

Stacy Howes, Master of Arts, May 2007

Committee: Cindy Schaeffer (Chair), Susan Sonnenschein, Charissa Cheah, and Anne Brodsky

Gender Responsive Therapy for Adolescent Girls Who Abuse Substances:
Understanding Loss of voice and Social/Relational aggression

Adolescent girls face numerous developmental challenges unique to their age and gender. Three areas of the study of female adolescent development have been particularly neglected: loss of voice, social/relational aggression, and substance abuse. Loss of voice involves learning to always be nice and passive, and feeling disempowered. Social/relational aggression involves harming relationships and negative nonverbal behaviors, and it is more prevalent in girls, possibly because girls are not encouraged to express anger. Substance abuse among adolescent girls has grown over the years, and girls may begin using and continue using substances for different reasons than boys. Substance abuse, social/relational aggression, and loss of voice are linked to feelings of depression and disempowerment, and it is possible that they are connected to one another.

In the present study, the associations between the above constructs were explored using a sample of adolescent girls participating in a gender responsive therapy program called Perseverance. In order to explore the constructs, the girls of Perseverance participated in observations, interviews, and self-report data collection techniques. First, the girls were observed within their group treatment settings, and episodes of social/relational aggression were recorded. Then, there were three treatment groups, and approximately half of the girls from each treatment group were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of what types of social/aggression were occurring and why. Finally, the girls completed questionnaires which served the purpose of providing exploratory data about the girls' loss of voice, social/relational aggression, substance abuse, and depression.

Social/relational aggression occurred in all three treatment groups, but only two girls spontaneously mentioned it as being a problem. Certain girls were regularly the perpetrators while others were regularly the victims of social/relational aggression. Social/relational aggression was not always intended to be malicious, and it could function as playful or helpful. Even when it was intended to be playful or helpful, it was not always perceived as playful or helpful. Almost every girl engaged in social/relational aggression. There were three main types, exclusion, gossip, and nonverbal, and social/relational aggression was associated with threats of physical violence one time. It seems that girls in this group who regularly rely on social/relational aggression are not engaging in positive ways to disagree with other girls. Also, their actions might be disruptive to their relationships. In this group, social/relational aggression was quite mild for the most part, but there were a few episodes that were more serious in nature (i.e., physical threats). Most of the girls and counselors stated that they thought social/relational aggression was a normal part of being an adolescent girl.

Additionally, the girls sometimes made positive connections to each other while, at other times, the connections were negative. Their positive connections with other girls included building strength in one another and learning to listen to the experiences and stories of other girls and learning from those stories. As a result, the girls are experiencing the positive aspects of gender responsive therapy. On the other hand, the girls also experienced the negative aspects of gender responsive therapy, particularly when they expressed various levels of disconnection from the other girls and the group as a whole. Additionally, the girls engaged in deviancy

training. The girls in Perseverance expressed both positive and negative feelings about being part of this treatment program.

Gender responsive treatment programs can use this information in the future in order to understand what might happen between girls in their programs. Girls may use social/relational aggression, and there may be girls who rely on it too much. When this happens, it would be beneficial for the counselors to know how to handle the situation. Helping the girls to understand that social/relational aggression can be hurtful and that there are other ways for girls to bond with and disagree with other girls is an important component to gender responsive therapy.