

Relational Aggression in Early Childhood:

“You Can’t Come to My Birthday Party Unless...”

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For several decades, studies of childhood aggression have focused primarily on forms of aggression most typical of boys (e.g., physical aggression). In recent years, however, researchers have begun to explore the types of aggressive behaviors that are most salient for girls. One form of aggression that has been identified as particularly important for girls is relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In contrast to physical aggression which harms others through damage (or the threat of damage) to physical well being, relational aggression harms others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships (Crick, Werner, Casas, O’Brien, Nelson, Grotpeter, & Markon, 1999). Relational aggression includes both direct and indirect acts such as threatening to end a friendship unless a peer complies with a request, using social exclusion or the “silent treatment” to control or punish others, and spreading nasty rumors about someone so that others will reject him or her. Relative to the relationally aggressive behaviors exhibited by school-age children and adolescents, those behaviors most common among young children are more likely to be direct (e.g., “You can’t come to my birthday party unless...”) and focused on the immediate social exchange (e.g., covering the ears to signal ignoring or the “silent treatment” as a peer is speaking).

Although significant progress has been made in our understanding of relational aggression in recent years, relatively little attention has been paid to young children. This is a significant area of inquiry due to its important implications for early prevention and intervention efforts, and for advancing our knowledge of the early development of relational aggression. Our goal for this chapter is to provide an overview of existing empirical findings on relational aggression among young children as well as ideas for advancing and encouraging future work in this area. Specific

objectives include: (1) consideration of current theories regarding the aggressive behaviors exhibited by young girls and their implications for research on relational aggression; (2) description of the types of relationally aggressive behaviors that are most common during early childhood; (3) description of assessment procedures used to assess relational aggression in young children; (4) consideration of evidence regarding the harmful nature of relational aggression; (5) discussion of implications for intervention research; (6) review of potential factors in a developmental model of relational aggression during early childhood and (7) an overview of future directions and challenges for research.

Theoretical Views of Young Girls' Aggressive Behavior

In tandem with the recent empirical interest in the behavioral problems of girls, theoretical efforts in this area have also burgeoned. In general, two distinct hypotheses have been proposed regarding the aggressive behavior problems of young girls (for a review see Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). In the first hypothesis, it has been posited that girls do not experience significant aggressive or conduct problems during early childhood (Keenan & Shaw, 1997; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Silverthorn & Frick, 1999). Generally, these theorists have proposed that the majority of aggressive girls do not develop aggressive behavior problems until much later than early childhood. This view has been described as the "Benign Childhood" hypothesis (Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). The majority of theorists who espouse this perspective have targeted the adolescent years as the developmental period most relevant for the initiation of behavioral problems among females. Other theorists have focused on middle childhood as the developmental period during which girls first develop aggressive behavior problems (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kuakianen, 1992). Not surprisingly, this approach has limited empirical efforts that focus on the aggressive behavior patterns of girls in early childhood.

In sharp contrast to the tenet described in the first hypothesis, other theorists have posited that a significant number of girls do exhibit aggressive behavior problems during early childhood (e.g., Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Feshbach, 1969; Ostrov & Keating, in press). These investigators have proposed that young girls' aggressive acts have been overlooked due to the failure to assess forms of aggression most common among girls during these early years. Studies of relational aggression have been based on this perspective. Research has demonstrated that relationally aggressive acts are relatively common in early childhood and can be reliably and validly identified in children as young as 2 ½ years of age (Crick et al., 2003). Further, observational studies have shown that, during the preschool years, girls are significantly more relationally aggressive than boys (Crick et al., 2002; Ostrov & Keating, in press; Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas & Crick, in press). These findings support the hypothesis that a substantial number of aggressive girls can be identified in early childhood if indices of hostile behavior that are salient to girls are included in assessments of aggression.

Manifestations of Relational Aggression in Early Childhood

The earliest studies of relational aggression have been concerned with, among many other things, what these behaviors look like during the preschool period. At this point there have not been any studies that have assessed relational aggression prior to age 2.5. This does not imply that relationally aggressive behaviors are non-existent before age 2.5 but rather that valid assessments may be more difficult to obtain while toddlers are still achieving important developmental milestones (for an expanded discussion see Crick et al., 1999).

Studies of relational aggression during the preschool years have found that these behaviors are quite common in young children's interactions (Crick et al., 1997; McNeilly-Choque et al., 1996). These studies have also highlighted the fact that relational aggression

during these years is still relatively unsophisticated. During this period, preschoolers are just beginning to gain an understanding of various social skills so when they do engage in relational aggression they tend to do so in relatively simple, concrete ways (e.g., telling a peer that they can't come to their birthday party unless certain conditions are met). In an earlier chapter (Crick, et al., 1999), we had posited that relational aggression would most often be direct in nature during early childhood reflecting children's cognitive, linguistic and social abilities. However, more recent observational work (Ostrov & Keating, in press; Ostrov et al., in press), has shown that in fact preschoolers are already beginning to use complicated indirect behaviors that are more rudimentary in nature. For example, gossiping and rumor spreading can be seen in young children's interactions in both structured and unstructured environments.

Another important characteristic of relational aggression in preschool is that it tends to be enacted "in the moment" in response to immediate problems. That is, the use of relational aggression tends to be a reaction to children's present situations rather than a response to a perceived transgression in the past. As work in this area continues hopefully more light will be shed on when children begin to routinely hold grudges, an "ability" that most likely serves to prolong anger and emotional distress among those children involved in the particular incident.

Assessment of Preschoolers' Relational Aggression: Current Issues and Advances

One of the fundamental issues for defining and understanding aggression in early childhood concerns identifying and utilizing appropriate assessment strategies. A number of approaches have been employed during early childhood including observation, peer reports, teacher reports, and parent reports. The continued use of these instruments may offer key insights into the development of relational aggression during early childhood and these tools may be used to assess the utility and effectiveness of intervention and prevention efforts in a myriad

of social contexts. The following sections will briefly review some of these innovative research tools with a focus on the developmental appropriateness of these early childhood measures of relational aggression.

Observation

Most empirical work on relational aggression in young children has relied on peer and teacher reports and only a few studies have incorporated observational approaches to specifically assess relational forms of aggression (see Archer, 2002).

Naturalistic observations. The focal child approach (Arsenio & Lover, 1997; Fagot & Hagan, 1985; Laursen & Hartup, 1989) appears to be one of the easiest methods to administer in a classroom or playground setting and may offer the most insight into the developmental progression of relationally aggressive behaviors. Past researchers adopting this method have observed a focal child for 10-minute intervals, across five to eight independent sessions during 2-3 months of observation, recording both the behaviors that s/he delivers to her/his peers (aggression) and those that s/he receives from her/his peers (victimization) (see Ostrov & Keating, in press). Observers are able to record children's behavior unobtrusively in a variety of environments (i.e., classroom, gym, playground) and children's aggression scores reflect their behavior across multiple days, times, settings and peer-groups in order to obtain a relatively valid assessment of their natural peer interactions (Pellegrini, 1996; 2001). The valid assessment of relational aggression requires that observers be in close proximity to participants so that they can readily hear their conversations (i.e., because many acts of relational aggression are verbal and/or subtle in nature). Although this proximity runs the risk of affecting children's behavior, fortunately, there are a number of steps that can be taken to reduce participant reactivity (e.g., spending considerable time in the classroom prior to observations) (Reid, Baldwin, Patterson, &

Dishion, 1988; Pellegrini, 2001). Observations of preschoolers' relationally aggressive behaviors during free play have been found to correlate significantly with teacher reports of the same behaviors (Crick et al., 2003; McNeilly-Choque et al., 1996; Ostrov & Keating, in press). As an example, results of our on-going longitudinal study of relational aggression during early childhood, the "Preschool PALS Project," has revealed significant correlations between teachers and observers (e.g., physical aggression, $r = .60, p < .001$; relational aggression, $r = .48, p < .001$; Crick et al., 2003). Favorable reliability of these approaches has also been revealed in each of these studies.

Semi-structured situations. In addition to naturalistic approaches, observational techniques designed to assess young children's relationally aggressive behavior have also included semi-structured, analogue situations (Ostrov & Keating, in press; Ostrov et al., in press). These developmentally appropriate observational methods are designed to elicit and capture (via videotape) the types of peer interactions that naturally occur in children's play environments in a relatively time and cost efficient manner. Based on past resource utilization studies, Ostrov and Keating (in press) designed a developmentally appropriate and ecologically-valid coloring task for use with preschool children. This coloring task was designed as a limited resource utilization task in which the presence of preferred colorful crayons was restricted while coloring various age appropriate pictures. The sessions were videotaped and later coded for relational aggression, physical aggression, and other social behaviors (e.g., prosocial behavior). Researchers have included dyads and triads of same- and opposite-sex children in the coloring task (for details see Ostrov & Keating, in press; Ostrov et al., in press). Favorable psychometric properties have been demonstrated for raters' coding of preschoolers' aggressive behavior elicited within these situations (e.g., high inter-observer reliability, cross-context stability,

agreement with teacher reports etc., see Crick et al., 2003; Ostrov & Keating, in press; Ostrov et al., in press). In addition, it is possible to achieve relatively low levels of participant reactivity using this paradigm (Ostrov et al., in press), which supports the external validity of the task (Reid et al., 1988).

Peer Reports

Peer reports of social behavior have been used with young children in several studies of relational aggression (e.g., Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Crick et al., 2003; McNeilly-Choque et al., 1996). Findings from these studies indicate that young children, aided by pictures of their classmates and practice items, are able to provide reliable and valid information concerning a host of constructs including peer acceptance and relational aggression, particularly when a peer rating approach is used (see Hart et al., 2000; Denham et al., 2000), a method in which children rate each classmate on the behavior of interest. Peer nomination approaches have also been used with young children in recent research (e.g., Crick et al., 1997; Sebanc, Pierce, Cheatham, & Gunnar, 2003; Walden et al., 1999). In this approach, children are asked to point to several children who exhibit the characteristic described by the item (e.g., physical and relational aggression etc.) (Crick et al., 1997). We have found that, when assessing relational aggression, both peer rating and peer nomination techniques are readily understandable by children as young as 3-years-old, although children younger than 3-years-old have had difficulty understanding these types of procedures (Hymel, 1983). Further, particularly when peer ratings are used, peer reports correspond rather well with information yielded by other informants (teachers, observations) (Crick et al., 2002; Wu, Hart, Draper, Olsen, 2001).

Teacher Reports

Teacher report methods of aggression and antisocial behavior have been used quite extensively with preschool children (e.g., Willoughby, Kupersmidt, & Bryant, 2001). The Preschool Social Behavior Scale for Teachers Form (PSBS-TF; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997) and the Preschool Peer Victimization Measure for Teachers Form (PPVM-TF; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999) have been developed to measure relational (and physical) forms of aggression and victimization in early childhood (for review see Crick, Werner et al., 1999). Adapted versions of these teacher reports have been used successfully in several cross-cultural studies (e.g., Hart et al., 1998, 1999; Russell, Hart, Robinson, & Olsen, 2003).

Parent Reports

Parent reports may be an alternate source of reliable information about young children's aggressive behavior; however, relatively few studies have explored this issue (Denham, Workman, Cole, Weissbrod, Kendziora, & Zahn-Waxler, 2000) and to our knowledge no studies have yet examined parent reports of relational aggression for this age group. In particular, parents may be able to provide important information about behaviors that occur among siblings and neighborhood children and their perspective warrants consideration in future research.

Is Relational Aggression Harmful?

To demonstrate that, similar to physical aggression, relational aggression is harmful to the perpetrators and the victims, a number of studies have attempted to assess the hurtfulness of these acts. Evaluation of the harmfulness of relationally aggressive behaviors among young children has tended to follow three avenues: (1) assessment of children's perceptions of the harm inflicted by relationally aggressive behaviors; (2) evaluation of the association between relational victimization (i.e., being the frequent target of relationally aggressive behaviors) and

social-psychological adjustment; and (3) evaluation of the relation between relational aggression and social-psychological adjustment.

Children's Perceptions of Harm

The results of several studies demonstrate that children believe that relational aggression is a hurtful behavior that often occurs in their peer groups. However, almost all of the studies assessing the children's perceptions of the harmfulness of relational aggression have focused on middle childhood and adolescence (see Crick, Werner, et al., 1999). For example, Crick, Bigbee, and Howes (1996) found that 9-12 year-old children reported relational aggression as the most common hurtful behavior instigated in the interactions of girls' whereas, in boys' peer groups, physical aggression was the most frequently cited hurtful behavior. Similarly, in a study of 9-13 year-old sibling pairs, relational aggression was cited as the most frequent mean behavior that occurred within the dyad, regardless of age or gender (O'Brien & Crick, 1997). Older adolescents also describe relational aggression as a mean behavior commonly occurring within peer groups (Morales, Crick, Werner, & Schellin, 2002). Findings from these studies indicate that school-aged children and adolescents view relationally aggressive behaviors as hostile, mean, and harmful (i.e., "aggressive").

In one of the few studies of young children's perceptions of aggressive behaviors, McNeilly-Choque et al. (1996) found that, similar to older children, preschool children associated relational aggression with anger. In a study recently conducted within our own research lab, we assessed preschoolers' perceptions of the harm caused by relational aggression by using a combination of open-ended and forced-response interview questions (Jansen et al., 2002). The 3-5-year-old participants were asked about a limited-resource coloring task that they had just completed with two peers (Ostrov et al., in press). Following their open-ended description of the situation, each

child was asked a series of eight forced-choice interview questions pertaining to the child's perceptions about how upsetting several types of behaviors were for the recipient. These included physical aggression (e.g., pinching); relational aggression (e.g., saying, "I won't be your friend anymore unless you give me that crayon"). All questions followed the format: "When they are coloring, some kids _____ (state a physically aggressive or relationally aggressive behavior). When a kid gets _____ (restate behavior), how do you think that kid would feel? Not sad at all, a little sad, or very sad?" A series of three schematic drawings depicting a happy face, a neutral face, and a frowning face were shown to the child to accompany the response choices (Arsenio & Kramer, 1992; Hart et al., 1998). Children either verbally responded or pointed to the face that corresponded with their answer choice.

Results of this study showed that the majority of boys and girls rated both physically and relationally aggressive acts as distressing. There were no significant differences in level of distress between relational and physical aggression items and no gender differences. The relatively high mean levels of distress reported for relational (74% of participants rated these behaviors as making a person feel very sad) and physical aggression (83% of participants rated these behaviors as making a person feel very sad) indicated that both subtypes of aggression were viewed as harmful by preschool children. Taken together, these results highlight the need to continue to study relationally aggressive behaviors in preschoolers since there is evidence that children as young as 3 years of age find these behaviors to be emotionally upsetting. It will be important to replicate these findings with preschoolers and extend this work to children under the age of three.

Relational Victimization and Social-Psychological Adjustment

The hurtful nature of relationally aggressive acts also has been evaluated by examining the association between relational victimization (i.e., being the frequent target of relational aggression) and social-psychological adjustment. The majority of studies in this area have focused on school-aged children and adolescents. These studies provide consistent evidence that relational victimization is associated with significant adjustment problems including depressive symptoms, social anxiety, loneliness, peer rejection, and externalizing difficulties (e.g., Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Crick & Nelson, 2002; Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002; Schafer, Werner, & Crick, 2002). Although relational victimization has rarely been studied in early childhood, initial evidence indicates that the correlates may be similar to those found in older children. Specifically, relational victimization among preschoolers has been shown to be related significantly to poor peer relationships and rejection by peers, internalizing problems, and a lack of prosocial skills (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999). These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that, even among young children, relationally aggressive behaviors are distressful and hurtful for the victims.

Relational Aggression and Social-Psychological Adjustment

The potential harmfulness of relational aggression also has been evaluated through exploration of the social-psychological adjustment status of the perpetrators of these behaviors. Similar to research on relational victimization, the majority of studies in this area have targeted middle childhood and adolescence. Findings for these age groups indicate that relationally aggressive children are at risk for continuing their use of relationally aggressive behaviors in the future, and are also likely to exhibit other adjustment problems including peer rejection, internalizing difficulties, and externalizing problems (e.g., Crick, 1996; 1997; Putallaz, Kupersmidt, Grimes, & DeNero, 1999; Tomada & Schneider, 1997; Rys & Bear, 1997).

Several studies have focused on the early childhood period. As has been found for older children, individual differences in the use of relationally aggressive behaviors have been shown to be relatively stable over time for preschoolers with $r = .45, p < .001$, for observations of relational aggression and $r = .69, p < .001$, for teacher reports over the course of an academic year (Crick et al., 2003) indicating that young relationally aggressive children are at risk for continued engagement in these behaviors. Other studies also have shown that young relationally aggressive children are at risk for peer rejection, feelings of loneliness, and depressive symptoms (Crick et al., 2003; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; McNeilly-Choque et al., 1996).

These findings, combined with those described previously regarding young children's perceptions of relational aggression and the association between relational victimization and adjustment in early childhood demonstrate that young children view relationally aggressive acts as mean and hurtful, and that both the victims and the perpetrators are at risk for serious adjustment problems. This evidence suggests the importance of a research focus on strategies that might prevent and reduce levels of relational aggression and relational victimization among young children.

Toward a Model of Relational Aggression During Early Childhood.

The research discussed in the previous sections makes it fairly clear that relational aggression occurs and is detrimental in early childhood and that we have made progress in developing reliable and valid measures for assessing these behaviors during this developmental period. Given the accumulating findings outlined previously, the next step would be to more clearly define the developmental trajectories of relationally aggressive children and to determine the types of factors that might put children at risk for these behaviors. Although a well-specified developmental model of relational aggression has not yet been specified, there are, however,

certain research areas in which the study of relational aggression may be particularly informative in developing such a model. A multicontextual model of development would address child, family, peer, and broader systems of influence (e.g., schools, neighborhoods etc.).

Research on the development and maintenance of aggressive behavior problems has highlighted the validity of social information-processing models of the social behaviors of children (see Crick & Dodge, 1994). Although most of the research on social information-processing has focused on physical aggression, several studies have shown that relationally aggressive children exhibit social cognitive biases that are likely to contribute to the development and maintenance of their relationally aggressive behavior patterns (Crick & Werner, 1998). Specifically, relationally aggressive children exhibit hostile attribution biases for relational provocation situations (Crick, 1995; Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002; Leff, Kupersmidt, & Power, 2003). Similar findings have also been obtained that illustrate the presence of social cognitive biases among young children. Casas and Crick (2003) found that relationally aggressive preschoolers evaluated the use of relational aggression in relational conflict stories significantly more positively than they evaluated its use in instrumental conflict stories. Therefore it is conceivable that social information processing, hostile attribution biases, and peer status coupled with these social cognitive biases may influence the development of relational aggression even during early childhood.

In addition to social information processing, children's perspective taking abilities may also be highly relevant to understanding the developmental trajectories of relational aggression (Nguyen & Frye, 1999). In the past, researchers have found that preschoolers possessing perspective taking capabilities displayed socially expressive, sympathetic, and prosocial behaviors toward children experiencing distress during play and tended to be accepted by peers

(Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998). Thus, perhaps these social-cognitive skills may also be an important factor in relationally aggressive behavior. That is, in order to understand that relationally aggressive behaviors would be harmful to another person, children may need to have the requisite perspective taking capabilities to know how such behaviors would affect the recipient. In addition, an ability to detect positive/negative affect or emotions may be associated with onset of relational aggression (Denham & Couchoud, 1990; Dunn & Hughes, 1998; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). To date, this has not been empirically explored with respect to relational aggression.

Similarly, other cognitive factors such as language development may play a significant role in relationally aggressive behaviors (Bonica, Yershova, Arnold, Fisher, & Zelso, 2002). Although, to date there has been little research focused on the topic, it will be useful to explore the influences of language development on the development of relational aggression. Many relational aggressive acts require relatively sophisticated verbal skills (e.g., "I won't come to your birthday party unless you do this right now"), where as others do not require such verbal production skills (e.g., ignoring or nonverbal social exclusion). Further research is needed to clarify the association between relational aggression and language skills, as existing studies have yielded mixed findings (Bonica et al., 2002, Crick et al., 1999; Estrem, 2003). In addition, developmental findings which suggest that girls' verbal fluency occurs earlier than similar language capacities in male peers further suggests the importance of future attempts to ascertain how (and whether) children's verbal ability relates to relational aggression (Bonica et al., 2002).

The development of gender roles, gender schemata, and gender attitudes may also be important for the development of relational aggression (Liben & Bigler, 2002). The work of Fagot and colleagues (Fagot, Leinbach, & Hagan, 1986) highlights that physical aggression is

decreasing in girls at the same time that gender role expectations are increasing. It is possible that, in contrast to physical aggression, relational aggression increases among girls as they develop a firmer understanding of female gender roles. Peer group specific gender norms may also influence the types of behavior in which children engage (Maccoby, 1988, 2002) and the consequences of those behaviors. There is evidence that children who engage in gender non-normative types of aggression (i.e., physically aggressive girls and relationally aggressive boys) are significantly more maladjusted than children who engage in gender normative aggressive behaviors (Crick, 1997). This work suggests that gender norms may be particularly important for understanding the outcomes of aggressive behavior.

Peer and sibling influences may also play a significant role in the development of relational aggression (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Along these lines, in a recent study with school age children it was demonstrated that nonaggressive children who befriended relationally aggressive peers were relatively likely to become relationally aggressive themselves in the future (Werner & Crick, in press). Furthermore, sibling research with older children has demonstrated that relational aggression is the most frequent form of aggression exhibited by siblings toward each other, a situation that may provide for the learning of these behaviors within the family context (for a review see Crick et al., 1999). The role of learning, modeling, and reinforcement of relational aggression in the context of peer and sibling relationships offers promise for informing a developmental model of relational aggression.

There is also evidence that family interactions and parent-child relationship factors (e.g., developmentally inappropriate parental expectations, parent-child coercive interactions, high family stress etc.) can affect physically aggressive behaviors in children (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Reid & Eddy, 1998). A parent-child relationship focus may be important for understanding the

development of relational aggression during a variety of developmental periods, but especially during early childhood (Casas, Crick, Ostrov, Woods, & Jansen, 2002; Grotzinger, 1996; Nelson & Crick, 2002). More distal risk factors such as parental psychopathology and substance use, family discord, low socioeconomic status, neighborhood instability/community violence, and difficulties with extended family and workplace relationships may also contribute to the onset and persistence of aggression in early childhood and across the lifespan (Reid & Eddy, 1998). However, the association of these factors with the development of relational aggression has not yet been explored.

Future Directions, Future Challenges, and Conclusions

Although information about the development of relational aggression in early childhood is increasing at a relatively rapid pace, a host of significant research questions have yet to be explored. One of the most significant challenges for future research will be to identify, at a relatively young age, individuals who are most likely to be at risk for engaging in high levels of relational aggression. The identification of precursors and risk factors associated with the onset and maintenance of relationally aggressive behaviors will be critically important for the formation of effective intervention or prevention programs.

Future studies should address how cognitive factors such as language abilities (for an example see Bonica, Yershova, Arnold, Fisher, & Zeljo, 2002), coping strategies, social information processing mechanisms (for examples see Crick, 1995; Crick, Grotzinger, & Bigbee, 2002; Crick & Werner, 1998; Casas & Crick, 2003), perspective taking abilities, and emotional competence, relate to the development of relational aggression and victimization. Additionally, it will be important to explore a variety of other proximal and distal risk and protective factors in young children in future investigative efforts targeting relational aggression. These are likely to

include: culture (for an example see Hart et al., 1998), socioeconomic status (for an example see McNeilly-Choque et al., 1996), stress reactivity (for an example see Dettling, Gunnar, & Donzella, 1999), family factors (for an example see Hart et al., 1998), social dominance patterns, play styles, attachment, and the role of the media. By studying many of these diverse factors concurrently and prospectively throughout early childhood, we may better understand factors that contribute to the early development of relationally aggressive behavior problems.

There are also a number of methodological challenges for the future. It is recommended that future work be dedicated to refining and adapting current measurement techniques for use with children younger than age three. Qualitative methods may be useful to identify the range and diversity of relationally aggressive behaviors exhibited by children in toddlerhood. For example, focus groups with teachers and parents of toddlers may provide information that could inform the development of teacher, peer, parent, and observational measures appropriate for very young children. Such approaches may also be helpful for evaluating the range and diversity of relationally aggressive behaviors among young children in other cultures.

In future research, it will also be important to assess young children's relationally aggressive behavior in multiple contexts. Thus far, these assessments have been limited to the school setting. To generate a more complete picture of the range and diversity of relationally aggressive acts in early childhood it will be necessary to include additional settings such as home, neighborhood, and day care contexts. This is particularly important for young children as they often spend significantly less time at school than older children, and less time at school than in other settings. Accordingly, it is recommended that future studies continue to explore the use of multi-informants to assess relational aggression in early childhood.

Clearly, our collective future agenda for research on relational aggression in early childhood is both challenging and exciting. It is also significant because it holds promise for clarifying theoretical and empirical questions regarding the prevalence, onset, and development of aggressive behavior particularly among females.

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