

WHEN KIDS ACT MEAN

Why Young Children Act in Unkind Ways And How to Help

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ABOUT ME

- Clinical Social Worker
- Working in the EC field for 35 plus years
 - Family and play therapist
 - Director of Parenting Resources at ZERO TO THREE for 20 years
- Returned to private practice:
 - Parent consultation
 - Preschool consultation
- Write extensively on understanding and supporting young children's development

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It turns out our little Miranda (5) is a "mean girl." Her teacher reports that she is very bossy at school, dictating to her peers what they can and cannot do. She uses threats to get her way—telling kids they won't be invited to her house for a playdate or she will tell the teacher on them if they don't do what she wants. She excludes kids from her play, especially when she is 1:1 with another child. She tells the "intruder" to go away, repeating that perennial, preschool mantra: "No thank you!" She also criticizes her classmates' work and teases them when they make a mistake. At home, she constantly puts her brother down and won't let him play with her unless he follows all her commands. He can't have a say in anything.



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DEFINITION

Using the threat of removing friendship, ostracism, and other forms of social exclusion (Crick & Grotpeter 1995, 711)

Behavior that manipulates or damages relationships between individuals or groups, such as bullying, gossiping, and humiliation. (APA)

- "You talk like a baby. You can't play with us."
- "I won't be your friend unless you let me be the princess and you are my pet."



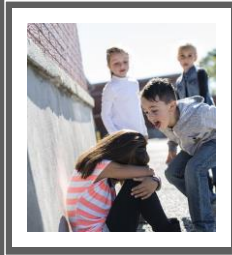
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INCIDENCE

Relational aggression is now seen in children as young as 3.

Studies of the relationship between gender and relational aggression among elementary school children have different findings, but most show that girls use relational aggression more frequently than boys (Godleski & Ostrov 2010).

In studies of preschoolers, the findings are somewhat less clear. Several researchers report either small or no differences in rates of relational aggression between 4- and 5-year-old boys and girls (Murray-Close & Ostrov 2009; Lansford et al. 2012).



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COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WHO USE RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

- Often the most sophisticated and developmentally advanced with well-developed perspective-taking and empathy skills. (Ostrov et al. 2013).
- Often popular with peers. (Roseth et al. 2007).



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WHY KIDS ACT MEAN



- Projection of their own insecurity and self-doubt.
- Excluding peers may be a coping mechanism for children who feel uncomfortable with the complexity of group dynamics.
- It gives them a sense of power when they are feeling powerless.
- They are experience feelings of being excluded (ie when there is a new baby in the family) and are acting this out with others.



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HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN ARE MORE LIKELY TO USE RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

- HSC's are wired to register their feelings and experiences in the world more deeply than other children.
- HSC's tend to be more self-conscious—keenly tuned in to how other's see them. When they can't do something exactly as they want or expect, or when they aren't the winner—the "best", they experience it as a loss of control and feel ashamed of their perceived "failure."
- When they see other kids struggling, it triggers their own sense of vulnerability. Because those feelings are hard to tolerate, they project them onto those children and put them down, like we saw with Sumi.
- To compensate for their feelings of insecurity, these kids also need to outdo everyone.



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RELATIONAL AGGRESSION HAS DETRIMENTAL IMPACTS ON BOTH THE AGGRESSOR AND THE VICTIM

Preschoolers who are relationally aggressive are significantly more likely to be rejected by peers than those who are nonaggressive (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner 2006).

Children who use relational aggression for a long time experience more adjustment difficulties and are more likely to need assistance from mental health professionals (Young, Boye, & Nelson 2006).

Engaging in relational aggression in elementary school is a strong predictor of psychological and social maladjustment throughout life (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner 2006)

It is also associated with poor academic performance and socialization problems (Preddy & Fite 2012; Risser 2013).



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HOW TO RESPOND: KEY MINDSHIFTS



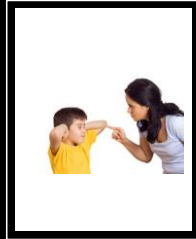
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THE RISKS OF SHAMING KIDS

• Children who engage in relational aggression are often acting out of their own insecurities and sense of shame. While they are choosing their actions, they are driven by deep-seated underlying feelings they are not able to make sense of or manage in pro-social ways.

• Shame is a very toxic emotion that shuts children down and makes it less likely they will absorb and act on the important lessons we are trying to teach them.

• Problem with using the term "bully"



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TUNE IN TO YOURSELF

Take time to reflect on your own experience with RA so you avoid acting on triggers that may interfere in your ability to effectively support children in managing these complex interactions.



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Avoid "schooling"—it is experienced as criticism which shuts kids down.

We can't *make* children be kind. Our job is to show our children that we are on their side; that we will be a trusted helper who will guide them to think through their experiences in a non-judgmental way, so they can learn to make the best choices for themselves.





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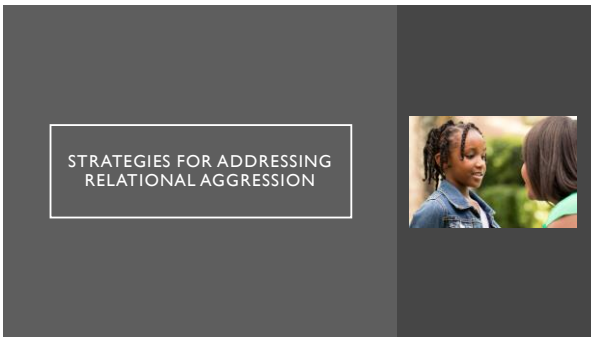
Limits of "teaching" kindness:

- Kids three and older "know" what is right and wrong.
- It doesn't address the underlying issues that are driving the unkind behavior.

When Forcing Backfires:

- "You can't say you can't play."





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TALK ABOUT CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

- Identify with the children a list of kind and unkind behaviors.
- Teach them about "group" vs "solo" behaviors.
- Describe how you will help kids when they are acting unkind.


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COMMUNICATE THEY ARE ALL GOOD KIDS EVEN WHEN THEY ARE ACTING IN UNKIND WAYS

Brainstorm why sometimes kids act in "mean" ways to give them insight into the meaning of behavior.

Normalize all feelings.

Normalize that most kids will have a hard time being kind sometimes, and that you will be their helpers.



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CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Ensure there is adequate supervision, especially in areas where children engage in less structured activities.

Avoid publicly shaming kids. Describe experiences versus using labels.



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HELP CHILDREN TUNE INTO THE OUTCOME OF THEIR BEHAVIOR

Make an empathetic connection to open kids up to reflecting on and rethinking their behavior.

Start by establishing that the child is a kind person who sometimes has a hard time *acting* kind.

Introduce the idea of being "Social Detectives"


*From Social Thinking, Michelle Garcia Winner




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USE SOCIAL STORIES

Retelling an event very matter-of-factly, without judgment or any editorial commentary. This enables children to more objectively reflect on the situation, dissect it, and then be more likely to change their behavior to get a better outcome.



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ENCOURAGE REFLECTION

Ask questions that get their wheels turning.

The idea is to refrain from telling the child what to do, and instead, help them think through their experiences, as objectively as possible



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SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Once children see you are not trying to tell them what to do or shame them for their actions, they are more likely to be open to hearing what you have to say.



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PROVIDE A TOOL TO HELP CHILDREN STOP UNKIND BEHAVIOR

Come up with a cue word that you will say out loud when you see a child going down an unkind path, to help them pause and see if they can make a course correction before things spiral out of control.

Providing this kind of support demonstrates to the child that you are on their side and are helping them make better choices.



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READ AND DISCUSS BOOKS ABOUT FEELINGS AND SOCIAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Ask questions like:

- "What happened to the character in the book?"
- Why do you think people treated him or her that way?"
- How does it feel to be treated that way?"
- How else could the characters responded? What would you have done if you were there to help?"



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CONNECT AND COLLABORATE WITH PARENTS



- Put yourself in their shoes so you can lead with empathy when reaching out to discuss difficult behaviors.
- Share what you are observing objectively, without interpreting the behavior or using triggering labels or language, ie: aggressive, mean, lacks empathy
- Show compassion for how hard it is to hear this difficult information about their child.
- Ask for their observations. If they see similar behaviors, how are they addressing them.
- Share insights into potential meaning of these behaviors—based on experience with other children in your care.
- Make referrals for therapeutic support if deemed an important next step.

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PROMISING PROGRAMS

A recent review of interventions for relational aggression, relational victimization, and relational bullying suggests that the majority of promising aggression programs are geared toward school-aged children with few being developed for young children (Leff et al., 2018).

The Walk Away, Ignore, Talk It Out, Seek Help (WITS, Leadbeater et al., 2003) program is a school-based, whole school, universal prevention effort that begins in kindergarten and is designed to reduce peer victimization by promoting social and emotional learning and conflict resolution skills, delivered primarily via children's literature. The initial trial demonstrated some evidence of reduction of peer victimization subtypes among school-aged children (Leadbeater et al., 2003) because it includes kindergarten as a promising for additional early childhood work.

The Early Childhood Friendship Project (ECFP) was developed to decrease physical and relational aggression, physical and relational victimization, physical and relational bullying, and promote social and emotional skills among preschoolers (Ostrov et al., 2009). This developmentally appropriate program uses projects, behavioral reinforcement sessions, and active/positive activities in a universal classroom-wide implementation and has now been tested in two randomized trials. It shows promise in reducing negative behaviors and promoting prosocial behavior (e.g., sharing, inclusion of others) among preschoolers from various backgrounds (Ostrov et al., 2009; 2015).

FROM: Jamie M. Ostrov, Kristin J. Perry, in [Encyclopedia of Infant and Early Childhood Development](#) (Second Edition), 2020




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PROMISING
PROGRAMS

The following are some programs recognized by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as effective for teaching SEL skills to young children:

- **AI's Pals** – teaches SEL skills to young children through explicit instruction to develop social competence, autonomy and problem-solving.
- **I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)** – teaches key vocabulary for understanding feelings and engaging in problem-solving.
- **The Incredible Years Series** – three different curricula for children, teachers and parents.
- **The Child Training program (Dinosaur Curriculum)** emphasizes developing skills to understand and recognize feelings, solve problems, manage anger and develop and maintain friendships.



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PROMISING
PROGRAMS

Promoting Alternative Thinking Skills (PATHS) – this preschool/kindergarten program promotes emotional literacy, self-control, social competence, positive peer relations and interpersonal problem-solving skills through scripted lessons.

Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Support Network Information: Program-Wide PBS designed for use in early childhood settings.

Stopbullying.gov U.S. government website serves as the clearinghouse for bullying related information and resources.

Training Center for Safe Schools provides training and consultation for administrators and school staff on policy development, evidence-based prevention and intervention programs, schoolwide planning and evaluation of prevention efforts.



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OTHER RESOURCES


- **Sesame Street:** Good Birds Club video and the Happy to Be Me Anti-Bullying videos provide discussion guide to promote discussion among young children.
- **Social Thinking Curriculum** by Michelle Garcia Winner
- **NAEYC website**
- **PACERS National Bullying Prevention Center:** A website dedicated to providing anti-bullying information, resources to parents, teachers and the community.

Books for kids:

- Willow Finds a Way by Lana Buttom

Books for adults:

- No More Mean Girls by Katie Hurley



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