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Published October 15th, 2008

## Friendship Fault Lines - How to Help Your Middle School Daughter Build a Firm Foundation for Relationships

By *Sophie Braccini*



Middle school girls having fun at the Sister to Sister Summit Picture courtesy of AAUW

It has a name. And let's not kid ourselves, it's insidious, destructive, pervasive and life altering. It happens in schools, communities, via cyberspace and cell phones every day, and it is primarily inflicted on girls, by girls.

What is it? Relational Aggression, or as it is becoming more commonly known, RA.

RA is female bullying and includes behaviors such as spreading rumors, refusing to talk to someone, or excluding them from the group. It can be done in deeply hurtful ways, and can leave a girl devastated and fearful of returning to school, often interfering with her health and academic achievement.

It is not just a painful experience for the girl, it is also a challenge to her parents. Often their first impulse, to come to a daughter's aid, is an action that will backfire, causing more harm than good. That's why, on October 22nd, the American Association of University Women, Orinda-Moraga-Lafayette branch, sponsors of the annual Sister-to-Sister Summit each March, is offering a workshop to give parents a toolkit for coping with RA.

"In the ten years I have been working with girls through the Sister-to-Sister this issue has continually come up," says Valarie Burgess, one of the presenters, "I remember how helpless I felt with my own daughters, experiencing vicariously their anguish."

Speaking to school administrators, Burgess became aware of how overwhelmed they felt in the face of girls' meanness. She was very relieved when someone finally came up with a name for it so it could be addressed head on. Now strategies are being developed that can give parents tools to change what has been an entrenched problem. "We would like to share some of these with parents to not only empower them and their daughters, but to create a healthier, more supportive environment in our schools and communities," adds Burgess.

The workshop on the 22nd will be held at the Orinda Intermediate School. The presenters will address the everyday issues of relational aggression among girls and provide parents with a chest of tools to respond appropriately and give their daughters the confidence they needs to deal with it in a constructive manner.

"Raising my own three daughters and working with hundreds of girls through the years, I can see how friends can make it or break it, especially in middle school," says Ksenija Soster Olmer, another of the presenters, "Having at least one trusted friend can make all the difference in the world on how happy a girls is to go to school, how she feels about her changing body or relationships with parents and siblings. Being on the outs, on the other hand, can be pure hell for her and everyone else involved in her life."

The free presentation will be held at OIS on October 22, 7-8:30 pm. Parents and community members are encouraged to attend.

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