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# Preadolescent Violence Among Girls

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## **Abstract**

This research study explored preadolescent girl-to-girl violence based on the perceptions of the victim at 14 years of age and those of her family. Using a heuristic research design (Moustakas, 1990), this constant comparative analysis of multiple data sources found (a) a clearly delineated progression of girl-to-girl violence, (b) blindness surrounding girl-to-girl violence in the responses of not only the victim's family but also the victim herself, and (c) proactive factors and strategies for early recognition and prevention of girl-to-girl violence. The implications based on these findings include examining when and under what conditions various forms of aggression emerged, alternative trajectories of victimization, and future research that can inform the prevention of girl-to-girl violence.

## **Keywords**

girl-to-girl violence, school violence, self regulation

## **Introduction**

Girls are capable of violence (Lagerspetz & Björkqvist, 1994; Osterman, Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, Kaukiainen, Laudau, Fraczek, & Caprara, 1998). Research shows that girl-to-girl violence tends to be relational in nature typically taking the form of social alienation, spreading of rumors, and otherwise

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manipulating the victim's peer group and mainly stems from competition for male attention (Artz, 1998; Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). The literature by Lagerspetz et al., also suggests that because sanctions against relational aggression are virtually nonexistent, there is a lower rate of physical aggression among girls that can be attributed to their recognition of the consequences. Aber, Brown, and Jones (2003) found that the rate of increase in hostile attribution bias and aggressive fantasies toward peers was sharper for preadolescent girls (6-12.5 years) than boys.

## **Violence and the Culture of Girls and Boys**

Although males tend to engage in physical or overt aggression such as bullying and fighting more frequently than females (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Pellegrini & Long, 2002), Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992) distinguished direct physical aggression (e.g., punching), direct verbal aggression (e.g., name calling), and indirect or relational aggression (e.g., covert third-party gossiping, spreading rumors, and social exclusion) in both boys and girls as strategic and developmental in nature. Thorne (1993) characterized the different cultures of boys and girls in Grades 4 and 5 as "The boys' world" and "The girls' world." Thorne indicates that the boys take up more space out of doors, with large groups of boys involved in more rough-and-tumble play including shoving, pushing, and grabbing. Even in the language of play and sport, boys express physical strength and force and their place in the competitive hierarchy through verbal threats such as "I'm gonna hit you, if you don't shut up." In fact, as Thorne asserts from her research, boys also bond when they are aggressive toward girls. Girls on the other hand create "intimate groups and friendship pairs" (p. 92) and support their popularity through small-scale, turn-taking cooperative play. Girls generate gestures of intimacy such as grooming their friends, positively commenting on physical appearance, borrowing clothes, monitoring one another's emotions, and sharing secrets and becoming "mutually vulnerable through self-disclosure" to construct intimacy and connection. Thorne indicates that girls carry out and break dyads, triads and maneuver alliances and promote shifting alliances through talk with third parties. Conflict is not addressed directly by girls but carried out through reports to and by third parties. When girls are involved in what Thorne characterizes as "mock violence," the physical encounters usually involve chasing, pushing, and pinning from behind. Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) proposed that the ability to aggress strategically in ways that are socially dominant, indirect, and private or relational in nature result in perceived popularity for girls. In fact for girls there is a bidirectional association

between relational aggression and perceived popularity. Therefore, according to Rose et al., if girls are perceived as popular and having followers, this may lead to greater relational aggression. However, some postulate that girls are beginning to perceive physical dominance as an integral part of securing power (Artz, 1998). Thorne indicates that these female perpetrators used insults about hygiene or appearance most often against girls but used threats, such as “shut up” or “I’ll punch you out,” with both boys and girls, and they used physical aggression only *against boys*.

Literature on girl-to-girl violence has explored the perspective of the perpetrator (Artz, 1988; Chesney-Lind, 2004; Daly, 2008; Olweus, 1995; Ringrose, 2006; Thorne, 1993) describing who they are and what theoretically and pragmatically might lead to these acts of violence. Literature on girls and boys who are victims has included the classification of victims (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001) and the negative effects of victimization (Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002; Snyder, Brooker, Patrick, Synder, Schrepferman, & Stoolmiller, 2003). However reports from families are tangentially used to support the need for prevention programs (Olweus, 2001). Debarbieux (2002) cautioned researchers to sensitively explore the point of view of victims rather than “relegate them to the realms of ‘subjectivism’” (p.39). To respond sensitively to the question of victimization, Hanish and Guerra (2004) suggested that future research should follow the developmental trajectory of victimization in context and extend present methodologies to include qualitative approaches. To better understand school violence among preadolescent girls, we must not only be attuned to the perpetrators but we must also be attentive to the perceptions of the victims. Thus this study focused on the following research questions: What are the retrospective perceptions of a Grade 9 student of having been a victim of girl-to-girl violence at 11-12 years of age, as well as the retrospective perceptions of her family regarding this girl-to-girl violence?

## Method

### Coresearchers

Qualitative purposeful sampling was used to select Lina, a Grade 9 student, based on her involvement in a self-reported year-long experience of girl-to-girl violence in Grade 7. The geographical context for the girl-to-girl violence was the Pacific Northwest. The snowball technique (Creswell, 2008) involves having prospective participants recommend the “best people to study.” The sample was identified from a high school of 250 students. As

a consultant, I had been asked by the parents of a Grade 8 student about research related to the positive and negative impact of tutoring. The family indicated that their daughter had experienced an academic setback in her Grade 7 year and had also experienced girl-to-girl violence. This family indicated that they knew of three other families of older and younger girls who experienced girl-to-girl violence including Lina and her family. Lina was recommended by the families because of her maturity and ability to remember and articulate her experiences of girl-to-girl violence. According to Moustakas (1990) participants were included in the story based on their “set of criteria for selection of participants—for example age, sex, socioeconomic status and education factors, ability to articulate the experience, cooperation, interest, willingness to make the commitment, enthusiasm and degree of involvement” (p. 46). Based on these recommendations and her willingness to participate in the research, I selected Lina when she was in Grade 9 to retrospectively discuss her Grade 7 experiences of girl-to-girl violence.

In addition, Lina’s parents and grandparents were also interviewed (Baird & Jenkins, 2003; Collins & Long, 2003) over a 4-month time period. The selection of Lina and her family was in accord with Bogdan and Biklen (2003), who indicated that in purposeful sampling “you choose particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (p. 65). The interviews with the parents and grandparents were conducted because Lina spoke of her family as consisting of her parents and grandparents. In addition, these individual interviews were explored to enrich the understanding of girl-to-girl violence by recognizing the effects of this violence on all family members. All five interviews, transcription, and member checking took place over a 5-month period.

### *Data Sources*

Multiple data sources including interviews with multiple participants, official and personal documents, and researcher field notes and journals were used. Lina’s Grade 7 report cards for the year, her journal including art and her poetry were also used to support trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to provide a deeper understanding of her experience of girl-to-girl violence. The 20 open-ended interview questions were based upon the literature of girl-to-girl violence, the trajectories of victimization (Artz, 1998; Boyer, 2003; Debarbieux, 2002; Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988), and the 7 heuristic research questions a primary researcher might ask a coresearcher (Moustakas, 1990) including, (a) What does the person know about the experience being studied? (b) What qualities or dimensions of the experience

stand out for the person? That is, what examples are vivid and alive? (c) What events, situations and people are connected with the experience? (d) What feelings and thoughts are generated by the experience? (e) What bodily states or shifts in bodily presence occur in the experience? (f) What time and space factors affect the person's awareness and meaning of the experience? and (g) Has the person shared all of the significant ingredients or constituents of the experience? (p. 48)

## Procedures

A Heuristic research design was used in this study to empathically reach the essence of each participant's engagement with the phenomena of girl-to-girl violence. According to Moustakas (1990), the researcher is gripped by the need to tell each participant's story in an authentic and respectful manner synthesizing their behaviors and emotions into one composite formulation. By following the procedures, replication can occur up to a point; however, applicability is of more interest to the heuristic researcher. The heuristic form of inquiry is autobiographic, yet with virtually every research question that matters personally there is also a social—and perhaps universal—significance (p. 15). I was guided by the six heuristic phases according to Moustakas (1990): (a) *Initial Engagement*: My interest in this topic stemmed from being a victim of extortion in elementary school. More recently, I was impassioned by the narratives of Lina and her family and I wanted to find out more. Because of its autobiographical nature, I was able to get inside the research questions and become one with them and thus really achieve an understanding of the responses of the coresearchers. . According to Moustakas, “there is a passionate, yet disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated or answered” (p. 15). (b) *Immersion*: Immersion in the topic and question, according to Moustakas, includes review and assessment of the published literature. In addition, for me, every working moment became a time to learn more about the topic. In fact, during one visit to the gym for a personal health and fitness break, I found an article on “Girl Power” which said that girls needed to be more aggressive than in the past. (c) *Incubation*: Incubation is a time when the researcher is unconsciously restructuring thoughts or what Polyani (1964) indicated is a process of spontaneous mental reorganization uncontrolled by conscious effort. (d) *Illumination*: According to Moustakas and through my own personal voyage this was a breakthrough phase for me. Illumination “opens the door to a new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or an altogether new discovery of something that

has been present for some time yet beyond immediate awareness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 30). At this time, I realized that that the research on violence, bullying, and aggression seemed to exclude the voice of the victim. I then realized that, to fully understand the victim’s voice, the full context of an ecological perspective was required. These insights allowed me to sharpen the research question and develop the procedural subquestions. (e) *Explication*: This involved looking at the philosophical, scientific, and psychological bases of heuristic inquiry while collecting and analyzing the data. The tape-recorded interviews were typed into transcripts by the researcher. In addition, the field notes, which were taken during the interviews, and personal researcher journal entries were completed immediately after each interview and typed into transcriptions. The transcription of interviews, field notes, and researcher journal entries took 7 to 10 hours per interview transcription for a total of 50 hours of transcription time and 175 pages of transcription notes. I developed a portrait of each participant and contacted them for feedback. They offered additional points and clarification, which were included in the final construction of the individual and comprehensive portraits. The analyses included the use of “a comprehensive knowledge of all materials for each participant and for the group of participants collectively” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 49) using a heuristic research design to create portraits of individuals who experienced girl-to-girl violence firsthand. From the totality of these individual depictions of girl-to-girl violence, a composite depiction of girl-to-girl violence was formulated. (f) *Creative Synthesis*: In this final phase, the research expresses “knowledge, passion and presence” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 52) in a poetic, musical, art form, or narrative form. I took a unified view of the victims’ experiences of girl-to-girl violence to create a narrative including the perspectives of Lina, her Mom and Dad, and grandmother and grandfather. This narrative portrait of Lina has been created to go beyond the label of victim and present the people within the experience.

After receiving informed consent from all participants in the study, I scheduled individual interviews at a convenient time and location for each participant. All five interviews were conducted using a conversational interview or dialogue style (Moustakas, 1990) and took place when Lina was in Grade 9. Conversation, according to Moustakas denotes an exchange of thoughts and feelings through accurate and empathic listening and a receptive and flexible response to the contributions of the participants. Furthermore, there must be a willingness on the part of the researcher to build a relationship with the participants. The foundation of this relationship is built on mutual trust, good will, and a willingness on the part of the researcher to be emotionally touched by the phenomenon being discussed.

The five individual interviews were 2 to 3.5 hours in length. The individual interviews were done over a 5-month period to include interview time, transcription, member checking, and approved modifications based on the member checking. During the interviews, I replaced many verbal contributions with gestural support and complete attention stopping the audiotape machine to hold a hand, pat a shoulder, or procure a tissue. With comments such as “I was in that time, not my present space when I talked about the bullying” and “I was totally in the memories of the circumstances,” the participants indicated comfort and trust in the process. I gained their trust and negotiated a relationship that did not fit their expectations of researcher behavior advocating “more of you, and less of me.” I said very little beyond the interview questions and neutral prompts, yet the participants announced “we had a really good conversation.”

Immediately after each conversational interview, I recorded field notes about the context (e.g., interviewee mannerisms) and journal entries describing thoughts and opinions about the interview responses. Then I transcribed the interviews as Moustakas suggested “in order to provide a basis for the analysis of constituents, themes, and essences of the experience” (p. 49). The interviews were transcribed “in vivo” to capture the exact words of the participants (Creswell, 2008).

Another aspect of this research was the use of retrospective accounting of Lina’s story. Lina and her family experienced the girl-to-girl violence when Lina was in Grade 7 but Lina and the family were interviewed when Lina was in Grade 9. The use of retrospective accounting presents what Creswell (2008) indicated was an accurate depiction of how the participants had come to understand the situation now as they think back on it. For example, Lina, at the time of the interview was at a different developmental stage moving from early adolescence into more of the cognitively developed period of adolescence. Lina, as a Grade 9 student today can bring a different understanding to the situation of girl-to-girl violence than when she was experiencing the girl-to-girl violence. In addition, Lina has had a little distance from the traumatic situation, so perhaps is able to bring more perspective to her accounting of it. This development is apparent in Lina’s story line; for example, Lina indicates that things might have been different if Val had come over to her house, that her parents might have had more of a sense of what was going on. These are the sentiments of an early adolescent, still reliant on her parents’ judgment. In this way a retrospective accounting is a valid research tool for this research on girl-to-girl violence. Creswell (2008) indicated that “the collection of multiple field texts, the triangulation of data and member checking can help ensure that good data are collected” (p. 522) when employing retrospective

narrative. Thus the analysis included the use of “a comprehensive knowledge of all materials for each participant and for the group of participants collectively” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 49) to clarify and support the accounts offered by each of the participants. Constant comparative analysis was used by repeatedly examining the multiple data sources to determine the central themes and to create a composite depiction. Moustakas (1990) indicated that validation for heuristics is subjective according to the work of Bridgeman but verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants through comparative analysis.

For heuristic research the question of applicability according to Moustakas (1990) is one of meaning: “Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly and accurately the meaning and essences of the experience?” (p. 32). I employed member checking as a process to support this vivid accuracy of the findings from this retrospective perspective. I asked Lina and her family to check the accuracy of the account by reading the report so that there was an accurate accounting of how they came to understand the situation now as they think back on it. Member checking was also done to ensure that the report fully explored the topic and the retrospective remembering was supported authentically (Creswell, 2008).

## **Analysis**

There are four steps to heuristic research analysis identified by Moustakas. First, heuristic analysis was used to identify the core themes and patterns. The second heuristic step involved using “a comprehensive knowledge of all materials for each participant and for the group of participants collectively” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 49). The third step involves creating individual portraits reflecting how the participants described themselves and their contributions to this narrative on girl-to-girl violence. From the totality of these individual depictions, the fourth step was a creative synthesis or a composite depiction with all of the voices blended to characterize the individual experiences and ecological process within the group.

## **Results**

As a heuristic researcher, I had to cross the gap that lies between problem and discovery (Polyani, 1962). The composite depiction, in this study, was a combination of details provided from the individual profiles to produce properties common to all of these individual components and which characterize

the group as a whole as victims of girl-to-girl violence. The composite depiction is a narrative that more expansively illuminates six themes explicated through the conversational interview process. By organizing the transcripts into individual portraits, it became increasingly clear that these six themes followed a chronological and developmental progression: (a) initial blindness, (b) reputational conflict, (c) silent aggression, (d) outspoken aggression, (e) physical aggression, and (f) external and internal support. Lina entered Grade 7 in a high school setting and met Val who was initially just another nice girl in the school. However, over the course of the year Lina and her family were surprised to find Lina was bullied by Val. Initial blindness was a pervasive deterrent to proactive response.

Initial blindness was the first theme addressed by the participants. The term *initial blindness* was used broadly to refer to the loss of vision in the visual field of Lina's cognitive, social, and emotional life as a Grade 7 student. The properties of initial blindness involved Lina's parents, grandparents, classmates, and the school authorities losing their sensitivity to the subtle hues of a new academic environment including academic, social, and emotional challenges and stressors that a new environment would exert on Lina. For example, everyone expected Lina to have an easy entry into Grade 7 and were unaware of the effect that formation of new friendships, potential entry into peer groups, and an increased workload would have on her. As the study unfolded, blindness became a central focus and a common point of reference. Lina indicated, "I was blind to Val's powers," "my family and I were blindsided by the violence." The *initial blindness* created a context for *Val's power over Lina*. Lina described Val as extroverted, attractive, popular to peers, and wealthy. She described herself as introverted, intelligent, friendly to peers, but not rich. Her grandfather indicated "Lina is placid and non-aggressive." Lina explained that in the beginning of their relationship in September, "Val donned a mask to pretend to be someone who was like me and who thought I was popular. I began to believe that I was like her." She indicated that even though their hair, eye color, and personalities were different, students in the school and classmates blindly called them "the twins." Lina recalled "going to lunch together and doing the things friends do." She filled in the picture by saying that "I was kind of lonely because most of my close friends had moved." Lina was dependent on Val for friendship, which made Lina blind to Val's interpersonal control. As Lina put it, Val was smart enough but didn't do her school work. She confided to having problems with school work and said, "Val told me that she could always rely on me and I would always there. I would always help Val when she needed me." Of course Lina did help by "doing Val's homework for her or letting her copy. The blindness also

extended to Lina's family, who wanted her to make friends but were dependent on her to say more about problems with her relationships. "I know that my parents love me but they were blind and couldn't spot the aggression. They didn't spot the problem in the relationship with Val." Lina says "Perhaps if Val had come over to my house it might not have been a problem. My family could have spotted and told me what was going wrong in our relationship." In fact her grandfather indicated "we didn't recognize the violence. We didn't put all of the puzzle pieces together." Her mother acknowledged that she did not see the signs of "Lina's physical stress," her changing needs for sleep, and her expression of excessive sadness. Lina's father indicated that in the beginning he thought that "the girls were just having little disagreements that everyone has." Her grandmother indicated "you can be the best family and you will deny the fact that bullying is going on. You will deny it because you think these are only little girls."

### *Reputational Conflict as a Point of Confusion*

The second theme of *reputational conflict* was another element that contributed to the girl-to-girl violence and was a conflict arising from varying expectations from family, Val, the school authorities, classmates, and from Lina herself. The properties of reputational conflict for Lina involved her wanting to maintain her reputation as a smart student while still desiring to be popular, attractive, and accepted by Val and the other youth in her class. For Lina both academic excellence and popularity required hard work and created a conflict. Could she do both and if not should she choose popularity and being Val's best friend over academic success? This conflict unfolded when Lina complained in early October about the "difference between what Val needed and wanted me to do, namely her homework, and what I was capable of doing. I couldn't keep up with the pressure of doing her homework and mine." The reputational conflict for Lina involved wanting to be popular with Val's help but not wanting to fail in school. Lina's grandmother indicated "We didn't realize that Val was having an effect on Lina's marks and her learning. We wanted to help Lina make and keep friends, but we also wanted her to do well in school. This caused conflict." The increasing tension led to an argument with Val after which Lina decided to stop doing Val's homework. Val stopped talking to Lina for a short time. Lina thought that "it would blow over like all arguments do with friends." The argument seemed trivial, but it wasn't to Val. Since Val was cut off from Lina's "help," she began having trouble at school getting her own work done. As those problems intensified, her relationship with Lina began to change.

### *Silent Aggression: The Making of a Cipher.*

The third theme of *silent aggression* was designated and defined by Lina. Silent aggression occurred mid-October to December: “She [Val] wasn’t aggressive to me by saying things; it was the absence of saying things.” According to Lina and her family, silent aggression had three developmental properties that corresponded to developmental spikes in the trajectory of aggression: (a) withdrawal of attention (b) exclusion from activities, and (c) premeditated isolation.

This *withdrawal of attention* was the first step in the process of exerting power over Lina through silent (indirect) aggression. Lina indicated that Val “used to tell me all of her problems and asked me for help, and then she stopped doing that, so it was almost as if I was some kind of object that had brought comfort but was now discarded.” When Lina stopped doing Val’s homework, and exerted her sense of agency, Val withdrew her friendship and Lina became prey to the silent aggression because she was not complying and meeting Val’s needs. Lina’s grandmother knew how hard this was on Lina: “she was more fearful and anxious about her relationship with her schoolmates than her completion of her own class assignments and projects.” Her first term school report (November) indicated that “Lina is less confident of her abilities and insecure when handing in her assignments.” Her mother said, that “we spent a great deal of emotional family time telling her ‘we love you, we are here for you, and we are looking out for you.’ She needed a lot of reassurance.” The family members were afraid because they didn’t understand the origin of the insecurity and fear. Despite the family’s reassurances, Lina did not appear to be listening.

In the next step, *exclusion*, Lina chronicled how Val excluded her from activities. For example, “in games in P.E. class or any lunch-time activity, I would never be asked to join, which would be regular for other seventh graders. I felt awkward and shy and I didn’t know how to join in by myself.” Lina confided in her father, indicating that she was being snubbed by Val and this made me a target. As a result of the bullying, Lina’s father discerned that “Lina’s popularity was declining and that, as a result of Val’s bullying, other kids’ popularity rose at Lina’s expense.” Silent aggression was painful for the primary victim. Lina felt that “People hated me.” In response to the silence at school, Lina became silent at home. Lina’s mother indicated “When we tried to engage her in discussion about what happened at school she would not say anything. We didn’t know how to break the silence.” Lina indicated that she had a hard time understanding or explaining what was happening so she felt that she had nothing to say.

The next step in this silent aggression was *isolation*. Lina would move to a lunch table, and all the other seventh graders would get up in unison and move to another table. Because she was shy she did not have adult social skills to insert herself in social contexts. Lina eventually, would go and eat her lunch in the hallway near her locker. The isolation also occurred in the hallways: “if I was on one side they moved to the other.” She reflected further on this time, saying, “I know that it may not seem bad to be ignored, but I felt like a nobody.” She reported that silent aggression “gets to you” when people pretend that you don’t exist.

According to Lina, the overall problem with silent aggression was the “veil of blindness.” Lina said that if she wanted to report the silent aggression to teachers, counselors, and her principal, she felt that she needed more “solid evidence” because

If it is just mental bullying, there is no bruise or scars or anything that shows on the surface, so people can easily deny that it is there. What could I do? I was in Grade 7, and I was not a legal genius. It’s not like I could go bring all of the evidence against her [Val] and tell my family to help me talk to the teachers, counselors, and principal to get her expelled. No. There was not enough evidence for that.

Reporting psychosocial abuse would mean that Lina was whining and complaining and not learning how to socialize appropriately with others. As a result, she felt that it was futile to seek help from the teachers, counselors, principal, and family members, so she turned to strategies of avoidance. Her grandmother and mother indicated that many times she did not want to go to school. According to her mother, “Lina would say ‘Oh, I don’t feel so good, and I think I should stay at home.’” The violence was emotionally draining for Lina because she had always loved school.

### *Outspoken Aggression: Deconstructing Relationships*

The fourth theme Lina termed *outspoken aggression* (verbal) began in January and proceeded through February. The properties of this form of aggression were vocal or based on “verbal or non-verbal” attack and had four progressive properties: (a) destruction and theft of property, (b) degrading language to the victim, (c) attack on personal appearance and social acceptability, and (d) The forming of a “hate club” in which other peers, previously bystanders, were enlisted as aggressors. Outspoken aggression was the initial evidence that Lina was looking for to support her allegations that she was the victim of girl-to-girl violence.

According to Lina, outspoken aggression began with a transition from silent aggression to *destruction and theft of personal property*: “there were things done to my locker for example rotten eggs smashed on my locker and paint splattered all over my belongings. My school bag was stolen more than once and my school day planner was stolen. They did this to make sure that I never said anything to them or the teachers. No one would listen to me if I complained.” Lina’s mother reported that Lina “became forgetful and this persisted long after we replaced her stolen day planner. She would not remember to do homework even with repeated help. She still had trouble tracking assignments and completing them on time.” It was, as her grandmother suggested, as if

Lina lost little pieces of her life. When her mom and I would look over her math and would say “Lina look you have forgotten to do this problem or finish the assignment,” maybe that was the time that Val would take something away from Lina or destroy her work. Perhaps that’s why she was distracted and forgetful. The aggression should not have been a surprise to us, but it was.

For Lina the stress of the silent aggression increased her anxiety and inhibited her ability to reflect on solutions to the problem. With no one to talk to about these problems all she could think about was surviving from day to day. Shortly after these acts, the bully’s behavior transitioned to direct vocal attack against the victim using *degrading language*. Lina said that “there was swearing and abusive language like bitch, piece of shit, fucking idiot, fucking retard.” Lina commented that she initially preferred outspoken aggression to silent aggression as a girl-to-girl violence strategy because “With silent aggression you are ignored and made to think that you are nothing, but with outspoken aggression you are at least acknowledged as alive even though they tell you and show you that they hate you.” However, over time the foul language made Lina feel as if she had done something wrong, but she admitted that “I grew angry because I didn’t think I should be silenced. I kept my anger quiet.” This outspoken aggression had an impact on Lina and she became silent and avoided people. Her mother indicated that she suffered along with Lina as she saw her daughter “doing things not like her.” Her behavior had changed. “She was sad more often and wanted to be alone.” This pervasive sadness was a sign of depression that began to worry Lina’s family.

In the next step of outspoken aggression, Lina indicated that “Val told me that I had to be taken down.” This was done by *attacking her personal*

*appearance or social acceptability.* Lina indicated that she did not know how to stop the comments

I have extremely low self-esteem and bad self-concept even today in Grade 9. It's not that I think about it all of the time. It's in the back of my head. She told me that I was fat lots of times when changing for P.E. To this day, when I look in the mirror I see the "Good Year Blimp" It's strange. I know that I am not fat, but I think it. Think of going to P.E. change rooms three times a week with a room filled with girls and no place to change in private and Val says "Oh, god she really looks fat."

In this quote, we see the progression of outspoken aggression from private bullying of the victim to more targeted verbal insults about the victim shared with the peer group and school authorities. Lina's father felt that Val wanted to be the most popular person, so Val went "after somebody who is smart, good looking, popular, and reasonably well liked person, like Lina, because when that person is not popular anymore and that person is down then you, the bully, can be the person who is up." Lina's grandmother saw the use of discouraging characterizations of Lina as a power tactic:

Bullies always try to bring you down to their level so that you are making a mistake too. So Val was going to denigrate and make Lina feel bad about herself. She knew that she couldn't attack Lina academically so she had to attack her personally by commenting on her hygiene and making her teachers and counselors focus on this as public humiliation.

This power tactic demeaned Lina first and then took a personal issue and made it public. This deconstructing of Lina's social acceptability by the bully was a nonverbal cue to the other Grade 7 students that Lina was a pariah. If you were friends with Lina you became untouchable and an outcast. How could this happen in school? Her school projects, on display in the hallways with other student work, were singled out for vandalism. School photos on display in the hallways had Lina's eyes removed. To Lina's grandparents, this seemed to be a precursor to physical assault. Lina's family including her mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather went to the school to report the aggression and their concern for Lina's safety, but Lina's grandfather indicated that, "the principal thanked us for coming and said that he had dealt with Lina." The principal did not address the signs of aggression against Lina, so at this point her grandparents thoughtfully mentioned the central school

policy document regarding discipline. “We laid out our case and had to ask for fair treatment for Lina.” Lina and Lina’s family, all stated, during their interviews that they felt they had taken action rather than being helpless against the girl-to-girl violence.

Lina’s interview highlights the advancement to the final stage of outspoken aggression in which the power tactic resulted in the enlistment of several classmates into what Lina called a *hate club*. Girls who previously had an inactive role of bystander now took an active and coordinated psychological role in the aggression. Because Lina was shy she did not know how to join groups, so she was an easy prey for the hate club. As Lina described it

They were friends with Val and if Val did not like a person, then they hated that person more. It was as if they took the anger as their own. It wasn’t as if I had done anything to them, although they did spread rumors that I had slept with all of the male teachers. The rumors were hurtful, spiteful and not true, but maybe this was why they thought I was getting good marks and were angry at me.

Lina said, “I took the hate personally. I took what they said personally. I hated myself and wanted to die.” She thought her classmates would take her side and report the aggression to the school authorities. They did not. According to Lina, “The ‘hate club’ members were Val’s friends, and she could do no wrong.” When Lina began to confide in her grandfather about the hate club, he felt concerned yet tried to convince her that it would not last: “I’m a quiet man but I had to take the time to talk to her and show my concern. My reaction was to try and tell Lina that she cannot believe and feel that she is going to be the target of abuse all of the time from these girls.” Lina’s family was anxious but they had to believe that the aggression would stop and Lina’s Mom said, “We really believed in the school as protector and advocate for all students. We thought that Lina was safe because schools are safe places, right?” This belief led to the next level of aggression.

### *Physical Aggression as a Progressively Public and Violent Act*

The fifth theme of *physical aggression* began in Mid-February. Lina described how Val progressed from the psychological threat of outspoken aggression to physical aggression, beginning with (a) attacking in private, then (b) attacking in public, and finally (c) death threats. According to Lina, “physical violence is prohibited in my school, but she didn’t hesitate to do it

to me.” This surprised Lina, who described the first act *physical aggression done in private*: “I remember the day she punched me in the arm; it wasn’t that it hurt at all; I just really didn’t expect it.” After discussing this first attack with Lina, her mother realized that “Val had attacked Lina when no one was looking. We needed to give Lina strategic skills and a positive attitude to outthink Val’s back street tactics.” This required bully-proofing Lina and ensuring that she was empowered by the experience. However, they were unprepared for the *second attack, which was in public*:

Val would often block my locker. One day I was late, so I tapped her on the shoulder and I asked her “excuse me please, could you move?” She said “Why don’t you move” and punched me. This got me mad, but I didn’t fight back. I don’t like hurting people. My parents have taught me that it is not right to strike out at others.

Lina was surprised by the violence. Her parents advised her that she was not wrong and did not initiate this physical aggression. They also decided to speak to the counselor about the incident. Of the result, Lina’s father said, “I couldn’t believe the counselor didn’t understand the difference between tapping someone to get their attention and hauling off and punching someone.” Lina began to feel that the school staff had “tricked me into believing it was my fault. I trusted them to be fair.” She indicated that she did not trust the school to act on her behalf. Lina’s family continued to be distrustful of the school. Lina’s grandmother concluded that the moral imperative is not to physically or emotionally hurt others but assertively stand your ground and address the perpetrator publicly and show that you are not afraid:

When I said “We don’t hit people,” I asked myself internally, “What am I teaching the kid?” When someone punches or pushes you, are you not allowed to push back? I came to the conclusion morally that you can stand your ground and say in a loud voice, “Hey, stop pushing me.” This will make the female bully stop when you make a public stink and the bully realizes “Hey, I better not start up with this one because this one is not a victim.”

Although Lina’s grandmother wrestled with the concept of fighting back using assertiveness, Lina did not use this strategy. She was afraid that the school would misunderstand her assertiveness. *Death threats* followed: “Val said she would kill me. She had the means, she had the motive, she

could make good on her threat.” Val had brought a knife to class “taken from the cafeteria and flashed it in the hallways to members of the ‘hate club.’” The knife was not removed from Val. Although a death threat appeared to be more verbal in nature, Lina indicated that these threats also were accompanied by physical acts of violence. Lina’s family also took the death threats seriously and was frightened. Lina’s family wanted to convey to Lina that they would not let Val act on her death threat. Lina’s grandmother relayed the experience, “Lina said fearfully, ‘Val is going to kill me.’ ‘I said to Lina ‘NO SHE IS NOT.’” It was imperative that Lina knew that her family would not let her be hurt by Val despite all of the violence already committed.

### *External and Internal Support*

The final theme illuminated through the interviews involved what Lina referred to as her *external and internal support*. “My parents were worried for my safety during the physical violence and after the death threats.” She reflected that when she told her parents about the physical aggression and death threats, they took the violence seriously and gave her the *external support she needed*. Lina’s mother said, “Val has the problem. *She* is aggressive. There is nothing to be afraid of because we are here to stand behind you, and we will be here every day and we will solve this problem and make a plan together.” The family felt that Lina was receiving the right nonverbal message from the right nonviolent actions and plans.

Lina gained more confidence in hearing that other students were being victimized and complaining to the school authorities so that she was not the only one being victimized. She was not alone. Knowing that others were having similar struggles gave Lina more “confidence and courage to tap into my *internal strength*.” She identified her internal strength coming from being able to identify the cause of the problems and not take things personally: “I thought it was about me, and it was not. Now I knew that other people were having the same problems with Val.” The physical violence between Val and other girls was eventually compounded by a substance abuse problem that resulted in Val’s expulsion from the school. At the end of the interview, Lina indicated that she had work to do learning to “forgive myself for being weak and a victim.” With the support of her family, Lina continues to face the fear and the shame of being a victim. The work involves helping Lina deflect the lingering negative messages of the aggressor. For Lina there is still more therapeutic work to be done in combating the girl-to-girl violence.

## What Has Happened to Lina?

Shortly after the interviews done in Lina's Grade 9 school year, Lina entered Grade 10 in the same school. This was not an easy decision for Lina and her family. She indicated, "We talked a lot about moving to a new school, but I wanted to prove to myself that I could really get over the violence and threats." Although Val had bullied other youth in the school, she was not expelled for this violence but rather for possession of drugs and alcohol. Val's hate club members did not reconfigure to form a new group, nor did Lina retaliate with a hate group of her own. She continued to work on developing her internal strength by helping others "I can help other girls who were bullied by Val to regain their confidence and courage." Although the literature suggests that new alliances are formed after aggression and acts of violence, this study supports the possibility of youth *individually* finding a restorative way to create a sense of equality and balance to their relationships. In fact, Lina deobjectified herself as a victim and has become a school advocate for equality, communication, and unification.

## Discussion

The present research examined girl-to-girl violence from the perspective of the victim and her family. The family is a protective resource in the life of a victim. Previous literature has indicated that parents remain influential and affectively salient throughout middle childhood into adolescence (Granot & Mayseless, 2001) but that some parents have difficulty communicating to their child that they understand and are responsive to their child's fears (Osofsky, 2003; Osofsky, 1999). In this study, Lina's family members were emotionally available, and this induced opportunities for Lina to safely talk about what was happening to her in school. Despite their initial inability to recognize the foreign signs of girl-to-girl violence, Lina felt an overall sense of security and attachment to her parents, saying, "I know that my parents love me but in the beginning they just could not see that a girl could be violent with another girl." Once Lina's family was able to acknowledge the girl-to-girl violence, they were then able to untangle their own emotional responses to this violence, including their fear for Lina's well-being. This allowed Lina's family to provide her with emotional scaffolding for incrementally coming to grips with the girl-to-girl violence. Initially, they encouraged her to identify her emotional responses to the victimization. In turn, this emotional openness allowed Lina and her family to continue sharing their individual fears and sorrows about Lina's victimization, which empathically

demonstrated to Lina that they cared and appreciated how she felt. Lina's interactions with her family members provided her with opportunities to talk about her victimization, determine a plan of action and practice, rehearse, and refine her interactional strategies to prevent, avoid, or curtail acts of aggression and girl-to-girl violence.

The series of interactions that Lina's family naturally took to emotionally engage with her are, according to Osofsky (1999), foundational to the development of a sound and realistic plan of action to help support the victim of violence. According to Lamb and Lewis (2005), parent-child relationships are not static but naturally undergo recalibration and redefinition in response to varying contexts and societal expectations. Lina's family had to adjust to the new context of girl-to-girl violence without sacrificing their moral imperative to avoid committing violence against others and to discourage the desire to exact revenge. Together, as a family, they were able to coregulate and positively reinforce Lina's understanding of moral standards. They also were able to encourage Lina to refrain from violence while assertively respecting herself and others. With Lina's family monitoring, guiding, and supporting her during this girl-to-girl violence, Lina was able to act with personal agency by making an effort to avoid being beaten in unsupervised locations such as hallways, change rooms, and classrooms.

Thus the findings from this study are in keeping with the literature (Parke, Burks, Carson, Neville, & Boyum, 1994; Parke & O'Neil, 1999; Pettit & Mize, 1993) that affirms that parents can influence peer relationship development by (a) providing children with opportunities for peer interactions, (b) selectively monitoring peer interactions, (c) coaching children to deal competently with peers, and (d) disciplining unacceptable, maladaptive peer interactions. However, this research study differs from previous studies in that it uncovered the effectiveness of having the family model self-regulation for the victim via coregulating strategies specifically aimed at emotion identification, emotion regulation, and impulse control to prevent further violence. In addition, this study provided a unified perspective on intergenerational involvement in resolving girl-to-girl violence, which has not been previously addressed.

In this study, the development of girl-to-girl violence progressed through six themes. The first theme, *initial blindness* of Lina and her family, set the stage for the aggression that followed. Previous research indicates that families may be unaware of symptoms such as difficulty with concentration that frequently follow traumatization, or the family may resort to a coping mechanism to minimize the impact of violence and deny that it is happening (Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Fick, 1993).

Boyer (2008) suggests that children, youth, families, and professionals are not prepared for violence perpetrated by girls against girls because social conditioning prevents the home, peers, and school systems from believing that girls can be physically aggressive with each other. When girls are cast as “good” and boys as “bad,” there is social objectification of feminine conduct and masculine conduct. These gender-linked contrasts (e.g., judgmental and argumentative vs. caring) exist and promote static dualisms and beliefs in our society that girls are cooperative and will not engage in physical aggression or be victims of girl-to-girl violence while boys are argumentative, competitive, and aggressive. These differing gender-normative trajectories reinforce a model of physical aggression that blinds various adult authorities to any escalation of aggression from the more indirect manner that is associated with girls rather than the immediate nature of aggression expressed by boys.

The second theme, reputational conflict, arose when Lina’s perceived popularity and status with peers and teachers came into conflict with her personal and family values and beliefs. According to the literature, this is an issue in the middle school years where youth aspire to be popular with their peers and judged worthy by their teachers. Perceived popularity is a socially constructed variable associated with reputation and based on personal attraction, sexual desirability, physical or academic talent, and possessions. Teacher-measured judgments about student popularity have a bidirectional influence on student-based judgments about peer popularity. Teacher-measured judgments about student popularity are based on peer popularity, classroom behaviors, social adjustment, and academic ability (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Lina reported that “my teachers saw me as fitting in as long as I was friends with Val and being her tutor.” Her teacher-aide role with Val eased her relationship with her teachers and increased their estimation of her popularity with her peers, positive evaluation of her behavior in the classroom, her ability to fit in, and her grades. However, the demands of this role conflicted with Lina’s family, who believed that “being popular takes time away from study and achievement.” Lamb and Lewis (2005) indicated that, in most families, the initial “conflicts over behavioral control are replaced by a concern with achievement and industriousness” (p. 441). The conflict for Lina arose because she had trouble balancing the completing of Val’s homework with her home and school responsibilities and expectations. However, when Lina chose achievement and industriousness over being a surrogate teacher and tutor for Val, she expressed her personal agency and ended this internal conflict.

The developmental progression of girl-to-girl violence was at this point ignited when Lina said, “No, Val, I won’t do your homework anymore.” Lina

also suspected that trouble lay ahead, saying, "I knew that without my help Val would fail in her school work." The aggressive reaction was progressive and thoughtful, peaking at physical aggression. These findings differ from the work of Björkqvist (2001) who indicated that aggression with younger youth is initially physical, but this exposes the perpetrator to danger of being caught, so they tend to developmentally replace physical aggression with more verbal strategies as they age. Björkqvist contends that, with the development of social intelligence, boys and girls are able to analyze and manipulate social relations to achieve aggression by more indirect means. This study suggests that girls use indirect forms of violence initially but, as they gain confidence in their power over others and immunity from punishment, their aggression becomes physical in nature. Being informed of the developmental trajectory of girl-to-girl violence could allow families, children, and professionals to be proactive in their identification of violence indicators and support the disciplining of unacceptable, maladaptive peer interactions before the behaviors become insidious and difficult to observe and extinguish.

This study focused on an age group that uses indirect aggressive strategies (Björkqvist, 2001). One of the most significant findings of this study, for the improvement of observation, identification, and program development was that aggression began with indirect strategies and regressed to strategies associated with earlier age groups as the underlying cause of the conflict persisted. In this study, it was noted that Val employed silent (indirect) aggression to publicly signal rejection of Lina while inducing Lina's response of fear, disengagement, and self-loathing. When silent aggression proved ineffective at restoring "Lina's homework service," Val escalated, to the use of outspoken (verbal) aggression to humble Lina by destroying her possessions, degrading her talents, her attractiveness, and eliminating her social power. Lina was confused, silenced, and humiliated. Val then escalated to physical aggression in private and public. According to Lina and her family, Val was not afraid of being caught. Val's physical aggression culminated in a death threat. It is important to note that when the death threat failed, Val reverted to the indirect or silent aggression that Björkqvist indicates is more characteristic of her age group. However, this change was more a reflection of her simply being prevented, by Lina and her family, from successfully aggressing by more violent means and less a manifestation of her social intelligence. Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, and Wojslawowicz (2005) advised researchers to provide a research-based picture of peer group interaction during preadolescence, such as the perspective of the victims of girl-to-girl violence provided in this research study. The intention of this research-based picture is to inform families, children, teachers, counselors, and principals to

be vigilant about the relations between girls so as to promote greater tolerance and restorative interaction. In addition, this research has the potential to enlighten congressional hearings on school violence and ultimately inform policy makers and educators about incorporating social relationship management into the academic curriculum.

This research study is significant because research on girl-to-girl violence from the perspective of the victims can support systemic change by providing principals, teachers, counselors, families, and girls with a clear developmental trajectory of girl-to-girl violence that can improve their ability to observe and identify girls who have been victimized by their female counterparts and to empathically prepare curricular and programmatic responses (Boyer, 2008). This present study provides us with a comprehensive intergenerational picture of girl-to-girl violence that differs from other studies because it examines victimization from the inside out.

## **Implications of the Findings**

There are several directions of future research implied by this qualitative study. The levels of victim bias and ignorance of violence progression must be determined and remedied. More studies of instances of girl-to-girl violence and other forms of violence must be conducted to further develop and generalize the progressive model presented in this study (Boyer, 2008). The frequency of occurrence of the various levels of aggression must be determined. How often does a conflict reach the level of silent aggression, outspoken aggression, and physical aggression before a resolution is sought or achieved? How often is the resolution sought or achieved by the youth, by their families, by school personnel? Finally, a program of restorative or transformative justice could be used and evaluated with girls. According to Thorsborne (2009), restorative or transformative justice brings together the offender, the victim, their families, and appropriately trained school personnel to explore the harm done to all those affected and to decide what needs to be done to repair the harm and how to minimize the chance of it happening again. It would be very useful to contextualize the effects of restorative justice in a nuanced forum where girls can appropriately express their anger, fears, and anxieties rather than employing horizontal violence at the expense of less resilient girls.

## ***Limitations of the Study***

This qualitative study explored the topic of girl-to-girl violence. The limitations of this study include the small sample and a focus on a specific instance

of a specific type of violence. The information provided by this heuristic form of inquiry is biographic in nature and is not fully generalizable. However, as with every research question that matters, Moustakas (1990) suggested “that there is a social significance and perhaps universal significance” (p. 15).

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