

Girl bullies don't leave black eyes, just agony

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By Jane Elizabeth, Post-Gazette Education Writer

ERIE -- To most adults, the typical school bully is the beefy kid who knocks the books out of the hands of the bespectacled ninth-grader in the hallway, or the hulking football player who tosses the swim team member into the shower stall.

But in the world of adolescent girls, the school bully wears glitter fingernail polish.

She has the latest jewelry, jeans and shoes. She has her hair professionally done. She has tickets to sold-out rock concerts, a membership at a tanning salon and all the premium cable channels.

The girl-bully is skinny, pretty and seemingly perfect.

And she can make other girls' lives so horrible that, decades later, they'll break down in tears just talking about it -- if they can talk about it at all.

With the recent publication of several books and studies on girl-bullies and their victims, there's been much discussion of the issue. Probably no one is hearing more about the topic than the staff of the Ophelia Project in Erie.

The project has been around since 1997, offering self-esteem programs and mentors for girls.

But the heart of the project is a school program called "How Girls Hurt Each Other." Using older teens as mentors for younger girls, it's meant to address the often Machiavellian methods of girl-bullies.

With this month's release of "Odd Girl Out: The Culture of Hidden Aggression in Girls," a book by Ophelia Project member Rachel Simmons, the program has been inundated by e-mails and phone calls "from ocean to ocean" and around the world, said Assistant Director Holly Nishimura, and it was featured on "Dateline NBC" last night.

In the three years since the killings at Columbine High School in Colorado, where the teasing and tormenting of two students who lived outside the social circle apparently played a part in their deadly response, "anti-bullying" programs have become commonplace in schools across the country. In Pennsylvania, a bill making its way through the state Legislature would mandate anti-bullying policies in all the state's public schools.

But, experts say, those programs revolve around the boy-bully model, in which physical aggression is the mainstay.



Ophelia Project volunteer Stacey Alex, right, plays the aggressor in a skit with, from left, Laura Audet, April Clark and Ellen Anderson, all McDowell High School seniors and project volunteers. The Ophelia Project, based in Erie, is one of the few anti-bully programs for girls in the country. (Martha Rial, Post-Gazette)

Rumors and manipulation

Girl-bullies, on the other hand, "use backbiting, exclusion, rumors, name-calling and manipulation to inflict psychological pain on targeted victims," Simmons wrote.

And girl-bullies' victims are often harder to detect.

While boys "come in with a black eye," said Nishimura, girls usually are "under the radar," carrying their scars inside, hidden even from their parents.

For her book, Simmons conducted hundreds of interviews with girls and women, some of whom described bullying so severe that they developed ulcers and eating disorders, transferred to other schools, used drugs, or became depressed or suicidal and underwent psychological counseling well into their adult years.

She found that much of the aggression results from a bully, and as many girls as she can rally, targeting one lone classmate, often for no particular reason. The girls will start rumors about the victim, pass notes in class or write embarrassing letters to boys and sign the victim's name.

They'll have parties and make sure the victim knows, but not invite her. They'll crowd the lunch table so there's no room for her to sit.

And in the 21st century, they use technology as a weapon. Three-way calling, for instance, is wildly popular among younger girls, who will put a third party on the line secretly and then get a victim to say embarrassing things about her.

"Instant messaging" or IM -- an Internet service in which several people can have a real-time conversation simultaneously -- also is epidemic in the world of girl-bullies.

The evil here is that the users, known as "buddies" in IM lingo, can use a fake name, steal someone else's name or pose as several different people while insulting and defaming an unfortunate victim.

"You can multiply yourself a hundred times, and the girl ends up thinking the whole world is against her," said Ellen Anderson, an 18-year-old senior at Erie McDowell High School who works as a leader for Ophelia's "How Girls Hurt Each Other" project.

Anderson is one of seven high school seniors, all smart and charming, who once were bullies and victims themselves. As 10th-graders, the girls were recruited by Ophelia team leader Katie Allison, and during an intense summer training session, learned the ramifications of being the bully and the bullied.

Three groups of girls

Now, they take their experiences on the road.

After dozens of visits to classrooms full of junior high girls whose schools have signed up for the program, the teens say they can walk into any room and pick out the mean girls and their targets.

One of the first tasks is to quietly identify girls in three groups: what they call the "aggressors," the "victims" and "the girls in the middle."

The aggressors -- also called the girl-bullies, the queen bees, the RMGs (Really Mean Girls) or the alpha girls, depending on which book you read -- typically walk into a room with a small entourage and tell other girls where to sit.

"They're false. They're overconfident. They're loud," said Anderson. "They're always dressed perfectly. They make themselves look like they have a perfect life."

The victims, she said, look "terrified, walking with their heads down. They walk in quietly, and alone."

It's the girls in the middle, however, who are the pivotal group. They're the girls who might alternately be victims or aggressors, often choosing to be bullies because the alternative is too devastating.

"Most of these girls [in the middle] don't know the power that they have," said Kristen Schnepf, 17.

As the largest group, they are a primary focus of the mentors, who use skits to help the younger girls make better decisions about conflicts and friendships. In the skits, the Ophelia team often assigns the real bullies to play the parts of the victims, while the real victims get to be the aggressors.

Besides role-playing, the Ophelia teens talk one on one with the younger girls and have frank discussions in small groups.

The teens also tell their own stories of being the bully and the bullied in their younger years. But outside of the program, they don't like to talk about that period of their lives -- it's too painful.

Sometimes, said 18-year-old Nancy Cipriani, it's nearly too much to hear the younger girls describe how they've been hurt at the hands of their peers.

"It's like, all of a sudden we're back in seventh grade and we're feeling victimized again," she said.

But, she added, "that's what keeps us going. You can forgive a person, but you can never forget what they've done to you."

The teens warn young girl-bullies that what they do to other girls today, "they'll remember 20 years from now," Cipriani said.

On the Net:

For more information on the Ophelia Project, go to <http://www.opheliaproject.org/> or call 814-734-5628.

Drawn-out torture

With boys, bullying incidents can be intense but they're usually short-lived and easily forgotten.

"If a boy doesn't get invited to the movies by his friends," he might be angry initially, said team leader Katie Allison, "but the next day, they're all out skateboarding."

Not so for girls, who tend to use a kind of slow torture that is manipulative, calculating and sometimes even brilliant. The Ophelia teens call it "R.A." -- "relational aggression."

In her book, Simmons gives examples of girls who have put considerable effort into humiliating their victims.

One group of girls invented a fictitious rock band and told their victim that the group was real. The victim, desperately wanting to fit in, claimed to be a fan of the band. The bully who led the group invented a video she had seen, created songs and sang lyrics in the hallway, all as a way of eliciting responses from the unsuspecting victim such as, "Yeah, I heard that on the radio yesterday."

The ruse went on for months, with the bully and her group entertained by the victim appearing more and more foolish every day.

In another typical story, Simmons described the ordeal of "Jenny," the new girl in school whom two bullies decided to target -- for their entire seventh-grade year. For inexplicable reasons, they called Jenny "Harriet the Whore."

"Brianna and Mackenzie started a club called Hate Harriet the Hore Incorporated," Simmons wrote. "They got every girl to join except two who didn't care. All the members had to walk by Jenny in the hallway and say, 'Hhiiiiiiii.' They made a long sighing noise to make sure she knew they were sounding out the initials of the club: HHH."

Later, the girls passed around a petition and bullied other girls into signing it. It directed them to "promise to Hate Harriet the Hore forever."

An adult might be able to overcome that kind of humiliation, but it's much harder for a young girl. Such humiliation campaigns -- no matter how silly they seem to adults -- can lead to serious psychological problems.

Through their own experiences and their dealings with younger girls, the Ophelia team has developed advice for parents of adolescent girls.

First on their list: Pay attention.

"If they overhear a screaming conversation on the phone, they should say something," said 18-year-old Laura Audet. "Be open and listen to your daughters. Ask if everything is OK. Don't be afraid to talk to them."

Also, the girls said, problems that seem trivial to parents can be traumatic for their daughters.

"Parents shouldn't judge how bad the problem is," said Stacey Alex, 18. "In their lives, girls are so dramatic about everything. It's always the end of the world. Don't say, 'Oh, you're going to have so many more important problems.' "

Cipriani warned that parents need to acknowledge that "there are always two sides to a story" and that, yes, their daughters might be bullies.

Though the seven seniors in the Ophelia program will graduate in June, several more girls have been trained to take their place. With the growing interest in girl-bullies, the project's directors hope that more communities will use its programs as a model.

The teens know that their work hasn't nearly solved every problem. But they're sure that "fewer girls will have to go through some of the same stuff we went through," said Cipriani, and that those girls will help future generations of girls.

"We don't want our own daughters to come home crying," she said.