The Development and Treatment of Girlhood Aggression

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Objectives

- Explore development of girls’ aggression and the individual child and relationship factors that shape a girls’ pathways.

- Link research on girls’ aggression to components of assessment and intervention for the girl (developmental) and for her relationships (systemic).

- Review Earls court Girls’ Program (EGC) and effectiveness of intervention for aggressive girls.
Understanding Girls’ Aggression: A Focus on Relationships

- Relationships are foundation and context for development.
- Relationships -- social determinant of health.
- For healthy development, children need warm, positive, supportive relationships.
- Children require relationship capacity to form and maintain significant relationships.
- For girls, relationships are particularly salient: one of girls’ primary goals is to be connected.
Two Lenses on Girls’ Aggression

Developmental: Focus on Girl
- How is girl doing for this stage?
- What are her strengths and challenges?
- What can be done to support her?

Systemic: Focus on Girl’s Relationships
- How does girl interact with others?
- How do others interact with girl?
- What can be done to promote healthy relationships for girl?
Video Observation 1

- We will watch an 8–year-old girl, who was referred to a social skills training program for aggressive, disruptive, and noncompliant behavior problems.
- Focus on her individual risks (behaviors and understanding), as well as her relationship risks (how others relate to her and how she relates to them).
## A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Girls’ Aggression

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Nature of Girls’ Aggression

- Across lifespan, aggression rates highest when children are 2 or 3; as children acquire language and social skills, aggression decreases.
- Girls’ aggression decreases at a faster rate than boys’ aggression.
- Aggression less normative for girls than boys: may have a higher social cost.
- Girls and boys have similar capacities for the full range of aggression: physical, verbal, social.
- Higher proportion of girls’ aggression is social, rather than physical, compared to boys.
Video Observation 2

- We will watch a group of girls interacting on the school playground. The focal girl is in Grade 5 and has individual risks: she was identified as both a girl who bullies and is victimized.
- One girl starts to talk to her with a threat. A second girl quickly joins and they walk her around asking her to do humiliating things (e.g., kiss the tree) and asking others to join in.
- Starts as rough and tumble type play (fun for all) but the girl quickly becomes distressed.
- Relationship Problems: Watch how quickly peers gather and join in the bullying interactions.
Social Aggression

- Form of aggression founded on relationships.
- Aggression aimed at damaging the other’s relationships through indirect aggression (e.g., gossip, exclusion), gestures, etc.
- “Advantages”: covert, safer than physical aggression, strengthens in-group relations.
Why Worry about Girls’ Aggression?

Developmental Perspective

- Girls’ under-regulated emotions and behavior inhibit their healthy adaptation (e.g., social skills, school achievement).

- Cumulative continuity: lack of skills seriously constrains development and opportunity for change.
Why Worry About Girls’ Aggression?

Systemic Perspective
- Girls’ lack of regulation and aggression inhibit development of positive relationships.
- Others become negative towards aggressive girls.

- Interactional continuity: negative interactions constrain the opportunities for positive relationships and impact on healthy development.
Prevalence of girls’ aggression lower than boys, but psycho-social costs may be as high.

Developmental and Relationship Problems

- Delinquency and substance abuse
- Depression
- Risk-taking behaviors (early sexual involvement)
- Victimization
- Sexual harassment
- Dating aggression
- Academic problems
- Adult internalizing and externalizing problems
Aggressive Girls and Relationship Problems

Our longitudinal study of adolescents from middle school through high school reveals the risk of relationship problems for girls who are aggressive.

- Bullying is the use of power and aggression – a relationship problem.
- We assessed physical aggression in a dating relationship with five items adapted from CTS (Straus, 1979): slapped or kicked; choked, punched, or beaten; pushed, grabbed or shoved; threw, smashed, hit or kicked an object; hit or tried to hit with something (coded 0,1).
Girls’ and Boys’ Bullying Trajectories
Girls’ and Boys’ Dating Aggression Trajectories

Girls

- △ Early-11.7%
- + Later-22.2%
- ● Non-66.1%

Boys

- △ Early-8.0%
- + Later-33.8%
- ● Non-58.4%

The Melissa Institute
For Violence Prevention and Treatment
Links between High Bullying and Dating Aggression

High Bullying Girls -- 4.3%

High Bullying Boys -- 19%
Links between Moderate Bullying and Dating Aggression
Individual Risk Factors for High Bullying

Differences between girls who bullied at high rate in early adolescence (high and desisting) vs low on individual risk factors:

- Cruel to people
- Manipulative
- Low trustworthiness
- Aggressive
- Substance use
- Internalizing problem
- But not different on feeling guilty
Relationship Risk Factors for High Bullying

Differences between girls who bullied at high rate in early adolescence (high and desisting) vs low on peer risk factors:

- Deviant friends*
- Exposure to bullying peers
- Conflict with peers
- Susceptibility to peer influence.*
Family Risk Factors for High Bullying

Differences between girls who bullied at high rate in early adolescence (high and desisting) vs low on family risk factors:

- Parental monitoring*
- Conflict with parents.
Assessing Aggressive Girls

EARL21-G

Levene, Augimeri, Pepler, Walsh, Webster, Koegl (2001)

- Child Factors (12): hyperactivity/impulsivity, abuse/trauma/neglect, coping ability, likeability, sexual development, academic performance, antisocial attitudes, antisocial behavior
- Family Factors (7): caregiver-daughter interaction, stressors, supports, parenting style
- Responsivity Factors (2)
- Coding: 0 (not present), 1 (possibly present/low risk), 2 (present/high risk)
EARL21-G and Manuals for EGC SNAP

- Available from Centre for Children Committing Offenses:
  http://www.earlscourt.on.ca/CCCO.shtml
Individual Risks for Girls in the EarlsCourt Girls Connection

- 72% bully peers, 47% victimized
- 69% witness domestic violence
- 59% suicidal ideations
- 58% externalizing behaviors before age 7
- 42% Children’s Aid Society (CAS) contact
- 38% special education, 15% behavioral class
- 35% self-harming behaviors
- 32% precocious sexual behaviors/interests
- 25% body image concerns
Family Risks for Girls in Earls-court Girls Connection

- 78% inconsistent parenting style, 49% punitive
- 71% highly conflictual caregiver-daughter relationship
- 58% poor problem solving
- 53% mothers current or past depression
- 41% mothers have high school education or less
- 27% parental criminal activity
Theoretical Framework for Developing a Gender-Sensitive Intervention

- Developmental-contextual model of risk and protective factors within the individual girl and within her relationship contexts (family, peers, school, community).

- Focus on relationship processes (relationship, social learning, and feminist theories).

- Multisystemic approach to helping troubled girls and their families in childhood and through adolescence.
The Earlscourt Girls Connection (EGC)

- Gender-sensitive intervention for girls under age 12 who display externalizing behavior problems
- EGC has served over 400 girls and their families
- Manualized, strong theoretical foundation

Supports girls’ development of:
- Social problem-solving skills
- Anger management

Supports caregivers’ development of:
- Parenting management skills
- Anger management

Focus on developing mother-daughter relationships
Treatment Components

- SNAP™ (Stop Now And Plan) FOR GIRLS GROUP
- SNAP™ PARENTING GROUP
- GIRLS GROWING UP HEALTHY GROUP (GGUH)
- Individual parent training and family counseling
- Tutoring
- Individual Befriending
- Advocacy (e.g., school)
- Leader-in Training Program
- Follow-up Parenting Groups
SNAP™ for Girls

- Structured group work with aggressive girls.
- Cognitive-behavioral approach emphasizing SNAP™ (Stop Now and Plan).
- Six segments of each of the 14 weekly sessions:
  - Check In, Home Practice Review, Goal Review, Skill Building, Home Practice Assignment, and Circle Time.
- Focus of sessions on: self-control, problem-solving and assertion skills aimed at remediating social and physical aggression in young girls.
SNAPP™ for Parents

- Structured parent training group work with parents of children with disruptive behavior disorders.
- Group sessions focus on SNAP™ (Stop Now and Plan) for parents:
  - tracking, monitoring, routines, listening and encouraging, giving commands, charting rewards, timeout and problem-solving, stopping stealing.
  - involves discussion and role-plays to facilitate parents trying new parenting skills.
Methodology

- Quasi-experimental design features:
  - Stratified random assignment (severity of problems)
  - Treatment and waitlist control groups
  - Data collected at several time points (Pre, Post & up to 2 years)
  - Multiple informants, multiple standardized measurement questionnaires
- Program Integrity:
  - Manualized programs, trained staff, video-taped sessions, integrity monitoring & feedback to staff
  - Process replicated in second year
Girls in the treatment group improved significantly more than the control group over time.

- Rule-Breaking
- Aggression
- DSM-IV Conduct Disorder
- Social Problems
- Internalizing Problems

Age, cognitive ability, & academic performance not significant.
No effect of treatment was found.

(N = 53)
Clinical Significance of Change
Externalizing Behavior: Parent Report

In the treatment group:
- 15 girls shifted a mean of 12 points.
- 19 girls remained in a clinical range.

Sexual development and coping risks associated with lack of change.
What Changed for Parents in EGC?

- **Rational Parenting** (Parent Report)
  - Less yelling, scolding, & physical violence
  - More calm discussions & coaching appropriate behaviors

- **Ineffective Parenting** (Parent Report)
  - Less angry, disapproving, reactive when disciplining

- **Consistency in Parenting** (Parent Report)
  - More limit setting, issuing requests, ensuring compliance

- **Inconsistent/Hostile Parenting** (Child Report)
  - Parents less often get angry, threaten physical punishment, forget rules, enforce depending on mood
ECG Evaluation: Implications

Evidence suggests theoretically-guided intervention for girls, the EGC:
- reduces girls’ aggression
- increases girls’ prosocial skills and coping
- supports development of effective parenting skills

Findings indicate a need for school-based SNAP training to support girls and teachers in the school setting
Future Directions

- An analysis of factors associated with change vs limited change following the SNAP program
- An analysis of the process of change through treatment by comparing those who improved and did not improve on brain activity and mother-daughter behavioral interactions (in collaboration with Granic, Lewis, & Zelazo)
- Follow up of the girls who have been in the program (2 and 3 years after SNAP)
- Plans for further RCT of enhanced version of the program with hopes of reaching some of the girls who do not change with the standard program.
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