

Understanding the Dynamics of Relational Aggression

Things to remember about relational aggression and its causes:

- Dealing with relational aggression cannot be taught by a lecture—each student has to come to understand how relational aggression hurts on her own.
- Being hurt by relational aggression does not seem to stop youth and adults from being relationally aggressive. They do not necessarily make a cause and effect connection to their own behavior.
- We all have a primary need to fit in, to belong. Even when families are supportive and loving, this does not supersede the need for each child to fit in at school and have friends.
- Children have their own set of rules for in order to fit in—how to dress, play, what friends to have, etc. These “norms” often supersede adult norms.
- Children act out negative norms that embrace aggression when adults are not looking and often deny them vigorously when confronted.
- Many parents do not monitor their children's use of phones and computers and, even if they try, it is difficult.

For each dynamic of relational aggression:

- *Look* at the issue
- *Read* a true story
- *Define* terms.
- *Ask* questions.
- *Discuss* common perception/ misconceptions.
- *Perform* role plays.
- *Create* a continuum showing an acceptable form of the behavior and its relationally aggressive opposite.

Gossip and Rumors

Look at the issue:

Our world has become very attuned to the personal lives of others. Political candidates find their lives fine tooth combed during the election process. Magazines, television, and radio all feature stories about the lives of celebrities. Knowing whom people talk to, what they wear, where they go has become a cultural obsession. In schools, these look like: who likes whom, what happened at the party or on playground, who is in trouble, and who did something embarrassing. Girls often bond with their friends over this kind of information and it easily turns into malicious gossip. As youth learn to describe this kind of gossip they will see that malicious gossip is designed to make the other person look bad. It is one thing to talk about Jane's new boy friend, quite another to comment on what a dork he is or share another's secrets. This topic demands a discussion about "telling secrets." Spreading rumors or someone's personal secrets is gossip. The fact is that gossip is an easy tool for relational aggression and social manipulation. When you add the use of cell phones and social media as fuel on a burning fire, it becomes undeniable that gossip is a serious social issue for youth.

Read a true story: *Youth Ambassador, Portland, Oregon*

"I was in 9th grade when I first fell in love. But after 3 months, he broke up with me and I was devastated. I cried myself to sleep every night for 2 weeks. In the third week, I found out he was starting to date another girl in our high school. I was enraged. All I could think about was hurting them as much as they hurt me. So I decided to spread a really bad sexual rumor about them. In one day, it spread through the entire school and I was happy to see that it hurt their reputations. Then, in the summer, there was a day when I suddenly realized what I had done. I wasn't raised to be that kind of person. So I went to them both and told them what I had done. I apologized and told them I would make sure everyone knew the truth when school started. And I tried. But no one listened to me. I realized that the rumor I spread was now accepted as a reality and there was nothing I could be to make it right. That's why I want to be a mentor. I want to help others not make the same mistake I did."

Define Terms:

- **Gossip:** an aggressive or untruthful statement told about another person
- **Rumors:** false information about a person spread to a number of other people

Ask Questions:

- What is gossip?
- Is it always malicious?
- How prevalent is it?
- Can we expect people to stop gossiping altogether?
- When does "sharing information" turn into gossip?
- How easy it is to ruin someone's reputation with gossip?
- How does technology help/hurt gossip and rumors?
- Can you ever truly make it right after hurting someone with gossip?
- What information about others can/should you share?

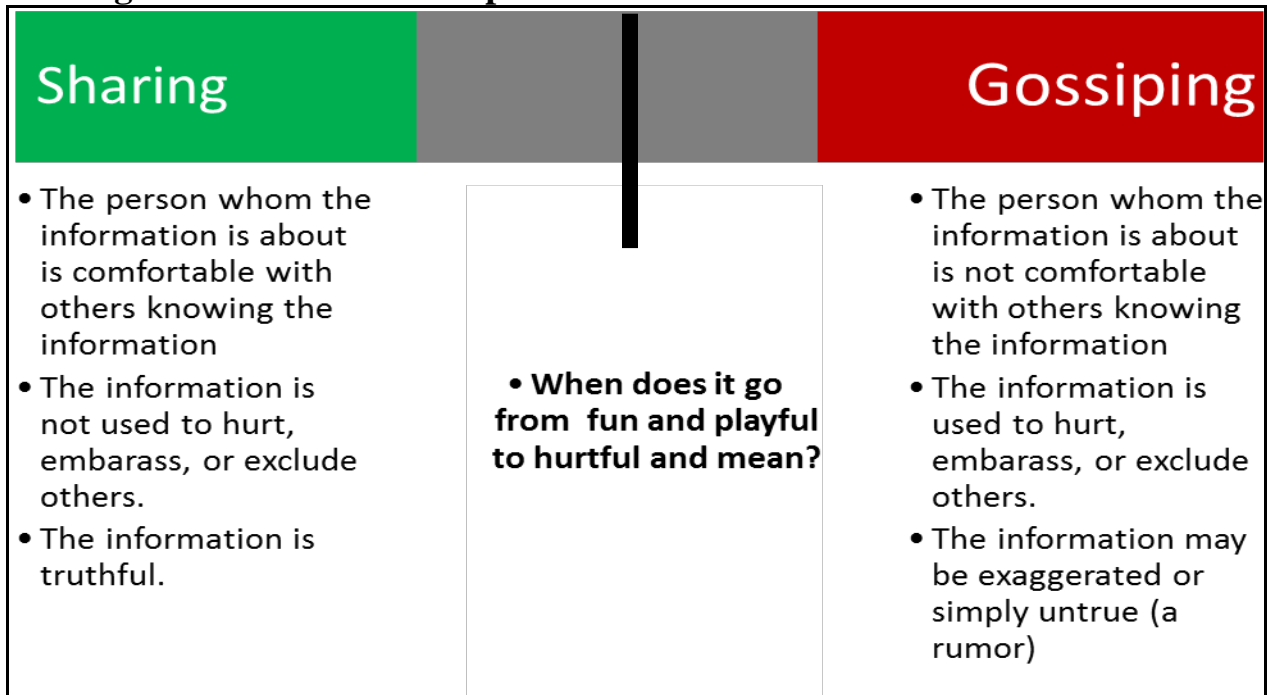
Discuss Perception and Misconceptions:

- Some current norms regarding gossip are:
 - Gossiping is fun.
 - I like having the latest scoop on other people.
 - The more gossip I know the more I fit in.
 - It is ok to tell my friends' secrets.
 - Everybody does it
 - Spreading rumors is a good way to get revenge on someone I am mad at.
 - I can spread gossip on the Internet without being caught.
 - One tool to gain popularity is to have information that others do not have. Gossip is often used to climb the social ladder.
 - Text messaging, social media, and the Internet have made gossip easily accessible and transmissible.
 - Once gossip is spread, it is very hard to take it back.
 - Children (and adults) can use gossip to hurt relationships and put other people down in order to make themselves look better.

Perform Role Plays

- You and a friend walk up to a group of people and find that they are saying things that are untrue about your friend.
- You receive a text message with an embarrassing picture of another student in the class.
- Two of your friends come up to you at separate times to complain about each other.
- One of your teachers openly complains about the principal to the class.
- Your parent tells you personal information about one of the teachers within the school.

Sharing Information vs. Gossip Continuum



Alliance Building

Look at the issue:

It is always great to know that you have friends on your side who will stick with you through thick and thin. These friends will be Upstander and help you when you are a target or be a shoulder to cry on when you are sad. However, friends should only be there for you when you need them for positive support. Using friends to build power and intimidation is alliance building, and can lead to negative behaviors. When youth are upset with someone, they want the support of their friends, and too often this means siding with them if there is an argument. They may enlist their friends to exclude, shame, or dislike the other. This often happens within friendship groups and ends up with one member suddenly being ousted, which is one of the most painful harm adolescents can inflict on another. It can happen outside friendship groups. Someone outside the group becomes a target of one person and the others join in. Alliance building is rarely discussed as a separate category of relational aggression and it is one of the most destructive forms of aggression, with a great potential for lasting harm.

Read a true story: *Youth Ambassador, Millcreek, Pennsylvania*

“When I was in middle school, I was part of a clique. One of my friends was furious with a girl who had been “flirting” with her boyfriend. (She was just talking to him, but we didn’t bother to get the facts.) We decided to make her pay for this and began taunting her in the halls, any place we could. It got so bad her parents contacted the school and I was questioned by the counselor. I just denied it and continued the taunting. I was called in again, was reprimanded, but I didn’t care and just waited awhile before I started again. We spread rumors about her too. We didn’t stop until her parents threatened to sue our parents, but by then we had done enough damage to ruin her life in middle school. It was only now, after becoming a mentor, that I realized what I had done. I am so ashamed. I still don’t know how to make it right.”

Define Terms:

- **Alliance:** a relationship between two or more people with an intention to exclude or act aggressively towards another person

Ask Questions:

- What is alliance building?
- Why would it be wrong to defend a friend by getting others mad at her enemy?
- How does it feel when alliances are built against you?
- How can you distinguish the difference between supporting a friend and building an alliance?
- What can you do when a friend asks you to be part of an alliance against someone?

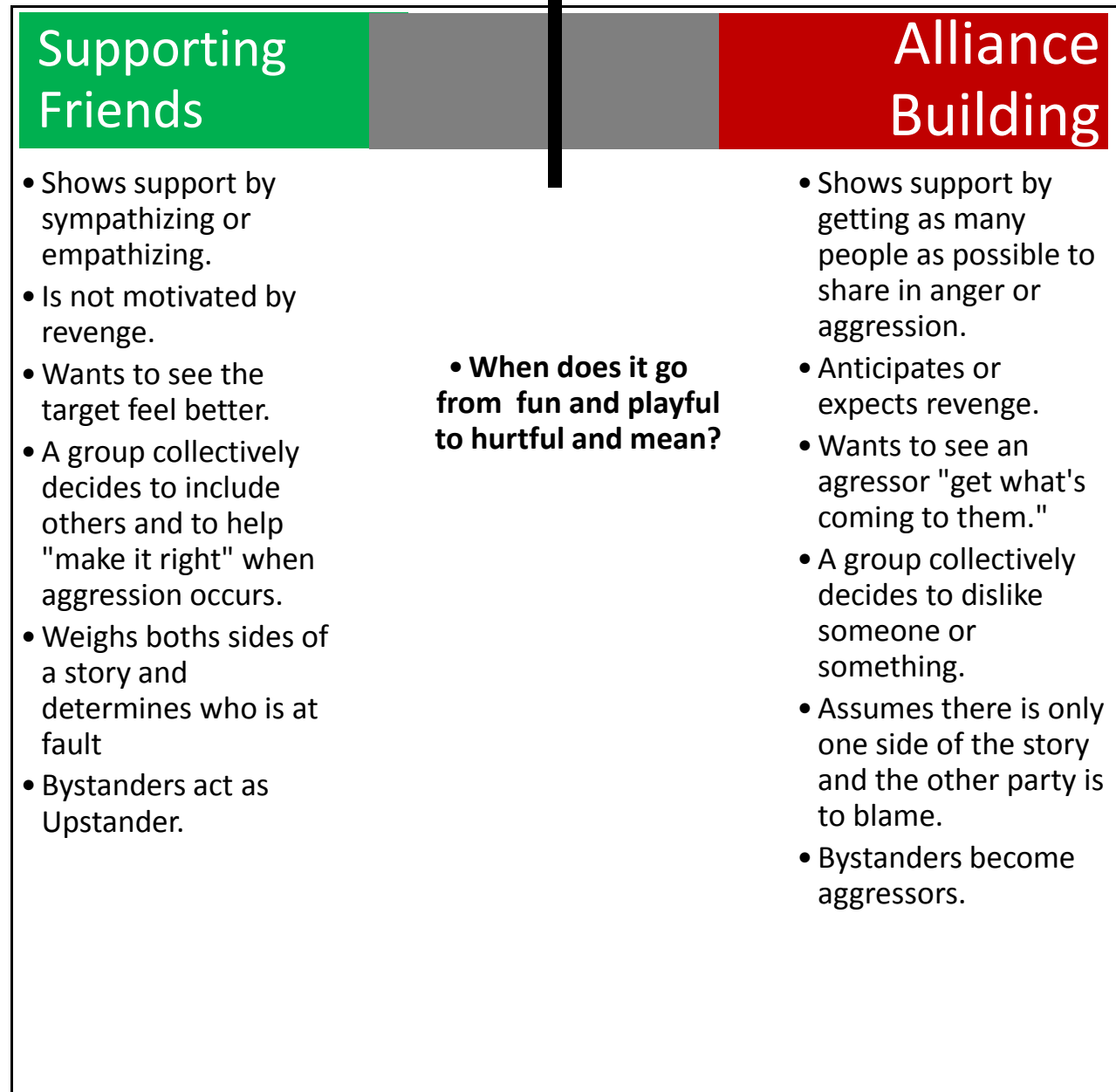
Discuss Perception and Misconceptions:

- It has become a norm to get other friends mad at someone who has hurt them - to take comfort from ostracizing or punishing a target with the help of our friends.
- Excluding a member of one's group by alliance building can be one of the most painful forms of RA.
- It is one thing to turn to your friends when you have been hurt or are angry with someone. It is another thing to get your friends angry with someone else or turn them against someone else.
- Sometimes the grievance is a misunderstanding, but the alliance building escalates the problem.
- Sometimes the grievance is a real conflict that needs to be worked out and a friendship group can listen to the conflict and be a stimulus for resolving the conflict, not escalating it.
- Sometimes the grievance is contrived to get friends mad at someone you do not like.
- Sometimes the "target" is really the aggressor manipulating their friends to do their bidding.

Perform Role Plays:

- A friend comes up to you and asks for your help beating up another student at recess.
- A student in the class is upset at a teacher for giving him a detention. He tells everyone else in the class to misbehave in the afternoon to really show her what getting out of hand can look like.
- One girl in the class tells you to avoid another student because that student said something mean about her.
- Marcus tells you that if you play baseball with Antwan then he won't be your friend anymore.

Supporting Friends vs. Alliance Building Continuum:



Taunting

Look at the issue:

Teasing can be a lot of fun, no matter your age, and in the right climate can show affection. Taunting, however, can look just like joking around, but is a way to put others down, to show disrespect, and to make the target feel uncomfortable. If someone calls tells the aggressor that his comments are hurtful, he has any easy out: “I was just kidding, can’t he take a joke?” “She’s such a baby - the smallest thing upsets her!” The same words can be used as a joke or a put-down with just a change in the tone or facial expression, which makes the line between teasing and taunting very blurred with online or written communication. It is very hard for targets to stand up for themselves and bystanders often make the mistake of laughing instead of protecting. It is a minefield for all ages. Certain kinds of teasing, no matter what the intent, should be off limits: sexual preference, size, weight, ethnicity to name a few. Another problem with teasing versus taunting is knowing where the line is. You can tease one person who thinks it is funny and say the same thing with the same intent and hurt someone else. Alternatively, the line can change because someone is having a bad day today. “Is it my fault if he took it the wrong way?”

Read a true story: *Ophelia Project Program Participant, Erie, PA*

John was a middle school student and the quarterback for his 8th grade team. He was a good kid, did well in school, and had many friends. But Derrick was jealous of him and started calling him a fag to his face and spreading rumors that he was gay. The taunting continued unabated and ended up reducing his ability to study and play football. John never told anyone about it, thinking he just had to tough it out. In the beginning of 9th grade, Derrick was chosen to be the quarterback and John had lost all his friends. We heard this story from one of his friends who never did anything to help him.

Define Terms:

- **Taunting:** a hurtful, aggressive statement often implying the taunter has power over the taunted
- **Teasing:** a playful way of joking between peers

Ask Questions:

- What exactly is teasing?
- When does teasing turn into taunting?
- Is it OK to tease under some circumstances?
- If your teasing hurts someone, even though you were not intending to hurt them, do you still have to make it right?
- What should people do to let others know teasing hurts?
- What topics should always be off limits for teasing?

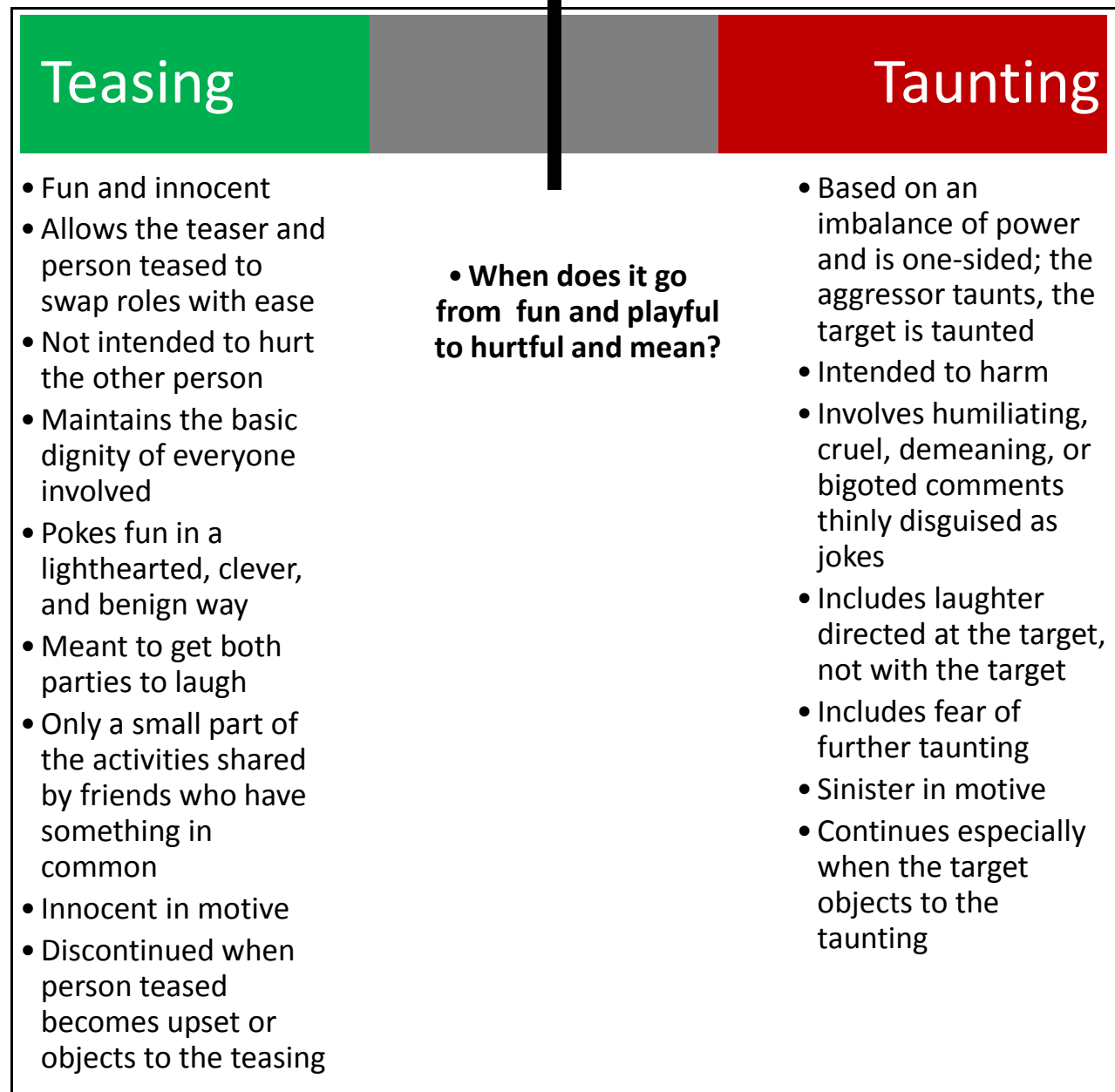
Discuss Perception and Misconceptions:

- Teasing begins early in their childhood.
- Being funny and putting others down is often a status symbol among children.
- Children deflect adults from intervening by saying, "I was only kidding" or "Can't he take a joke?"
- Children need an alternative to taunting; to express their anger or have their needs met without hurting someone.
- *Important note:* Crossing the line with teasing is a tricky issue on many levels. You may think it is just teasing, but your target is still hurt. Some people are more sensitive than others are or they are having a bad day, or you inadvertently pushed one of their buttons. On different days, our sensitivity to teasing changes. Some teasing is truly just meant to be playful - the intention is pure. However, sometimes we pretend to be teasing, when we are really taunting. Children need to see that if our intent is to just kid around, then, we will immediately stop when we see it hurts and make it right. We apologize and do not do it again. However, if the hurtful teasing continues, then we know it really is taunting. Everyone is a target of hurtful teasing at some time so we all need to have ways to communicate when our feelings are being hurt. We cannot assume the other person is being mean until we ask them to stop and they do not. In a safe environment, children know that certain subjects are never acceptable for teasing; students can say stop and it STOPS.

Perform Role Plays:

- One student makes fun of your best friend, but always says, "Just kidding."
- When you make a mistake on a group project, another student calls you stupid.
- A student trips in the hallway and everyone laughs and calls her clumsy.
- A student who always raises her hand in class is called "teacher's pet" after school.
- A group of students always makes fun of a heavier student in the class.

Teasing vs. Taunting Continuum



Bad Popularity

Look at the issue:

Some kids will be mean to others just so they can fit in with the popular group, even when they know better. The issues with popularity reach a peak in middle school and tend to diminish in high school. Studies have confirmed that relational aggression has a link to popularity. However, it is not the stereotypical king and queen of a school social structure that have been found to be most aggressive. Instead, it is the students who are trying to move up the social ladder and are just below the most popular group. Relational aggression is an important tool to move up in the social hierarchy of the school as you push others around you down.

Every child wants to be accepted and included and often easily makes the mistake of falling into the bad popular category in an attempt to be liked. Parents, too, want their children to be accepted without recognizing that we need to make a clear distinction between good and bad popular.

Read a true story: *CASS School Parent, Erie, PA*

This story was told to an Ophelia Project employee by a parent from a local CASS school. The parent actually recognized an employee who had presented at the CASS Community Night the month before and approached her in the grocery store to share this story! The parent's daughter, an eighth grade student, had borrowed a sweatshirt from a football player on a cool fall morning. The popular group of girls noticed this and immediately approached her, showering her with compliments and telling her how they wanted her to be friends with them now that she had a boyfriend on the football team. They asked her to eat lunch with them, and even to come over to one girl's house after school for manicures. When the girl explained at lunchtime that she borrowed his sweatshirt on the bus because she was cold, not dating him, the popular group called her a slut and a tease and walked away from the table.

Define Terms:

- **Popularity:** The quality of being well known and generally well liked.

Ask Questions:

- What is the difference between good popular and bad popular?
- Why is being popular so important to us?
- What is the effect of being unpopular?
- What is the best way to make friends?
- How are leadership and popularity similar?
- Is bad popular just a stereotype or an actual aggressive problem?

Discuss Perception and Misconceptions:

- Social maneuvering is tied to popularity, which many children crave. Bad popular students can have higher social status - particularly in middle school.
- Most people like the good popular students. They are inclusive, act like friends to a wide number of peers, are respected for their talents, and are usually kind. As they grow older, they are often leaders in their school. They rarely describe themselves as "popular."
- Bad popular students can fall into this stereotype: they are better looking, have more friends, date more often, and wield the most social power.
- Being popular is good - if it is the good popular kind. If popularity were based on the good popular model, the most popular kids would work to make their school a better place for all kids.
- Research has shown the popularity and relational aggression are directly related, but it is not the students at the top of the social hierarchy who are the most aggressive. It is the students who are in the middle or close to the top and vying for more social status.

Perform Role Plays:

- You are invited to a party, but with the condition that you do not bring your brother who is way too much of a nerd to be seen with in public.
- Britney says you can be her friend if you do her math homework and have your mom drive Britney, Stephanie, and Rachel to the movies at least twice a month.
- You want to be Spring Queen so you spread rumors about all of your opponents so they do not get more votes.
- You were cut from the hockey team, but all of your friends made it. Now, they say you cannot hang out with them anymore because you are not good enough at hockey.
- In choosing teams for a game on the playground or in physical education class, people begin arguing about which team will have to take a player who is less skilled and is not friends with many people.

Good Popular vs. Bad Popular

Good Popular

- People know you and like you
- Mutual appreciation for others encourages status
- Kindness, altruism, or helping behaviors are shown to many people
- Inclusion in several friendship groups
- Welcomes others into friendship groups
- Actively seeks out friendships and positive connections

• **When does it go from fun and playful to hurtful and mean?**

Bad Popular

- People may know your name but may dislike or fear you
- Intimidation and manipulation of others encourages status
- Disrespect, exclusion, or ignoring are shown to those who are not equally popular
- Excludes others from clique of popular friends
- Does not actively seek out additional friendships or connections

Cliques

Look at the issue:

Children need to belong to a group and we hope that every child has at least one good friend. Groups form in school and out of school and change often. A student may have best friends to sit with at lunch, and many friends to play with at recess or work with in class. In CASS schools, we acknowledge that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and civility, even if they are not considered a close friend. If a teacher asks students to get into groups, cliques will often join together and not allow others in. On the playground, cliques will only play with their members and keep others out. Cliques will avoid being with anyone who is not deemed good enough for them whether in the hallways, on the bus, or during lunch. One of the social powers of cliques is not to let others in and they use this power to keep their group in line. “If you don’t back us, you’re out.”

Read a true story: *Ophelia Project Secretary, Erie, PA*

Sometimes stories about peer aggression are remembered into adulthood, such as this story shared by an Ophelia Project employee. She was a part of the popular clique in middle school. In 8th grade, they made up a game where they picked out one of the unpopular girls and began to shower her with attention. By the end of the week, she thought she was a part of this popular clique and could hardly believe her good fortune. On Monday, they all totally ignored her. They would pass her in the hall without even looking at her and if she came up to them, they would just turn away. They thought this was hilarious because the girl was so embarrassed for being duped that she never told anyone. The next week they would pick their next target. It worked every time.

Define Terms:

- **Clique:** an exclusive peer group
- **Friendship:** a relationship between peers who generally like each other
- **Exclusion:** a form of relational aggression where a person or group of people do not permit someone to be a part of a peer group; can be intentional or unintentional

Ask Questions:

- What does it feel like to be in a clique? What about when you are denied access to a clique?
- How does it feel to be in a friendship group?
- What is the effect of a clique on the social structure of a school?
- Why does exclusion hurt so badly when you cannot be part of a clique?

Discuss Perception and Misconceptions:

- Children need friends and groups of friends. We do not like everybody and have every right to choose our own friends. However, we do not need to aggressively exclude.
- The purpose of cliques is to exclude others because exclusion can increase the social status of the group.
- Friendship groups come together for the same basic needs, but are not exclusive. friendship group will speak to others in the halls, allow others to sit with them at lunch, include outsiders in the group. Their goal is to have a close group of friends, NOT to use exclusion to elevate their status.
- You can tell the difference just by observing a clique in class, in the hallways, or at the lunchroom. They decide who gets in and who does not. Surrounding them are the "wannabees" who are not quite sure if their inclusion is secure and will often do things they know are wrong just to be included.

Perform Role Plays:

- A new student walks in the door halfway through the school year. He does not know anyone.
- You do not play on the school's basketball team, but you would still like to play basketball with the other children at recess. They tell you that you are not allowed because you are not on the team.
- You and a friend overhear a group of people making fun of someone and planning to exclude that person from eating lunch at their table.
- You witness a small group of students moving away from someone who is crying and clearly upset.
- A friend of yours makes "blond jokes" every time your other friend, Christa is around. Christa has very blond hair and the jokes make her uncomfortable but she is afraid to say anything.
- Two students cut in line in the cafeteria saying, "Important people go first."

Friendship Groups vs. Cliques

Friendship Groups		Cliques
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use inclusion to encourage group membership• Members mutually respect and value other members inside and outside of the group• Members may belong to one or more groups• May be based upon similar interests or viewpoints• Dynamic and open to change within the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When does it go from fun and playful to hurtful and mean?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use exclusion to limit group membership• Members may have an imbalance of power with one member leading the clique• Members may not belong to other friendship groups• Members use shared interests or viewpoints to control and exclude those outside of clique• Not open to change within the clique

Cyberbullying

Look at the issue:

Cyberbullying is an ever-changing dynamic given the new and innovative ways the youth find to hurt each other with technology. Anonymity plays a huge part in cyberbullying because the target may never find out whom the aggressor is. Complete strangers known online as trolls harass people and taunt them for entertainment. Still, 84% of adolescent cyberbullies surveyed by Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reported that they knew their targets. The Ophelia Project identifies two main contributors to the hurtful impact of cyberbullying:

1. *Empathetic Disconnect*: This describes the inability to sense the emotions and feelings associated with the receipt of a message. In traditional bullying, an aggressor immediately sees the hurt they have caused the target. The lack of immediate emotional feedback in cyberbullying allows an aggressor to often continue the hurtful behaviors unchecked. In addition, due to the ability to maintain anonymity on the Internet, an aggressor and target may never know each other or interact face-to-face.
2. *The Infinite Bystander Effect*: In a traditional bullying situation, the number of bystanders is limited to whoever is present at the time of the incident. With cyberbullying, the aggression remains present online and can be viewed by anyone with access to the web.

Read a true story: *Ophelia Project Education Specialist, Erie, PA*

“I had my first boyfriend when I was sixteen. What I did not realize was that I became his girlfriend while he was still dating another girl at a different high school. He ended up breaking up with her and staying with me. One day shortly after he broke up with her, I started getting nasty instant messages from her on the computer. At first, I just started firing back saying, “You’re just jealous he chose me and not you.” Then she got all of her friends to start messaging me too. I stopped signing on the computer because it wasn’t fun anymore. A month or so after this started, our high schools played each other at a football game. She stood with her friends right in front of where I was performing with the cheerleading squad holding signs with my picture and the word slut written all over it. It was horrible that someone I had never even met could harass me so much and it got even worse when it left the computer and the bullying was right in front of my face.”

Define Terms:

- **Cyberbullying**: willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices

Ask Questions:

- What is cyberbullying, and how does it happen?
- Why has it become one of the most prevalent forms of peer aggression?
- How is cyberbullying different from aggression in person?
- Are the effects of cyberbullying different from aggression in person?

Discuss Perception and Misconceptions:

- Relational aggression has found a home on the Internet. For today's youth, Internet technologies are allowing hurtful, relationally aggressive behaviors to become anonymous, and these incidents of cyberbullying are affecting the emotional and psychological health of our children.
- Today's youth hardly know a world without cell phones, text messaging, social media and constant Internet access. Those who brush off the threat of cyberbullying and suggest restricting access to technology are taking a naïve approach. Cutting a student off from technology all together, in fact, separates a youth from their peer group and can create feelings of resentment and rebellion – and reduce chances of a youth discussing peer aggression online when it happens.
- Youth need specific discussion about privacy online – that it does not truly exist.
- Young people need to be educated in responsible Internet use. A strong, positive set of social norms related to online behavior need to be established and enforced by the youth themselves.
- Removing the mask of anonymity and telling personal stories about cyberbullying can help put a face to the pain of online bullying.
- Other issues that make cyberbullying a unique phenomenon compared to other types of peer aggression are:
 - Instant Gratification (adolescent impulsivity)
 - Disinhibition (I don't see you as 'real')
 - Anonymity
 - Empowering the Disempowered (victims become aggressors)
 - Mass audience
 - Home isn't 'safe' anymore
 - Exhibitionism – the desire to post our lives online and get validation from peers
 - Sharing private information is true sign of friendship (sharing passwords very common)
 - Infinite bystander effect - The idea that anyone online can be a bystander to a cyberbullying incident

Note: A continuum is not provided for cyberbullying.