conflict and relational victimization in this study.

Girls in this study appeared to describe their relationships in a socially desirable way. These participants consistently endorsed attitudes against relational aggression and in support of girls who are victimized. Furthermore, most girls reported feeling socially supported by peers and tended to deny experiences of relational aggression. These findings were not consistent with previous studies in which most children were bullied at some time in their schooling (Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Simmons, 2002). Although some girls
may not have experienced bullying or relational aggression, this low rate of relational problems may be explained by girl’s tendency to view their relationships as positive in order to maintain a sense of positive identity (Maccoby, 1988). Thus, social desirability likely played a role in girls’ descriptions of attitudes and behaviors related to their relationships.

Overall, it is socially desirable for girls to demonstrate positive peer relationships. Thus, girls may be more likely to behave in ways that maintain their social identity, regardless of conflict with peers, resulting in acts of relational aggression. Specifically, because relational aggression is typically covert, the behavior may not appear aggressive to onlookers. Therefore, girls who are relationally aggressive will often appear to be acting in a pro-social way and these acts will go unnoticed by parents and teachers (Laursen et al., 1996; Remillard & Lamb, 2005; Simmons, 2002). The victims of the relationally aggressive acts may also wish to preserve their identity and will be more likely to avoid or deny that they are being victimized. Because of the hidden nature of relational aggression, and the apparent desire to maintain positive identity in relationships, girls may have denied experiences of relational victimization in this study. Participants may have had negative experiences that they chose not to disclose in order to preserve positive feelings regarding their relationships.

There are other potential explanations for the low rate of reported experiences of relational victimization. It may be that the relationships of these participants were actually different than those of participants in previous studies. Girls who participated in the study may have had less conflict in peer relationships than those who did not participate. Furthermore, girls who participated in Girls Today were self-selected.
Individuals who self-select for programs like Girls Today may already have fewer problems with peers than those who don’t. Similarly, it is possible that girls with more significant problems may tend to avoid conferences that discuss topics related to peer relationship problems. Finally, it is possible that the age of participants had an effect on report of relational aggression. Many of the previous studies on relational aggression are based on college students’ memories of teasing in adolescence. Thus, participants may have been too young to report the extent of relationship problems that would be evident upon reflection as an adult. Although it is possible that participants in this study reported fewer instances of relational aggression than the general population, it is estimated that girls were in fact underreporting experiences of peer conflict due to social desirability and the overall perceived impact on their identity.

Girls Today: Factors Affecting Change

The current study included an examination of factors affecting the ability of adolescent girls to respond appropriately to difficulties with relationships. According to the Learning Evaluation Model, for a program to instigate change in participants, they must think and feel positively about the program, gain knowledge and be able to demonstrate the skills they have learned (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Specifically, this study measured the girls’ reactions, attitudes, perceived ability to deal with relationships, learning and behavior related to relational aggression and social problem solving skills.

Participants appeared to have positive reactions to the Girls Today sessions. In general, the girls enjoyed the Girls Today conference and found the information to be helpful. Furthermore, most girls reported that they “learned more about girls’ relationships” at the Girls Today conference. Girls also appeared to evidence a change in
attitudes after the conference, which is consistent with previous research findings for which attitude changes were identified outcomes (Stevens et al., 2000). Although participants consistently disagreed with relational aggression, and sympathized with victims of relational aggression at each administration, girls disagreed with bullies significantly more at follow-up. Thus, according to the Learning Evaluation Model, Girls Today appeared to foster positive reactions, knowledge and appeared to have the potential to create behavior change. However, following is a description of some factors that may have hindered participant’s ability to experience behavior change following Girls Today.

Social Problem Solving

Providing adolescent girls with skills necessary to cope with peer relationships may foster their ability to counteract the harmful effects of relationships. Therefore, teaching girls social problem solving skills was one target of the conference, and based on literature, was hypothesized to be a determining factor in the success of the program. However, participants did not demonstrate a change in social problem solving skills from the beginning to the end of the conference, or one month after the program. Although participants were able to report more solutions one month later than at the end of the day, they didn’t list more solutions than prior to the conference. Thus, behavior change was not likely an outcome of this study.

Knowledge is a vital variable, according to Kirkpatrick (1998), for a program to facilitate behavior change. Thus knowledge about peer conflict and social problem solving skills was hypothesized to facilitate behavior change in this study. Most girls reported they learned about girls’ relationships during the conference; however, girls
were unable to list more solutions for coping with a difficult relationship problem following participation in the program. There are several potential reasons for this discrepancy between self-report of knowledge learned and ability to demonstrate what they learned as pertains to social problem solving. Specifically, relevant to this discussion are the theory of planned behavior and the conceptualization of change in this study.

*Theory of Planned Behavior*

There was a discrepancy between participants’ intention to use the skills they learned at the conference and their perceived ability to be able to cope with relational aggression. This discrepancy may have been a contributing factor to the girls’ apparent difficulty with demonstrating potential for behavior change (generating solutions to a difficult relationship solution). According to the theory of planned behavior, there are three conditions that must be met for planned behavior to occur. Specifically, an individual must have intention to perform the behavior, believe the behavior will be beneficial and believe that the behavior is under their control (Ajzen, 1991). Among participants of the current study, 83-85% of girls reported that they “agreed” to “strongly agreed” that they intended to use the skills. In addition, most girls reported that they found the information that they learned to be beneficial. However, most girls consistently reported being unsure as to whether they would be able to solve the difficult relationship problem. Furthermore, although girls’ ability to generate social problem solving solutions did not change following the Girls Today conference, there was a significant decrease in perceived ability to solve the problem from the end of the conference to one month later. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the missing element was the girls’ perceived ability or belief that the behavior was under their control. One potential
explanation for this change in perceived ability is girls’ lack of awareness regarding relational aggression prior to the conference. It is possible that by increasing the participant’s awareness of relational aggression, they may have realized it to be a problem they hadn’t considered before. Thus, girls may have experienced a decrease in general perceived ability to handle relationships. Although girls reported that they learned new information, it appeared that they perceived these situations as out of their control and too difficult to handle.

Conceptualization of Change

In general, there are two ways of measuring social problem solving ability: process measures and outcome measures. Process measures are more likely to be quantitative and directly assess the activities that are part of the process of problem solving (e.g., the number of solutions generated), whereas outcome measures assess the quality of the solutions that are generated (D’Zurilla & Maydeu-Olivares, 1995). This study was quantitative in nature, such that it included a measurement of participant’s ability to generate a number of solutions to a common relationship problem. No significant changes, in the number of solutions generated from before the conference to one month later, were found utilizing this quantitative measure. Although changes in quality of solutions were not measured, following is a general description of the types of solutions generated by the social problem solving vignette.

The current study was somewhat consistent with several prior studies that have identified various coping strategies, such as distancing or avoidant strategies that are typical in response to relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Adolescents who attempt to avoid the hurtful situation, by using indirect or avoidant strategies may be
more likely to be poorly adjusted than peers (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Although avoidance may be adaptive at times, the adolescent has less opportunity to have their feelings recognized and addressed. Coping with relational aggression by avoiding the hurtful feelings may contribute to development of a mood disorder, or related symptoms (Phelps, 2001). Participants in the current study described both direct and indirect solutions to common relationship problem. However, in contrast to the research, fewer participants in the current study generated indirect coping solutions (ranging from 17-21% across administrations) whereas most participants generated direct coping strategies (ranging from 53-69% across administrations). In addition, very few participants described aggressive behavior as potential solutions (ranging from 0-5% across administrations) and girls were able to generate ideas for attempting to understand the friend in the situation at the end of the day (3%) and at follow up (19%). Girls in this study utilized both direct and indirect solutions for the coping with relationships vignette.

According to studies on coping with relational aggression, it is more common for girls to seek social support than boys (Bird & Harris, 1990; Chapman and Mullis, 1999; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Phelps, 2001). Girls in this study did tend to list seeking social support as a solution to the vignette (ranging from 14-22% across administrations). Girls listed support seeking from peers (ranging from 3-7% across administrations) and from parents or teachers on the day of the conference (2-3%) and one month later (16%). Participants in this study did appear to list solutions, or coping strategies, that are consistent with the current literature on adolescent coping with relational aggression. What this study did not seek to identify was whether there were changes across administrations in the quality of solutions.
The current study was somewhat consistent with previous studies that have described typical coping strategies related to relational victimization. However, there was no hypothesis regarding change in type of solutions, or quality of the solutions, generated between administrations. However, this finding does not necessarily mean there was no change in the quality of responses generated. It is possible that there was a change in quality of solutions over time; however, this study was not designed to identify specific changes. Thus, it is unknown whether there was a change in quality of solutions over time.

*Other Factors Affecting Change*

In addition to identifying the role of the theory of planned behavior, and evaluating quality versus quantity, there may have been other factors that affected potential for changes in solutions. At the end of the day, it appeared as if the girls were fatigued, according to facilitator feedback. It is possible that fatigue affected their motivation for listing coping solutions. Furthermore, although data was not collected on specific break-out groups, facilitator feedback suggested that whereas some groups covered several problem solving skills, and some even role-played situations, other groups had more behavior management difficulties and were unable to cover relevant material. Thus, variance among groups may have affected the outcome. Finally, because follow-up participants had a higher average number of social problem solving skills than those at post-test, it is possible that those girls who participated in the follow-up had more skills to begin with than the overall sample. The participants who dropped out of the study may have had fewer problem solving skills than those who remained participants.
Overall, several factors may have hindered the ability of Girls Today to produce change among participants.

Implications for Future Programs

It is evident, upon reviewing the literature, that programs that address female peer conflict, primarily relational aggression, are greatly needed. In addition, it is possible that programs that provide girls with social problem solving skills may lead to improving relationships, as well as potentially decreasing symptoms of depression and anxiety. The question remains: Can a program, such as Girls Today, have a sufficient effect on girls’ relationships to reduce relational aggression? Furthermore, is a one day conference sufficient in duration and depth in order to create meaningful change?

According to results from this study, although behavior change was not demonstrated, a one-day conference may have the potential for creating change given the inclusion of specific elements in the program. Furthermore, there are specific changes that may be implemented in order to increase this potential for change. Specifically, participants of the Girls Today program reported positive reactions to the conference and increased knowledge (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Girls who attended the conference appeared to enjoy the day, find the information helpful and intended to use the skills they learned. In addition, this program appeared to facilitate attitude change regarding relational aggression. In contrast, girls were not able to demonstrate an improvement in problem solving skills. Thus, elements may be added to the program in order to facilitate learning and behavior change. There are potential areas of growth for programs, such as Girls Today, in preventing adjustment difficulties related to relational problems. Specific
recommendations, for facilitating the potential for behavior change related to relational aggression and social problem solving, are outlined below.

*Accounting for Social Desirability*

The covert nature of relational aggression, and associated avoidance, may make it more likely for girls to feel alone in their experiences of relational aggression. Furthermore, there appears to be a high rate of social desirability for describing relationships as positive regardless of actual experiences. Girls tended to deny experiences of relational aggression and endorsed socially desirable attitudes in the current study. Thus, it appears that it would be beneficial for this type of program to include specific normalizing and validating statements regarding relational aggression. Results suggest that girls might be more forthcoming about negative experiences in a safe environment where these experiences are described as typical. Specifically, facilitators might normalize or validate experiences of relational aggression by utilizing examples from the popular media (e.g. a clip from the movie Mean Girls), excerpts from books written for girls experiencing relational aggression (e.g. Odd Girl Speaks Out, Simmons, 2004) or by facilitators describing their own personal experiences with relational aggression. If girls understand that they are not alone in their experiences, they may be more likely to disclose these events in a group setting. In addition, girls may lack the ability to accurately identify relational aggression when it is occurring because of the covert nature of the problem. Providing information about relational aggression will likely enhance identification of relational aggression. Normalizing relational aggression encourage participants to disclose situations where they are victimized.
Facilitating Perceived Ability

This study included evidence that, although girls may intend to use the skills they learned, they have low levels of perceived ability for dealing effectively with the situation. Girls may feel as if this type of situation is out of their control and may not know what to do. In order to address this discrepancy, it is suggested that programs provide girls with specific solutions that may be used to cope with the relational aggression. Facilitators can also provide girls with specific strategies for evaluating which coping strategy to use. Furthermore, it would likely be beneficial for girls to observe skills (e.g. skits by the facilitators) and practice the skills during the conference (e.g. role-plays). Previous researchers have also described role-plays and other activities as vital for skill acquisition (Mikami, 2005). The following skills related to social problem solving may facilitate perceived ability among participants of Girls Today and other programs.

Studies have indicated the potential benefit of teaching youth specific criteria for deciding on a specific solution, such as determining consequences to each solution, and whether each solution is healthy, legal and does not cause harm. They also suggested utilizing a pre-test in determining where participant’s deficits are in problem solving, and using that knowledge to guide specific interventions (Coleman et al., 1993; Frauenknecht & Black, 2003; Olexa & Forman, 1984). Group leaders can facilitate activities by working with girls to generate both problem-focused solutions (e.g. talk to that friend later on that day when she is away from the group) and emotion-focused solutions (e.g. stress management or relaxation skills). Furthermore, facilitators can help girls by showing them how to evaluate each solution for its effectiveness. It is suggested that
practicing the skills may help girls experience a sense of mastery over the material and help foster their perceived efficacy for dealing with problems in relationships. Providing girls with avenues for evaluating social problem solving solutions, as well as facilitating girls’ ability to gain master over skills, are likely to facilitate perceived ability.

**Continuing Support and Skill Building**

The Girls Today conference appeared to help foster interest and intention to understand peer relationships; however, more ongoing support and opportunities to continue to use the skills may be necessary to create behavior change. There are several ways to build upon the momentum created by the Girls Today conference. Providing girls and their parents with resources, such as school resources (e.g. school counselors) and community resources, may help facilitate change following a one day conference. Furthermore, it would be helpful for girls to continue to build upon the skills they learned at the conference through practice and additional skill acquisition. The Girls Today program includes monthly follow-up sessions for participants in the conference. These sessions have the potential to be a source of continued support and skill building; however, attendance may not be consistent. In order to increase attendance, incentive for follow-up Girls Today days (e.g., raffle drawings, t-shirts, community donations) may be helpful. Furthermore, a mentoring relationship with interested facilitators may help girls with continued community support. Continuing support by parents and teachers, as well as providing opportunities for further skill building, are likely to be beneficial following a one-day conference.

Parents and teachers can be particularly instrumental in supporting children and adolescents who experience relational aggression. One probable benefit of the Girls
Today program was the inclusion of a parent meeting during the conference. Researchers have demonstrated that it is difficult for parents and teachers to recognize relational aggression (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). It is recommended that programs, such as Girls Today, provide information for parents and teachers on how to recognize relational aggression and intervene when they see it occurring. This type of program for parents or teachers might include specific signs that a child may be experiencing difficulties with peers. Furthermore, adult programs may include suggestions to parents for checking in with girls about relationships regardless of youth self report regarding relationship problems. Overall, continued support and practice is likely to assist girls’ ability to cope with relationships.

Organization

There are several factors, related to organization, which may enhance efficacy of programs for girls. According to previous studies, one factor that impacts the extent to which participants learn new skills is a program’s fidelity to its model (Coleman et al., 1993). In terms of facilitator recruitment and training, it would likely be beneficial to recruit facilitators at least two months prior to the program. Specific training for program leaders would likely foster fidelity to the desired curriculum. Specifically, training might teach group leaders Social Problem Solving Skills (e.g., problem definition, generating solutions, choosing a solution, implementation) as related to relational aggression and general peer relationships. Specific training protocols may also include research literature on topics of interest (e.g., relational aggression). Furthermore, lesson plans, conference guidelines, and discussion prompts may help facilitators feel prepared to lead groups.
Facilitator training is likely to enhance consistency and organization of small group breakout sessions.

The sensitive nature of relationships to girls makes the safety of small group discussions particularly vital. Several elements may be useful in creating an atmosphere of safety among participants. These considerations for creating small groups may also help facilitate learning and group cohesion. It may be beneficial to assign girls to groups based on age, school and group size. Groups who are of similar ages may have more in common, and be able to discuss topics more openly. Furthermore, it is likely important to prevent participants from being in groups with their friends. This strategy may foster self disclosure and decrease the potential for peer difficulties among group members. Specifically, if girls are in groups with others from their school the likelihood is increased that they have experienced relationship problems with those girls, thus decreasing feelings of safety and the potential for disclosure among participants. These factors are likely to enhance effectiveness by promoting disclosure among participants.

*Girls Today Recommendations*

The impact of findings in this study is particularly relevant to the board of Girls Today and participants of future Girls Today conferences. Primary to the goals of this study was to be locally informative by providing specific feedback and suggestions to the board of Girls Today. Feedback from this study will help shape the Girls Today Program in future years by providing clear and useful suggestions. Because of the importance of fidelity to treatment model, and consistency among groups, specific feedback was provided to Girls Today regarding enhancing training of facilitators, improving organization of the program, and utilizing current research literature in shaping Girls
Today topics. Furthermore, recommendations were made regarding improving participation in monthly follow up sessions in order to provide participants with continued support and skill building opportunities. Finally, suggestions were made regarding increasing communication and collaboration between facilitators of the break out groups and leaders of the parent groups. Parent participation, and parental understanding of topics presented to girls, will likely provide them with resources to support girls following the program. Specific results of this study were presented to the board of Girls Today. Specifically, this researcher provided feedback and suggestions for improving the Girls Today program and answered general questions about this study. Overall, the director of Girls Today appeared enthusiastic about results of the study and described several impending changes related to specific recommendations. It appears that recommendations will be implemented into future Girls Today conferences (specific recommendations are presented in Appendix D). Thus, this study appears to have established one of the primary goals to be locally informative to a community program for girls.

Limitations

There were limitations associated with the current study. Some limitations of this study are consistent with those found in other programs that address social problem solving. For example, due to a lack of control group, it is unknown whether other girls, regardless of participation in the study, would have experienced similar changes in attitudes regarding relational aggression over time. However, a criticism of several former studies (Coleman et al., 1993) was a lack of longitudinal follow-up measures. A benefit of the current study was the follow-up one month later; however, it would have
been beneficial to follow up again (e.g. six months or one year later). These follow-ups would provide information regarding stability of any changes that were found.

There are additional limitations associated with the methodology of this study. Because there were only twenty participants in this study, and there was a relatively high dropout rate, there may not have been adequate power to detect change. Furthermore, because of the high dropout rate, from the day of the conference to follow-up one month later, there may have been between group differences that were unaccounted for. The attitudinal changes between the day of the conference and the follow up may have been due to differences in attitudes between those who participated in the day of the study and those who completed follow-up measures.

Furthermore, generalizability is limited due to small sample size and because most participants identified as Caucasian. In addition, girls whose parents reported limited English proficiency were excluded from the study. Thus, exclusionary criteria limited representation of Hispanic participants. This limitation is relevant because this study was unable to take into account how girls of traditionally underrepresented groups may experience peer conflict. Minority participants, such as those who are Hispanic or African American, are likely to experience peer aggression based on ethnicity (Storch, Phil, Nock, Masia, Warner & Barlas, 2003). These experiences are likely to impact the nature of relational aggression among those adolescent girls. Furthermore, participants from this study were from a small rural community that is influenced by migrant Hispanic populations. Thus, results of this study are not generalizable to larger urban areas. Finally, although there are likely elements of relational aggression that are
consistent across diverse groups and communities, results of this study are limited primarily to Caucasian girls from rural communities.

This study was based largely on self-report measures of adolescent girl’s relationships. Social desirability has been discussed in relation to relational aggression and peer relationships for girls. Furthermore, several of the measures (Attitudes about Relationships, Social Experiences Questionnaire, Reaction sheets) appeared to have high levels of face validity. Girls may have responded to questions in a way they perceived as socially desirable rather than by reflecting on their actual attitudes and experiences.

Furthermore, a particularly relevant limitation of the current study was the potential for lack of fidelity to the social problem solving model. Coleman et al. (1993) suggested that programs should stick to a similar training protocol to ensure fidelity of the program. Although Girls Today facilitators were instructed to teach “social problem solving skills,” the description of social problem solving was somewhat vague. Although this allowed facilitators to be creative in their small groups, it also added to inconsistent definitions of social problem solving, and therefore inconsistencies between breakout groups. Whereas some groups may have gone into detail regarding specific skills and included role-plays, others groups did not. This potential variance in the definition of social problem solving among groups contributed to between-group differences that were not accounted for in this study. Thus, it was likely more difficult for the current study to demonstrate changes in social problem solving skill ability.

Another limitation of the current study, related to social problem solving, was the focus on quantity versus quality of solutions generated for the social problem solving vignette. The measure of social problem solving only addressed participant’s ability to
generate solutions to the social problem solving vignette. Furthermore, the measure did not include the other steps of the rational problem solving strategy, such as problem definition, deciding on the solution, or implementation, as targets (D’Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). A measure of the quality of solutions, as opposed to quantity of solutions, might have better accounted for potential changes.

Finally, this study was exploratory in nature and sought to determine whether any current local programs may be indirectly addressing relational aggression. Thus, the current study focused specifically on relational aggression and social problem solving skills and was not able to identify efficacy of additional Girls Today goals. Specifically, this study did not identify whether the program effectively limited barriers (other than difficulties with peer relationships) for girls getting to college. Although the focus of the Girls Today program in 2007 was designed to address relationships and relational aggression (seen as barriers to girls getting to college) and promoted learning and problem solving skills, the goals of the leaders of the conference are more expansive than those of this study. This study was able to identify Girls Today as a potential avenue to address relational aggression; however, did not include other Girls Today topics in the study.

Future directions

There are several potential future directions for studies on programs for adolescent girls that are similar to Girls Today. This study utilized Kirkpatrick’s Learning Evaluation Model for measuring change related to participation in the Girls Today program. Although there are four levels of this model, the current study fully included measurements pertaining only to the reaction and learning levels. The behavior level was
included; however, was aimed at detecting potential for change (intention, demonstration of skills), rather than actual behavior change regarding relationships. Future studies utilizing this model might benefit from measuring changes in behavior (e.g. whether they used social problem solving skills or experienced changes in relationships) and in adjustment (e.g. self-esteem, depression or anxiety). It may also be beneficial for future studies to include evaluations of other community programs, including those that are longer than one day in duration.

Future studies are recommended for evaluating programs that teach social problem solving skills to address relational aggression. These studies should include both process and outcome measures of social problem solving skills. This study included a process measure of social problem solving skills as opposed to an outcome measure. Thus, no significant changes were found in participant’s ability to demonstrate improvement in the ability to generate solutions to the problem. However, it is possible that the specific solutions generated were better after participation in the conference than at pre-test. The potential is that an outcome measure could have demonstrated changes in the quality, as opposed to quantity, of solutions. Future studies should include both process and outcome measures to better account for change. Qualitative measures of social problem solving may include ratings of effectiveness, appropriateness, or type of coping (active vs. passive or approach vs. avoidance) (Fischler & Kendall, 1988; Freedman et al., 1978; Getter & Nowinski, 1981; Linehan et al., 1987; Marx et al., 1992). Utilizing both process and outcome measures of social problem solving ability is likely to be more sensitive to potential changes in ability.
The topic of relational aggression in children and adolescents continues to be relevant. The attractiveness of relational aggression, as opposed to direct bullying, appears to be the covert and indirect nature. This is particularly relevant for girls who tend to determine their sense of identity by how they are functioning in their relationships. Thus, girls can maintain their “good girl” identity regardless of relationally aggressive behavior. The already hidden nature of this type of aggression has become particularly relevant over the last few years because of the increase in the use of computers and cell phones. Cyber bullying is a type of bullying, or relational aggression, which refers to using computers, social networking sites (e.g., Myspace, Twitter, and Facebook) or cell phones (e.g., texting) as a way to purposefully hurt a peer. Cyber bullying is of particular concern because of its increasingly covert nature, such that adolescents can be aggressive from the privacy of their own rooms. Because of this, it may be even more difficult for parents and teachers to know when relational aggression has occurred. Thus, cyber bullying will likely be a vital addition to future studies on relational aggression. Overall, more research is needed on relational aggression among adolescent girls.

Finally, it does seem that programs like Girls Today may in fact be a potential avenue for addressing relationship problems for girls. At the very minimum, this program appears to build awareness among adolescent girls. Although studies have shown that girls with adequate social problems skills have fewer adjustment difficulties, and experience fewer relational problems (Diener et al., 1999; Linehan et al., 1987; Marx et al., 1992; Nezu & D’Zurilla, 1989; Nezu et al., 2004), there has been a paucity of research on programs for girls that specifically teach social problem solving skills as a way of addressing relational aggression. Thus, future studies on this topic are greatly
needed. It will be particularly important for future studies to improve the research methodology. Specifically, studies with longitudinal follow-ups (beyond one month) and control groups are needed to determine potential long term effects of programs that intervene in girls relationships by teaching social problem solving skills. Furthermore, research is needed to identify the particular benefits of programs that teach the specific skills associated with rational social problem solving, such as generating solutions and deciding on a specific solution, as well as focusing on improving girls’ sense of perceived efficacy. Overall, future studies are indicated for programs that address relational aggression, social problem solving and adjustment.
REFERENCES


Pepler, & K. Rigby (Eds.), *Bullying in schools: How successful can interventions be?* (pp. 13-36). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.


A: SOCIAL PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

Social Problem Solving Solutions

Social Problem Solving Solutions Generated at Pre-test (42)

Direct Communication (29)

Talk to her (15)

✓ Talk to her in person.

✓ Talk to her

✓ Talk to her.

✓ Talk to her no matter what.

✓ Start talking to her.

✓ You could go to the girl and talk to her.

✓ Talk it out.

✓ Talk it out.

✓ You can talk to her.

✓ Try to be nice to her and start up a conversation with her, then ask.

✓ Ask her.

✓ Confront her.

✓ You could confront her and ask her why she’s ignoring you.

✓ Ask her what’s wrong.

✓ Make her promise to tell the truth. You can probably tell when she’s lying.
Be nice to her (4)

✓ I’d try to be nice to her. Try to find out the truth.

✓ Try to be nice to her and start up a conversation with her, then ask.

✓ You can hug her and declare your love.

Apologize (2)

✓ Make up.

✓ Say you’re sorry.

Call her (4)

✓ Call her and either talk or leave a message.

✓ Write her a note and put it in her locker/backpack.

✓ Call her when you get home.

✓ Call her when you get home.

Email her/Write a note (3)

✓ Email her.

✓ Write her a note.

✓ Give her a note.

Involve new friend (1)

✓ Or, go to the person who your friend was passing notes to and talk with them if she doesn’t tell you wait for your friend to come and tell you herself.

Indirect Solutions (7)

Sit next to her & see what she does (2)

✓ I would sit next to her and see what she did.

✓ I would sit next to her at lunch and see what she does.
Ask a friend to talk to her (1)
  ✓ Ask a friend to talk to her.

Ignore her (1)
  ✓ I would ignore her.

Watch and wait (3)
  ✓ Watch and wait.
  ✓ I would just think that it would pass and everything would be normal the next day.
  ✓ Or, go to the person who your friend was passing notes to and talk with them if she doesn’t tell you wait for your friend to come and tell you herself.

Seek consultation/support (7)

Peer support “Talk to a friend” (4)
  ✓ Talk to a friend about what you should do.
  ✓ Ask some other friends.
  ✓ You could ask a friend.
  ✓ Go to peer mediation.

Ask an adult-parent, teacher, etc (1)
  ✓ I’d ask my parents about it.

Tell someone-vague (1)

Get new friends (1)
  ✓ Make new friends if she is ignoring you.

Aggressive Behavior (2)
  ✓ Tell her you hate her and to leave you alone…or else.
  ✓ Slap her and say “I’m dumping you”.
Attempt Understanding (0)

_Social Problem Solving Solutions generated at post-test (29)_

Direct Communication (19)

Talk to her (12)

✓ Talk to her in person.
✓ Talk to them.
✓ Talk to them.
✓ You could go to the girl and talk to her.
✓ Talk it out with her.
✓ Talk it out.
✓ Talk to them about it.
✓ Talk it out.
✓ I would just confront her about it.
✓ Confront her and ask what’s up.
✓ Make her promise to tell the truth. You can probably tell when she’s lying.
✓ Work it out.

Be nice to her (2)

✓ Be very nice.
✓ Tell them you’re madly in love with them.

Apologize (0)

Call her (2)

✓ Call her.
✓ Call them.
Email her/Write a note (2)

- Email/write note.
- Write them a note.

Involve new friend (1)

- Or, go to the person who your friend was passing notes to and talk with them if she doesn’t tell you wait for your friend to come and tell you herself.

Indirect Solutions (6)

Sit next to her & see what she does (1)

- Give little tests like sitting next to them at lunch and see what she does.

Ask a friend to talk to her (2)

- Ask a friend to talk to them.
- Ask a friend to confront her.

Ignore her (1)

- Ignore.

Watch and wait (2)

- Sort of go along with her for a little while because maybe she’s going through something hard and needs to be left alone.
- Or, go to the person who your friend was passing notes to and talk with them if she doesn’t tell you wait for your friend to come and tell you herself.

Seek consultation/support (4)

Peer support “Talk to a friend” (1)

- Ask a friend f she knows anything.

Ask an adult-parent, teacher, etc (1)
✓ Tell an adult you trust and ask them for advice.

Tell someone (1)
✓ I’d tell someone.

Get new friends (1)
✓ Get new friends if needed.

Aggressive Behavior (1)
✓ Slap them and say “I’m breaking up with you”.

Attempt Understanding (1)
✓ Sort of go along with her for a little while because maybe she’s going through something hard and needs to be left alone.

Social Problem Solving Solutions generated at follow-up (32)

Direct Communication (17)

Talk to her (12)
✓ Talk to her.
✓ You can call her and talk alone for awhile then throw it into a conversation.
✓ Talk to her.
✓ Talk to her the next day.
✓ Go up and speak with the girl even if there's no good time.
✓ Talk to her. Whether it's face to face, or over the phone, talking is the best solution.
✓ Go over to her and talk. Don't bring it up, because the avoidance might not have been a conscious decision. See how she's reacting to you being normal with her.
✓ Go ask her.
✓ Ask your friend why she’s practically ignoring you.
✓ Ask if she has a new friend.
✓ Ask if she still wants to be your friend.
✓ Ask her what’s up.

Be nice to her (0)
Apologize (0)
Call her (2)
  ✓ Call her after class when you get home.
  ✓ Talk to her. Whether it's face to face, or over the phone, talking is the best solution.
Email her/Write a note (1)
  ✓ Write her a note and put it in her backpack or locker.
Involve new friend (2)
  ✓ Try being nice to her new friend.
  ✓ When you see them talking join in.

Indirect Solutions (6)
Sit next to her & see what she does (1)
  ✓ Just start sitting with your friend at lunch.
Ask a friend to talk to her (1)
Ignore her (1)
Watch and wait (3)
  ✓ Let her tell you what’s going on when she's ready.
If you feel like she's holding something back, don't mention it. She'll tell you when she feels ready.

Then the only thing left to do is wait and talk to everyone around her (and on occasion her).

Seek consultation/support (6)

Peer support “Talk to a friend” (1)

Ask an adult (parent, teacher, etc (5)

You can talk to a teacher about it and ask for advice.

Ask a parent to see what they say.

If your friend is still ignoring ask an adult!

Talk to your parents.

Have a sit down talk with her parents and your parents.

Tell someone (0)

Get new friends (0)

Aggressive Behavior (0)

Attempt Understanding (6)

You can try to find a way to talk to her about the way she has been acting.

Tell her it’s ok if she has another friend but you really want to be included to.

If she looks distracted or uncomfortable talking with you, try to make the conversation short so she doesn't feel like she's multitasking talking to you and thinking something else and feeling horrible/comfortable etc.
✓ See if you can find out if you did anything that rubbed her the wrong way, or if she's just been having a hard time with something. One way or another, things will work out and you'll most likely be better friends with her.

✓ Go over to her and talk. Don't bring it up, because the avoidance might not have been a conscious decision. See how she's reacting to you being normal with her.

✓ Let her tell you what’s going on when she's ready.
B: SESSION RATING

In order to determine how well Girls Today is working for you, we need your input. Please give your reactions to the activities today, and make any comments that may help make the day better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I found the information today helpful.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I enjoyed the breakout sessions.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I will probably use some of the skills I learned today.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I will tell my friend to come to the next Girls Today.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I got bored today.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I probably won’t use any of the information I learned.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I learned more about girls’ relationships.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The breakout sessions were fun.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Overall, I enjoyed the Girls Today conference.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your opinions are helpful. Please write any comments below:
C: COPING WITH RELATIONSHIPS VIGNETTE

Social Problem Solving Vignette

Directions:
Read the following story. When you have finished, answer the questions that follow.

“Let’s say you feel like a friend of yours has been weird to you all day. You think maybe she’s ignoring you, but you’re not sure. You want to ask her about it, but you can’t really find the right moment, and anyway, you’re kind of nervous about what she might say. All day you’re sitting in class thinking about it, watching her pass notes with someone else and wondering if she’s writing about you. She comes late to lunch and doesn’t sit next to you. After that, you’re not even sure what happened”.

–Rachel Simmons, Odd Girl Speaks Out

Questions:

1) On a scale of 1-5. How well do you feel you would be able to solve this problem? Circle below.

1  2  3  4  5
Not well  Not sure  Very well

2) How often has something like this happened to you?

1  2  3  4  5
Never  Sometimes  Frequently

3) In the space below, please list as many possible solutions as you can think of to deal with this situation.
D: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GIRLS TODAY

Recommendations
Girls Today October, 2007

Girls Today: Improving Adolescent Relationships by addressing Relational Aggression in a Community Program. Following are recommendations for the Girls Today Program based on results of the study.

1) **Facilitator Training:** In order to promote consistent and informative small groups, it is recommended that Girls Today facilitators be required to read an article/chapter/etc. on the small group topics prior to the day of the conference. Facilitators described some confusion regarding the difference between two of the breakout sessions (e.g. “girlfriends” and “rumors, teasing, etc.”). It appears that providing facilitators with lesson plans or guidelines, regarding topics of discussion for small groups, would likely enhance effectiveness of training by promoting competence among facilitators. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to recruit facilitators earlier in the year which would likely facilitate preparedness by facilitators, by giving them more time to read materials and study lesson plans. Finally, facilitators requested having campus maps—particularly to where they were supposed to go.
2) **Small Groups:** It is recommended that groups be organized by age in order to facilitate commonalities between girls. Some groups had a wide range of ages (11-15) in the group. Whereas some of the younger girls wanted to “go outside and play” others wanted to talk about topics that were inappropriate for younger girls (e.g. sex and drugs). In addition, because of the delicate nature of most Girls Today topics, it is suggested that girls be organized into groups with peers from other schools. This is particularly true for topics related to peer relationships because of the potential that girls could be in groups with those they’ve experienced conflict with. This type of organization is likely to promote disclosure and openness among participants. Finally, if possible, small groups of 5-10 girls would also promote self-disclosure by participants.

3) **Continued Support:** It is suggested that Girls Today provide girls with mental health resources (Iris clinic, Co Crisis lines, etc.) in case they want further help after the conference. The Girls Today follow up sessions are likely particularly helpful for participants. However, it appears that participation has been somewhat limited. Participation may be enhanced by providing incentive for participation in follow-up GT sessions (e.g. donations from the community, rewards, t-shirts).

4) **Research:** It is recommended that the board of Girls Today (or students involved in the program) conduct further research on “what keeps girls from pursuing higher education”. It appears evident that girl’s relationships, body image, etc. are likely related to poor college attendance. However, further research would likely be beneficial for highlighting areas that have yet to be discovered.
5) **Parent Participation:** It is recommended that the Girls Today program continues to provide parents with an outline of information that is discussed in small groups (e.g. relational aggression and social problem solving). Informational meetings are likely particularly beneficial for topics, such as relational aggression, that often goes unnoticed by adults. Teachers may also benefit from this information.