



## Young women and aggression

Anger hurts. It hurts the person it is being taken out on and it hurts the person experiencing it. Anger can lead to bullying, self-harming and explosive violence. However, no emotion in and of itself is bad, it is only how we handle it that matters. These are all important messages to teach our children and especially our girls. Why do I say our girls? We need to focus on our girls because there seems to be a rising of girl violence in our society. One veteran teacher replied that since the mid 1990s it seems as though girls have had something inside them ignite and they are taking it out with physical violence at an exponentially increasing rate. The question, however, is what do we teach them. We have to know that the traditional phrases 'girls don't hit' or 'girls should be nice' certainly don't cut it anymore. Girls are furious and we have to figure out why and how to deal with it.

Certainly there is a continuum of aggression that we have to acknowledge. We have to weigh biological, social and cultural factors and never forget that sometimes girls are aggressive because they need

to be. It is perhaps this idea that is most overlooked in our society that still largely views girls as meek and non-threatening. The problem with being non-threatening, however, is that you tend to be more vulnerable to being threatened.

Two stories that I ran across in my research for this article struck me quite poignantly as being on the two ends of the aggression spectrum. In one case, I was flipping through a book on cyber bullying in the library and I found hidden inside, an appointment card from one of our local mental health intake programs. Clearly I found evidence of the dark side of aggression taking its toll. The other story was one I found in Sharon Lamb's brilliant book *The Secret Lives of Girls*. The story is of a six year old girl who confronts her aunt's boyfriend who is beating her aunt. She punches and kicks him in defense of her injured relative and yells at him 'you're dead wrong!' This show of immense courage from a little child is the empowering side of aggression where one stands up for oneself or another and

this is something we need to talk to our girls about just as much as the other side of the aggression coin.

During the following exploration of girls, girl culture and girls' anger what will reveal itself is the complexity of girls' fury as well as its possible causes and several ways we can teach our girls to rise up and empower themselves with useful action while stemming the flow of useless violence that society is telling us is steadily coming our way.

Boys will be boys and girls will be girls is often how people begin discussions on the innate differences between the genders. The jury is still out on exactly how different the sexes are but certain patterns emerge from very early on in life that bear considering in any dialogue on aggression. The most compelling statistics I found are the following: A study in physical aggression in young children reports that at age four girls are nearly as likely to use physical aggression as boys. Also, the effects of TV violence in stimulating aggression are equally apparent in boys and girls.

These findings suggest that in early life, boys and girls have equal capacity for aggression both in action and in their influences. As girls age, social factors are brought in and aggressive behavior in girls lessens until puberty. At the onset of puberty, however, hormones run wild making girls' more susceptible to mood swings, especially during menstruation. Some parts of a girl's hormonal cycle make her feel like bonding with others and other parts make her feel easily hurt and irritated. Our brains also get a growth spurt from age eleven onward in the prefrontal cortex. This is the area responsible for rational decisions. During this growth, our ability to make responsible choices and deal with complex emotions becomes difficult especially when combined with powerful hormonal influxes. Another theory states that women's aggression, especially towards other women, is an evolutionary holdover from yesteryear when women would have to compete with each other for desirable mates and other resources. This could be why girls hurl sexual slurs at one another such as 'slut' and 'whore'. Its function is to make them less desirable mates for men. This also explains women's competition over looks and popularity.

Though these biological factors are important as they show how girls and boys start out capable of the same or similar amounts of aggression,



the social and cultural world we expose children to seem to start its influence around late toddler-hood which is when the media and parental influences surrounding a child truly start to take root. Girls begin to reject aggression in early childhood and it is worthwhile to discover why and whether or not this has something to do with its reemergence in early adolescence. It is also important to explore girls' 'normal' way of dealing with anger which is a complex phenomenon known as 'relational aggression.' The following quote from James Garbarino's book *See Jane Hit* explains a bit about the shift girls experience from more readily recognizable aggression to a more subtle version:

"...we shouldn't assume that girls can't be as aggressive as boys...Girls have been traditionally less physically aggressive than boys not because they lack the biological capacity to be physically aggressive but because they tend to give up physical aggression more readily & effectively than boys, because they more easily translate their aggressive impulses into relational and verbal aggression and because they more readily learn and display non aggressive strategies for resolving conflicts, gratifying impulses and achieving their goals."

Before we get into relational aggression and how teen

girls have traditionally handled their anger, I think we should examine one of the most illuminating and influential cultural milestones in a young girl's life: teen and young women's magazines. Aimed at girls from roughly age eleven to their early twenties, these magazines are consumed in a huge amount which is only further illustrated by the very well-thumbed library editions I managed to obtain in my research. A lot of girls have been seeking answers here! While many, many things starting earlier in childhood do matter hugely in a girl's socialization such as parental messages and behavioral correction strategies from adults, and one could argue that these influences are stronger than cultural mediums, I believe that these magazines offer a little microscopic view into girl world and its dangers and pleasures.

The magazines I mainly focused on were the ones that were the most well used at the library. These were: Seventeen, Twist and Glamour (a magazine aimed at slightly older women, but read hugely by teens). I found the material to cater mostly to boys, popularity and flirting and sex with some very light treatment of positive body image and, school and work, and girls 'building each other up'. Though body image, careers and friendships were claimed to be the most important things in life in these magazines, most of the page space went to how to get boys to like you, how to be popular and most of all,



how to be pretty and fashionable. The magazines are highly hypocritical in that they tell girls to 'ignore' the 'fashion police' and be themselves while posting photos of fashion Dos and Don'ts and 'who wore it best' competitions just pages away. There are articles about loving your body the way it is and about the dangers of eating disorders, yet turn the page and size zero models are sporting the latest 'must have' designs. With how much cognitive dissonance these messages must cause, is it any wonder our girls suffer from depression, anxiety and unfocused anger?

While our opinions on the influence of these cultural mediums may differ, one cannot deny their presence in the back of girls' minds as they go through the minefield of teenage-hood. Competing and sometimes allying with these messages, however, are the messages girls get about themselves at home.

Starting early in life and continuing on, the trend still seems to be to teach girls to keep their anger in check always and to keep their niceness at whatever the cost. One study found that mothers tend to punish aggressive behavior in young girls at a much higher rate than young boys, citing that it is natural for boys to play rough but that it is not acceptable for girls. Girls are also treated quite badly by all those around them when they show anger or aggression. One theory is that society is not ready to handle female aggression because women are



seen as nurturers and we cannot handle the idea that our caregivers are allowed to feel anger too. Girls are made to feel ashamed of their natural aggressive feelings and are not taught that there is a continuum of aggression ranging from fairly benign to horribly destructive. They are taught that it is an all or nothing thing. If you are aggressive you are bad, if you are not you are good. There is also a greater likelihood that any display of overt aggression amongst girls is likely to end friendships for good. Boys are allowed to yell and punch it out and remain friends but girls feel such shame over the same episodes that they are likely to not talk to each other again thus undermining the potential for more honest bonding among girls. The following controversial quote from Garbarino's book *See Jane Hit* talks about this phenomenon in a very macro social perspective:

“... [Girls] have been confronting an ever more toxic social environment. The elements of this social toxicity include spirit-deadening superficial materialism, reduced benevolent adult authority and supervision, civic cynicism and fragmentation of community, all promulgated through the vehicle of pop culture that often undermines legitimate adult authority... All these social toxins stimulate aggressive behavior. This is decisive, when coupled with the fact that girls have the innate capacity to be aggressive and that the cultural pressures for girls to give up physical aggression early and seek alternatives have been declining.”



While I agree with much of Garbarino's statement, I must say that I disagree that the pressures for girls to give up physical aggression are less. Although statistics do show that female crime is on the rise, I believe it to be quite obvious that the pressures for girls to keep their hands to themselves and use their words are still very much in place. This very pressure is why we have relational aggression and bullying.

Relational aggression has to do with girls manipulating friendships and acquaintances in their lives to subtly get what they want and to covertly express their displeasure for real or perceived wrongs. Bullying occurs when relational aggression reaches a dangerous level and the anger that girls feel towards each other or towards outside factors rises up and blows over. While there are girls who bully simply because they like to and like the power, often it is misplaced aggression that is the culprit. When girls are taught to be nice and sweet and keep 'ugly' feelings inside, the pressure relieves itself in passive-aggressive and inappropriate ways when feelings are left over time to marinate and worsen. Girls gossip about one another, suddenly exclude each other, give the silent treatment, compete ruthlessly over boys, social status and prettiness as well as outright bully each other with verbal and lately cyber abuse. Cyber abuse can be especially harmful as the anonymity of the internet is a tempting and easy outlet for someone with a lot of anger. They do not directly see the consequences of what they are doing and so do not experience appropriate guilt. It is also near impossible for victims to escape since cell phones and computers are everywhere and social media shares gossip in the blink of an eye. Educators and parents see these things happening all over and they see immense suffering and often feel they cannot do anything about it. Adults are also worried, not without cause, that verbal aggression can spill over into physical aggression and are therefore doubly concerned. They want to know why girls behave this way and what they can do about it. Perhaps the following can provide some insight.

“If you're not tough people will walk all over you”. This is a paraphrase from the book *The Secret Lives of Girls* where Sharon Lamb interviews a number of girls of all races and walks of life to determine how they experience aggression and how it makes them feel. Much of the consensus is that



girls are tired of being walked on as a group. Young girls experience a lot of unpleasant things in their lives. A popular statistic says that one in four girls will be sexually assaulted by age eighteen and many people say that it would be more if underreporting were not a problem. Most girls say they've experienced bullying and thirty-five percent of kids say they've experienced cyber bullying. Girls are expected to do more chores at home and to provide more child care for their younger siblings than boys and girls have to negotiate the rocky landscape that is relational aggression and being picked on for reasons they cannot discern. Girls are judged on weight, clothes, makeup, hair, their friends, their tastes, their class, their boyfriends and also their race and sexual orientation. While some of this is true for boys as well, the pressure on girls to fall in line and do what they're told is immense. Girls are learning that if you want to survive, you better learn how to fight. 'Fighting' can be verbal and/or physical but the power the word contains is potent. Girls are tired of being ogled by men, of being arbitrarily excluded by their peers and want more than to be 'good girls' at home. Though they may lack the skills to express this anger, it is present and very powerful.

In summation, girls and women have been put down for so long that rising up feels good. Female gang members have reported trolling the streets just to look for somebody – anybody – to beat up just so they can feel powerful and tough because at home they still have mothers who demean them or fathers who abuse them or peers who looks down on them. Girls snipe at and viciously backstab one another because they don't know what else to do. Girls are experts at misdirecting their anger. They convince themselves that they are truly angry at their best friend for having more expensive jeans but they are really angry that their father lets their brother stay out later than them. There is also something to be said about the aggression older women place on their younger counterparts. Centuries of female oppression is nothing to make light of and older women may aggress against younger women because they went through hardships and they are trying to prepare girls for the way the world really works. It takes a lot of courage to rise against these obstacles and our young girls have that strength to be sure but before we teach them to healthily express their feelings, we must teach them what unhealthy expression looks like – before it kills them.

Sadly, the greatest aggression girls express is towards themselves. Depression, anxiety, eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorders are rampant among young women. Girls as young as eight speak of childhood in the past tense and say they are 'dieting' to try to fit in better. It is important to note that when girls who self-abuse cut themselves, they say that the flow of blood feels like a release of all their tension. It is truly alarming that our girls feel so confused and filled with despair that they must scar their bodies to help themselves cope.

Along with self-harm, bullying is the other deadly force in a girl's life. A girl being bullied feels enormous hurt and rejection and thus self-harm and being picked on often go hand in hand. Perhaps as complications in a young girl's world grow, the potential for truly vile bullying becomes greater. Parental messages, the mass media, the early sexualizing of girls and the still present misogyny in our culture can be overwhelming and the vitriol has to go somewhere. A quote from See Jane Hit:

"Compare the traditional 'you're not nice' with the contemporary 'you're a fucking bitch!' for their dehumanizing and depersonalizing content. The first is a judgment of character; the second is a statement of dehumanizing contempt. There is a correlation between verbal violence and physical aggression. The more girls verbally degrade and demean one another and the more they isolate and reject one another, the



more they set the stage for depersonalization and dehumanization."

This quote is particularly powerful because it sums up the dangers of relational aggression, physical aggression and the growing pressure cooker girls seem to be stuck in and the increased lashing out that happens as a result. What this quote does not express, however, is the guilt girls feel when they aggress. As Sharon Lamb discovers in her book, girls feel tremendous guilt for even one act of aggression or meanness. This guilt may not be able to stop them from acting out again, but it will build up and cause harm. Girls are still convinced that aggression is 'improper' and not fit for a girl. They therefore can not understand their impulses to be mean or angry. Girls themselves even realize in their more contemplative moments that what they do to one another is useless and counter-productive. In the excellent book *Girls against Girls: Why we are mean to each other and how we can change*, girls' own perspectives are shown: "...we need to get better at communicating our feelings in a prompt and rational manner. Being falsely nice to friends simply to ward off potential conflict can create big problems later on..."

Passive-aggressiveness is particularly negative because it causes hurt without giving the person who is being hurt the opportunity to discuss the issue or defend themselves."



Because women are so scared of expressing anger, their slippages are punished greatly amongst themselves and in a society that will not accept direct anger from girls and therefore view them as cunning and manipulative and even less trustworthy as friends. This is why we must teach girls how not to harm but to still honor the feistiness and passion within them as legitimate and powerful.

Also, we must consider when anger and aggression is appropriate. What about righteous anger over injustice? Anger over another person wronging you? We must never forget that anger and outrage are the appropriate responses when someone violates the rights of another. If we forget this, we stamp out all impetus for social change and for our girls fighting back when attacked. We must remember that realistically, girls will face times when there are malicious people who want to hurt them and they need to be able to fight back. If we continually tell them that violence is not the answer etc. or that girls don't hit, we disempower them and make it likelier for them to freeze at key moments when they should be fighting for their lives. Rape statistics are catching up with the times and finally discovering that women who fight back are more likely to get away and furthermore even if they don't get away, they have a much shorter recovery time than those who remain passive. Of course, every situation requires different evaluation but shouldn't we teach girls that hitting is sometimes the answer?



Essentially what we want in our girls and their culture is a balance. We want strong girls who are not victims but who still empathize with others. We want girls to be direct with each other so their emotions don't get bottled up but we don't want constant schoolyard brawls. Female aggression that causes harm and is criminal certainly needs to be stopped but we must never teach girls that anger is not ok and that they are not 'supposed' to feel it. To encourage our girls to feel, honor and properly channel their own anger is to give them a gift of immense freedom and empowerment and I cannot think of a better way to show girls and women that they are loved and valued. By acknowledging their good and their 'bad' we allow them to be whole human beings at long last.

For good advice on how to teach girls this crucial balance, see the following lists" From Sugar and Spice and no Longer Nice by Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Howard R. Spivak Violence Prevention Tips:

1. Teach girls to be nonviolent and nonvictim.
2. Teach and model health assertiveness.
3. Don't trivialize the pain felt by bullied children.
4. Don't overlook adult bullies and institutional bullies (racism and sexism)
5. Remember that the adults at school may not respond to threats made by a child against another child or may not know how to respond.
6. Be willing to help change your child's environment – make new friends; change your place of worship and so on.
7. Celebrate your child's accomplishments.
8. Use creative punishment that promotes healthy activities and sets the stage for more accomplishments to celebrate.
9. Use role playing – even at home. Introduce your child to new friends.
10. Ask your adult friends to help you with your child
11. Get a professional caregiver involved in your child's life early on.
12. If your child's behavior hurts you, let her know it, but remember that you are the adult – don't stop talking or listening to your child.
13. Don't excuse your child's bad behavior, but don't overreact either. Punish or discipline in ways that help your daughter develop the skills and capacity to be a healthy adult.
14. Get to know the parents of your daughter's friends; create a network.