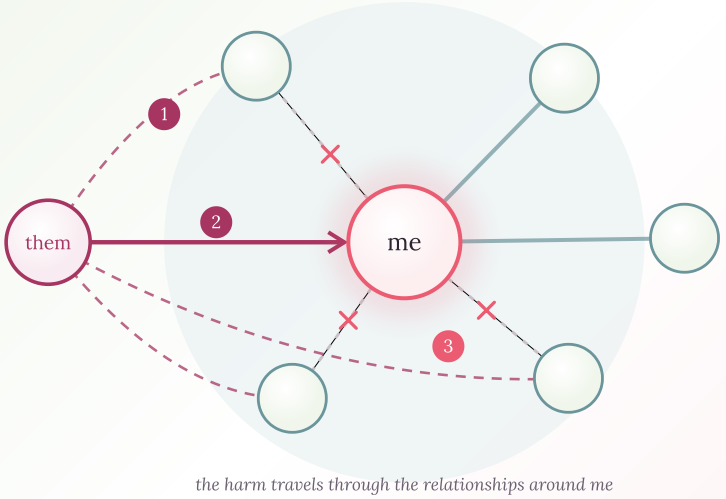
Relational Aggression

FRIENDSHIP · FAMILY · WORK · ONLINE

Relational aggression is harm done by damaging someone's relationships, reputation or sense of belonging, rather than through physical force (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). It can happen among children and adults, between friends, partners, family members and colleagues, and online. Because it is often quiet and indirect, it can be hard to name, and easy to doubt yourself.



the harm travels through the relationships around me

HOW IT WORKS

1. **A rumour spreads**
   Stories passed through others, often behind your back.
2. **Friendship as leverage**
   "I won't be your friend if you…"
3. **Being left out**
   Links to others quietly weaken or are cut.

No bruises, often deniable, and still deeply hurtful.

01 Common forms

Leaving out
Not inviting, ignoring, or making plans in front of someone who isn't included.

Rumours and gossip
Spreading stories, secrets or half-truths to damage someone's reputation.

The silent treatment
Withdrawing warmth or contact to punish or control.

Friendship as leverage
Making care conditional: "I won't be your friend unless…"

Turning others against you
Recruiting people to take sides or keep their distance.

Public embarrassment
Mocking, eye-rolling or sharing things online to shame someone.

02 How it can feel

- confused or doubting myself
- anxious about social situations
- lonely or on the outside
- hurt and embarrassed
- on edge, waiting for the next thing
- tempted to change myself to fit back in

03 Why it is easy to miss

No visible marks
It leaves no evidence others can easily see.

Easy to deny
"I was only joking" or "You're too sensitive."

Others go along
People may join in, or stay quiet to protect themselves.

04 Ordinary friction or relational aggression?

ORDINARY FRICTION	RELATIONAL AGGRESSION
A one-off disagreement	A repeated pattern
Saying how you feel, directly	Going through other people
Needing some space for a while	Withdrawing to punish or control
Both people can raise problems	One person holds the social power

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Relational aggression was first studied in children (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). A large meta-analysis found only trivial gender differences in indirect aggression, a related but distinct form of aggression (Card et al., 2008). It also appears in adult friendships and romantic relationships (Linder et al., 2002).

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.

05 Signs I recognise

- ☐ I'm often left out of plans I hear about later
- ☐ Someone goes cold when I don't do what they want
- ☐ I've been made fun of in front of others or online
- ☐ I've heard stories about me that aren't true
- ☐ People seem to have been turned against me
- ☐ I feel I have to earn my place in the group

06 Keeping a record

DATE	WHAT HAPPENED	WHO WAS INVOLVED	HOW I FELT

07 What could help

- ☐ **Talk to someone I trust** — A friend, family member, teacher, manager or counsellor.
- ☐ **Respond calmly and directly** — "I heard you said…. I'd rather you came to me."
- ☐ **Widen my circle** — Spend time with people where I feel safe and liked.
- ☐ **Step back** — Reduce time with the group or person, if I can.
- ☐ **Keep a record** — Dates, what happened and who was there; screenshots if online.
- ☐ **Report it** — School, HR, or the platform's reporting tools.

08 My plan

One person I can talk to

One step I will take

How I will look after myself

09 If I have done this myself

What was I feeling, or trying to get, at the time?

What could I do instead next time?

A note of care. Being targeted in this way is not your fault. If you need support, please reach out to someone you trust or a health professional.

SOURCES

Card, N. A., Stucky, B. D., Sawalani, G. M., & Little, T. D. (2008). Direct and indirect aggression during childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review of gender differences, intercorrelations, and relations to maladjustment. *Child Development, 79*(5), 1185–1229.

Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development, 66*(3), 710–722.

Linder, J. R., Crick, N. R., & Collins, W. A. (2002). Relational aggression and victimization in young adults' romantic relationships: Associations with perceptions of parent, peer, and romantic relationship quality. *Social Development, 11*(1), 69–86.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.