

Developing student wellbeing and resilience using a group process

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Abstract

Emotional wellbeing and resilient behaviour is of fundamental importance and inhibited by the well documented prevalence of relational aggression amongst adolescent girls in schools. This often subtle and insidious form of aggression damages relationships within peer groups either by excluding and isolating girls from the group or by damaging their reputation. Research is showing that the outcome of relational aggression can be loss of self-esteem, school avoidance or more serious psychological damage leading to mental illness (Rigby, 2005; Owens et al., 2000). Within a school setting valuable learning time is taken up dealing with the disputes of relational aggression. The aim of this research was to use group processes to provide some psycho-education to name the conflict that exists and to examine the processes occurring.

A girl's friendship group of 12 members was invited to take part in four sessions of group work run by school counsellors to examine the nature of the conflict arising in their group and to learn better ways of dealing with this. Positive psychology research indicates that interventions can be successful when the strengths of individuals are articulated and used within a group process (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The group facilitated open discussion with clear articulation of the problems each experiences, together with attempts to deal with these problems. The process of developing pro-social skills, empathy and effective conflict resolution skills has resulted in greater emotional literacy of the girls in this group and the girls report being empowered to deal with conflict.

The incidence and impact of relational bullying

Social and emotional wellbeing is a desired outcome for all children. Some children are able to maintain a healthy emotional wellbeing while others are more prevalent to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Rowling & Kasunic, 2006). Risk factors for mental health problems do not affect all children and adolescents in the same way, indicating that certain protective factors must be present to enable some children to be more resilient (Ungar, 2005). Resilience is defined by Alvord and Grados (2005) as skills, attributes and abilities that enable individuals to adapt to hardships, difficulties and challenges. Noble and McGrath (2005, p.749) refer to resilience as 'the ability to bounce back after encountering difficulties, negative events, hard times or adversity and to be able to return to the original level of emotional wellbeing.'

The peer group plays a critical role in the psychological and physical health of adoles-

cent girls (Reynolds & Repetti, 2006). Peers can be a source of support and strength as well as a source of stress. The importance of peer relationships for a girl's emotional and psychological wellbeing is well documented (Dutrizac, 2006; Noble & McGrath, 2005; Rowling & Kasunic, 2006).

The evidence of relational aggression in girls' groups, however, is evident and quite well researched (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; James & Owens, 2004; Rigby, 2000, 2005). It can be broadly defined as the purposeful manipulation and damage of peer relationships often leading to social exclusion (Martin & Gillies, 2004). The subtle nature of this type of bullying behaviour makes dealing with it extremely difficult. How do you report being left out of an outing, or having someone roll their eyes when you speak? It is often difficult for victims to be heard as both parents and teachers dismiss it as trivial. However, research shows that in adolescent girls, symptoms of depression and anxiety increase where there is ongoing relational bullying

(Cox, 1995). The target often appears powerless to deal with the subtle and insidious nature of this form of aggression.

Girls' friendship groups are dynamic and fluid and characterised by changes in the roles of individual members in the group (Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000). Girls will try to harm another person's relationship to enhance their position in the group. Girls will at times form alliances with other group members to push out one member of the group. There are always bystanders who seemingly do not have a role but who give support to this relational bullying by their silence and acceptance of this behaviour as normal (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Because girls generally form tighter social cliques, and consider friendship to be most important, being popular and having a 'best friend' is paramount. This need gives rise to girls using tools such as gossip, hurtful emails, mobile phone text messages and cyber chat rooms to manipulate the social context of their group in order to enhance or ensure their position in the group (Rigby, 2005).

Families and school personnel may refer to girls bullying behaviour as an inherent nature of girls, e.g. 'girls are bitches'. Yet acceptance of this behaviour means that girls who are victims of this social form of bullying are often powerless to deal with it or to get any help. Rigby (2005) has researched the poor mental health outcomes of victims of bullying. As with all such behaviour, there is often an interchange of position from target to bully. Historically aggressive behaviour was seen as being the domain of boys and males generally and it was believed that girls were not aggressive (Olweus et al., 1980). Lager-spetz et al. (1988) and Crick and Grotpeter (1995) in their research confirmed that females can be aggressive but the form of differs from male aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) showed that female children were more relationally aggressive than male children, findings replicated in Australia (Rigby, 2000) Great Britain (Smith & Shu, 2000), in the US (Egan & Perry, 1998) and Italy (Baldry, 2004). Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) research results were consistent with

the theory that the goals of boys are more associated with physical dominance while the goals of girls are associated with intimate relationships.

Although it is confusing to see what the clear motivation for this relational bullying is, it revolves around the need for intimate relationships as well as the 'position' of individual girls within the group. There is an acceptance of the position of 'queen bee' which is in hierarchical terms the top position within a group that many group members aspire to (Wiseman, 2002). Being 'best friends' with the queen bee is also prestigious within the group. These positions can be challenged by other group members and usually result in conflict. Underlying this vying for position and hence status is a need to belong and have a sense of importance within the group. Conflict can result when individuals are excluded from group activities by not being invited to participate, by the spreading of gossip which undermines a person or by being ridiculed for some action or perceived action by other group members. These forms of aggression serve to damage the relationships between individuals within the group (Simmons, 2004).

Although it appears on the surface that the relational aggression that occurs has no clear purpose or intention and that perhaps it is in the 'mind of the target', closer scrutiny results in evidence of quite deliberate and hurtful processes which although insidious are in fact wilfully damaging of relationships within the group (Rigby, 2005). This results in lowered self-esteem of targets and psychological distress (Forero et al., 1999; Slee, 1995). This is evidenced by feelings of unhappiness, avoidance of school as well as anxiety and often depression (Salmon et al., 1998). Depressive reactions of targeted children in schools have been reported internationally. (Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Kumpulainen et al., 1998).

Promoting positive peer relationships to counteract both relational aggression and its impact

Rigby (2000) in his research with adolescent students found that the negative impact of relational bullying and peer victimisation could be improved for individuals when there was perceived positive social support. In his study, it was concluded that high levels of social support could lessen the negative impact of relational bullying and increase psychological wellbeing. Social supports for adolescents are most powerful within their peer group and this study aimed to use the peer group as a factor of social support. Optimistic and resourceful thinking, self-efficacy and a positive view of the world are important factors in being resilient (Noble & Mc Grath, 2005). Many of these attributes are skills and hence can be taught and learnt.

Rational for the intervention

The purpose of this study was to use the peer group to build emotional wellbeing and resilience in adolescent girls by naming the underlying processes that were occurring in the group and using that information to teach pro-social values of empathy and effective skills for conflict resolution. The premise used was that a psycho-educational process could name the behaviours that the girls were engaging in and then to use the group process to teach positive social skills in order to develop emotional wellbeing and resilience. The group was also employed to serve as a social support network for the girls in this peer group.

Within positive psychology there is a growing movement which places greater emphasis on the positive aspects of human nature. It focuses on 'the scientific study of human strengths and virtues as well as the variables that promote positive traits and emotions' (Miller & Nickerson, 2007, p.147). Within this paradigm, it is possible to name and draw out, the goodness of children, to promote better ways of behaving. Interventions can be presented for altering and enhancing children's and adolescents' per-

spectives regarding actions in the past and the possibilities for the future. This perspective from positive psychology considers what is right rather than what is wrong with people (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

Method

Participants

The participants were a group of 12 girls, members of one friendship group. The girls were aged 13 or 14 and were all in Year 8 at a high school. This group was chosen because the Year Adviser indicated constant and continual issues arising within this friendship group resulting in hours spent negotiating disputes. The girls often were upset or angry because of the issues arising within the group. Valuable class time was being eroded trying to resolve disputes. One of the members of the group was considering changing schools because of the relational bullying that she was experiencing. Each member of the group was invited to take part in four sessions with all the other group members to talk about the relational bullying within that group. The participants were told that they would learn some skills in dealing with relational bullying. All the members of the group willingly agreed to participate. The group leaders were two school counsellors and the Year Adviser.

Materials

The adults involved identified the major areas for the development of wellbeing. These themes were then used to create a psycho-educational lesson plan for each session. The session themes and processes for each week are in Figure. 1

Procedure

The group met for 45 minutes once a week for four weeks. They were taken out of a different subject class each week to minimise the loss of subject content for any one class. Basic group rules were established and written up at the first session. These included confidentiality of the sessions, one

person to speak at a time while the others listened and treating each other with respect.

Each session then went through the content using the processes listed. After session one there was a brief recap of the previous session and any issues that arose.

Results and Discussion

From session one it was evident that the girls in this group were able to articulate the nature of the conflict they experience within the group. This included 'gossiping' about one another, giving someone the 'look', rumour spreading, involving the whole group

when there was an issue between two girls, creating big scenes by involving others, talking about others behind their back as well as using cyber chat rooms to damage a girl's reputation. They were also able to speak about the tension that fighting in the group created, the fact that there were many sides to the issue they were fighting about and at times that the conflict existed on many levels even though it appeared trivial at one level e.g. one girl shared the difficulty she experienced when she was excluded from something and it wasn't just about being left out but went back to a situation that involved a boy and was

<p>Session 1- Naming what is</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Didactic approach to hierarchical position of girl groups ● Examining culture of girl groups ● Teasing out 'how' groups work ● Developing pro-social behaviours <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brainstorm on the board what they see as the 'positions' or 'functions' in a group ● Role play a conflict situation of a threesome where misunderstanding occurs ● Discuss what happened in the role play ● From the discussion pull out and record the information on the nature of groups and how they operate ● Examine positive prosocial behaviours and how to work on these – behaviours such as listening to your friend, building a real relationship, responding to one another with kindness and social awareness as well as responding with empathy 	<p>Session 2 – Developing skills in social problem solving</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trying to get the group members to see their position in a group and the importance of social skills within this group ● Importance of acting individually – taking responsibility for themselves but with a social conscience for others ● Identifying risky behaviour – spreading gossip, excluding others ● How to behave more resourcefully- being aware of others, having empathy for each other, respecting the rights of other girls to act individually, taking responsibility for themselves <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recap from last week about group membership ● Role plays (2) of scenarios where people act as a group ● Discussion after each role play of risky/resourceful behaviour – where risky behaviour involves pulling others down, spreading rumours, passing on gossip and embellishing it. Resourceful behaviour includes the value of a real relationship, tuning into your friends needs, being aware of your own 'baggage' in the relationship, valuing the difference in others and being willing to listen with empathy ● Further discussion of resourceful behaviour when things happen in a group – use of a video clip here to spark the discussion
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<p>Session 3 – Developing positive skills for difficult situations</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Skills I need when there is a problem ● Acting individually in response to 'a disaster' ● Teaching them to deal 1:1 with a problem with an individual member ● How to successfully manage conflict and stay friends ● Anger and how to manage it successfully <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Role play a 'disaster' ● Brainstorm solutions to this situation ● Teach assertiveness skills – making 'I' statements, avoiding absolutes, only deal with the situation at present, the relationship is more important than 'winning' ● Give strategies for managing conflict – address the issue with the relevant person, tell them how you feel, explain the hurt, have good will to resolve the conflict, remember the importance of the relationship with your friend and hence try not to involve others in this situation ● Use the strategies for managing conflict in a scenario 	<p>Session 4 – A positive spin</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The importance of self-esteem ● The goodness of all people ● How can harmony be maintained in the group <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use 'boxes' to decorate with my gifts. Each girl was given a small cardboard box with a slot in the top. Words indicating positive attributes were written on the outside of the boxes. ● Invite each person to add a gift to someone else's box ● What will happen next time there is a problem situation- ask them to retell the prosocial values they have learnt ● Get them to give you strategies for successfully managing the next difficult situation ● Go over the importance of the group in supporting each other to be the best person they can be
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Figure 1: Session content and process.

never satisfactorily resolved at that point. They spoke about trying to get people on side by texting them or using a chat room to 'shore up' their support. As long as the aggression was toward someone else in the group then you were kept fairly 'safe' yourself. There was comfort expressed by this thought. This process gave them a sense of power within the group and allowed conflicts to continue. One person described this process using this metaphor – 'you start off in this fight with an apple and before you know it you have fruit salad'. The metaphor was used to describe how a small issue quickly escalated to involve many more girls and more issues.

The other important finding of this process was the tenuous nature of friendships within this group. Everyone spoke about the importance of a 'best friend' and yet the best friends changed frequently and were also the source of

betrayal of confidences and secrets. Girls were able to speak clearly about how this happens *'it starts off when Louise is my best friend and I tell her a secret and she keeps that confidence until we are fighting and then this secret is used as ammunition against me. Then I feel really let down'*.

The most popular girl in the group has other girls wanting to be her best friend but in the process her position of most popular is also quietly being challenged. The girls were able to talk about the 'rattling' on your best friend just to pull her down as one of the things that happens in their group often. This revolves around jealousy for the position of most popular. The discussion around this point drew in the need to feel important and to have a sense of belonging. One of the tasks was to brainstorm how girls' needs for belonging and acceptance can be met without 'pulling down' other girls in the process. This prosocial aspect of their

learning allowed the girls to experience that they can relate in another way and that their personal wellbeing is in fact enhanced when they act positively and with emotional confidence and maturity. Dutrizac (2006) confirms that individuals high on levels of self construction experience greater positive emotions. This was fruitful and served as a means of social support that the girls can provide for one another. Rigby (2005) reports the importance of social support for the psychological wellbeing of adolescents.

The girls were also able to discern that at times the conflict within the group also revolves around boys. The issues over boys are more covert and escalate if any girl is given attention by a 'hot' boy. This involves jealousy and often results in gossip and rumour spreading to bring that girl down. Discussion about jealousy was quite painful at times but resulted in an awareness of the need to deal with those feelings within oneself rather than transferring them to a friend. To quote:

I can see now how ugly it is that I try and pull you down because I feel jealous cause you're so pretty and popular.

Surprisingly, the girls were open and honest in discussion about this process and were willing to name the jealousy and 'pulling down' for what it was. This in itself was a cathartic process for many of the girls in the group because they could 'suddenly' understand more clearly what they do to one another. This emotionally literate response was enhanced by the openness of the group process and the positive value of feeling safe and heard by the group. Respect for one another was built in this process.

Teaching the girls some basic rules of dealing with and successfully managing conflict was also an important aspect of this group process. The basic message was to state your case using 'I' messages; stick to the issue at hand; do not engage in character assassination; if the fight is between you and one other person then do not involve the rest of the group. The girls were keen to share that since they learnt some of these rules for managing conflict, there had not been a major 'blow up'

and neither had the whole group been drawn into any conflict. The Year Adviser who indicated that she had not had to 'disentangle' a single fight amongst the girls attested to this. This was in contrast to prior to the group process where nearly everyday there was 'some crisis' or other to sort out within this group of girls. Skilling individuals in managing conflict gives rise to confidence in handling oneself in a difficult situation and this then gives rise to resilience. Resilience is influenced by environmental factors and greater resilience results when people are empowered to deal with difficult situations (Rutter, 1999).

Social isolation is one outcome of relational bullying. One girl shared that she was considering changing schools because of the constancy and viciousness of the relational bullying within the group prior to the group sessions. Post group sessions, individuals spoke with greater hope that positive friendships could be maintained. Social isolation leads to social maladjustment and often school avoidance (Zubrick et al., 1997). The positive aspect of psycho-education on this issue results in girls taking greater responsibility for what and how they say things because of their awareness of the damage they can cause. This awareness is pivotal in relationship building within the group.

The session on building self-esteem was important because each girl was able to name some qualities that she had and was happy about. Pointing out that self-esteem is not competitive or does not need to be comparative was freeing for many of the girls :

I really like the way I can smile easily and be friendly without comparing myself to anyone.

Once the girls had spoken about their own qualities they were then invited to write down a quality in another person in their group and to give them that piece of paper. This process cemented the sense of belonging and social cohesion that exists in the group and can be used to boost one another rather than to pull one another down. Rigby and Slee (2003) assessed the poor self-esteem of victimized adolescents.

These sessions showed the girls that they had the capacity and resolve not to gossip and spread rumours but rather to support one another. It was this process of naming qualities in others and affirming your friends which fostered and built self-esteem in group members.

Addressing the social needs of adolescents in a proactive and positive way also demonstrates to adolescents emotionally literate behaviour which aims to meet psychological needs of individuals (Roffey, 2006). The group process allowed the adults in the group to demonstrate emotionally literate behaviour as well as to affirm this behaviour in the girls as they observed it. This evidenced the positive feelings that can be generated when girls find appropriate coping behaviours. It is coping behaviours that build resilience in adolescence. Anderson and Doyle (2005) point to the importance of whole school or group approaches to resilience building in individuals. This type of group process had building resilience in girls as one of its aims. The positive aspect of resilience was demonstrated in the following event.

There was an incident between two girls some time after the group session concluded and the comment from one of the girls was that they were able to have the fight, just between two girls and they were proud to announce that they had not created 'fruit salad'. They also reported:

I'm so proud because I've learnt to manage small fights in a much better way and I feel so good about myself.

Relational bullying is such a covert process and will exist in some form or other in most groups but the importance of understanding the process and naming the behaviours cannot be underestimated. This form of bullying underlies a great deal of anxiety and depression in adolescent girls (Rigby, 2005). If dealing with it within the group not in a punitive way but in a psycho-educational way can eradicate some of the insidious and vicious behaviour then it is a worthwhile process. The group process allowed the girls to feel supported by one another. Social support helps

to alleviate the impact of peer victimization. It also allowed the girls to develop some greater emotional literacy and to build their self-esteem. These skills that the girls have learnt are indeed life skills and therefore have relevance beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

The importance of well adjusted, resilient adolescents is self evident. The deleterious effects of relational aggression or peer victimization are well documented (Rigby, 2000; Smith et al., 1999). The prevalence and devastation caused by this social exclusion and damaging psychological factors have been proven to harm individuals. Girls use relational bullying to harm the intimate relationships that they need for emotional growth in often covert and insidious ways (Olweus, 1993). This study reports on the positive use of the group process to name behaviours and expose the process of relational bullying, giving both victims and bullies a shared language to use as well as skills to develop.

There is an empirical base demonstrating the positive influence of school based prevention programs as having positive effects on psychological wellbeing, creating protective factors and resilience as well as enhancing academic outcomes (Anderson & Doyle, 2005). Emotional and psychological wellbeing of students needs to be a focus in psychological intervention. This intervention focused on the positive aspects of being proactive in dealing with relational aggression in girls and highlights the importance of using group processes and psychological education for positive ends.

Positive psychology constructs of self-efficacy, optimism, and self regulation can be included in all aspects of counselling and working with children and adolescents (Harris et al., 2007). The importance of self-efficacy in psychological and health-related processes has been well documented (Bandura, 1997, Harris et al, 2007). This focus empowers people to work with their strengths and find solutions and positive out-

comes to difficulties. This is in contrast to seeing problems and pathologising children and adolescents. The positive psychology process has the potential to promote social and emotional learning as a universal need in schools. This style of health promotion can lead to greater emotional wellbeing and safety for children in schools. Building an individual's awareness of the positive aspects of their emotional health has far greater reaching prospects than simply determining the problem. Using a positive approach enhances children's and adolescents' view of past and present events and allows them to develop hopes for the future (Miller & Nickerson, 2007).

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