

Bullying has received international attention since the pioneering research over thirty years ago by Scandinavian psychologist Dan Olweus (1978). While prevention programs have proliferated, this article charts new ground by applying Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) to bullying in an example involving young girls.



## When Friendship is Used as a Weapon: Using Life Space Crisis Intervention Skills to Confront Bullying

**Signe Whitson**

*The problems kids cause are not the causes of their problems.*

—Nicholas J. Long, founder, the LSCI Institute

From time to time in my conversations on the subject of girl bullying, a polite, yet skeptical person will ask me if I think that all of the recent media attention paid to bullying has caused professionals to cite incidents of bullying where perhaps only rudeness exists. I answer quite affirmatively that yes, indeed, “false positives” are a possible outcome of increased awareness, to which the inquirer usually nods a satisfied smile. “More often, however,” I follow up quickly, “I find that genuine bullying

underlies situations that adults mistakenly write off as harmless. That is what I am even more concerned about.” Take, for example, the following real-life situation involving an easy-to-miss incident of girl bullying in a suburban U.S. elementary school.

### **What the Adults Saw**

Third-graders Jada and Liza were swinging together on the playground during recess when their classmate, Riley, approached and asked if she could swing with them. They invited Riley to take the third swing, but just as Riley got going at full speed, the two girls brought their swings to abrupt stops and

laughed together as they ran away from the swing set. Jada turned her head and shouted, “We’re going over to the walking path, Riley. Have fun swinging.”

Confused, Riley impulsively jumped from her swing, landing hard on the ground. She reached down, as if in pain, to rub her left ankle that buckled upon landing. Riley quickly got back up to her feet, however, and raced toward the walking path, to catch up with her classmates. When Jada and Liza noticed Riley approaching, they abruptly veered away from the walking path. Undeterred, Riley caught up to her classmates and said something to them, pointing to the walking path. Jada and Liza looked at each other and began to laugh again before continuing to walk away from Riley.

As soon as the girls turned their backs, Riley reached out and grabbed a hold of the long scarf wrapped around Liza’s neck. With a quick yank, she physically turned Liza around to face her then grasped the second end of the scarf. Riley pulled both pieces of the scarf in opposite directions, effectively choking Liza. This lasted for under five seconds before Jada’s screams for help caught a recess aide’s attention and immediate intervention. Riley was quickly pulled away from Liza and marched to the office of the school’s guidance counselor. Liza was shaken by Riley’s actions but unharmed.

### ***What the Adults Did Not See***

Riley is a bright, but socially awkward eight-year-old girl. She longs to be friends with her classmates but often finds herself excluded from games and activities due to behaviors that her classmates find “quirky” and sometimes even “gross.” Riley feels an intense degree of confusion, frustration, and humiliation over repeated incidents of peer exclusion and, on more than one occasion, has gotten into trouble at school for losing control of her emotions and lashing out verbally and/or physically at her peers.

Jada and Liza are best friends. They are in the same third-grade class as Riley. Both girls cite “being popular” as one of their biggest wishes. To Jada and Liza, Riley’s predictable emotional outbursts are a source of amusement. The socially savvy girls have intuited that they can elicit over-the-top responses from Riley—effectively controlling her like a puppet—through subtle actions that school teachers and aides easily overlook or fail to notice. Jada and Liza understand from experience that although Riley will get into trouble for her outbursts, they will be able to remain blameless, safely tucked under the radar of school personnel.

### ***The Incident:***

Each day during the week prior to the scarf incident, Jada and Liza made arrangements with Riley to meet her at the swings during recess. To Riley, this plan made her feel important and desirable as a friend. She looked forward to the connection each day. Yet day after day, when Riley would arrive at the swings, Jada and Liza would make a point to abruptly abandon her, leaving her alone on the playground. For the first three days of the week, Riley did not fully catch on to the fact that a cruel joke was being carried out at her expense. On the fourth day, however, Riley—fueled by a painful landing on her ankle and two back-to-back experiences of watching Jada and Liza laugh whenever they looked at her—suddenly understood with clarity that she was the object of intentional ridicule. In that moment of realization, she snapped.

### ***What Adults Need to Know about Girl Bullying***

Bestselling author and girl advocate Rachel Simmons (2010) explains that in the culture of young girls, social norms dictate that conflict cannot be waged directly. While on the surface this “no sticks or stones” policy can create a desirable level of civility, it is critical for adults to understand that just beneath the seemingly placid surface often lies an unbelievably cruel layer of planned exclusion, whispered gossip, cyber-sent rumors, and hidden hostility that pierce a young girl’s developing psyche. When bullying is disguised as friendship and friendship is used as a weapon (Whitson, 2011), kids like Riley are left feeling confused, frustrated, humiliated, and unsure of how to cope, while frenemies like Jada and Liza remain free and clear to carry out their hidden aggression time and time again.

### ***Why Did Jada and Liza Do It?***

There is no one single reason to explain why girls bully each other, nor is there a definitive profile of what kind of girl will become a bully, but experts agree that social status is often a prime motivator of this behavior among girls. Girls who are overly concerned with popularity often engage in behaviors in which they try to increase their own social status by publicly putting others down. In their third-grade classroom, an awkward and socially isolated classmate such as Riley made for an “easy mark” in Jada and Liza’s drive for personal gain.

With all of these dynamics in play—Riley’s social awkwardness, Jada and Liza’s drive for social status, and the repetitive but hidden bullying behaviors

that continued until Riley’s “sudden” aggression—how can an adult hope to be helpful? The problem seems complicated, yet there are basic steps adults can take to improve the school climate, confront Liza and Jada’s bullying, and help Riley develop specific insights that can change her long-term responses to her peers.

### ***The Bystanders***

Statistics compiled by the National Center for Learning Disabilities show that adults miss up to 96% of the incidents of bullying carried out by kids like Jada and Liza (Horowitz, n.d.). Their targets, however, rarely miss it. Kids like Riley know all too well the soul-crushing pain of repeated assaults on their dignity.

What is more, studies show that bystanders are either physically present or intellectually aware of the majority of instances of bullying. In the situation above, all of the girls in the third-grade class verbalized knowledge of Jada and Liza’s patterned, planned exclusions of Riley. What could have been different if even one of them had intervened to stop Jada and Liza from humiliating Riley on the swings that week? What difference might it have made if a single classmate had stepped up to spend time with Riley during recess so that she did not feel all alone? How could a single “I’m sorry that happened to you, Riley. Don’t pay attention to Jada and Liza” have helped diffuse Riley’s intense emotionality?

One study by the Response Ability Project (2012) shows that 57% of the time, bullying stops within ten seconds when a child intervenes and confronts a bully. When adults focus efforts on creating a school climate and classroom culture that empowers bystanders to act like heroes to victims of bullying, they send a powerful message that kindness matters and that aggression—whether physical, verbal, or relational—will not be tolerated.

### ***Liza and Jada:***

Thankfully, Liza was not seriously injured by Riley’s aggressive behavior on the playground. Sadly, not every kid is so lucky. The media is teeming with incidents of serious violence perpetrated by both bullies and their victims.

While it is important that Liza’s physical well-being is addressed and the message is conveyed that Riley’s aggression is unacceptable, the loop would not be closed unless Jada and Liza’s roles as provocateurs were directly confronted by school staff. Both girls need to be held accountable for their purpose-

ful bullying. Since their behavior was patterned and planned, my counsel to school staff would be to take steps up to and including involving the girls’ parents in a meeting to bring out into the open the set of previously well-concealed behaviors that led up to the incident. It will also be important for the adults to establish a set of expectations for how Jada and Liza will move on from the incident with regard to Riley. Retaliation—a terrifying reality for kids who expose their hidden bullies—needs to be anticipated and planned for.

The message to all who bully under the cover of friendship must be that adults are astute enough to recognize hidden aggression as it occurs and strong enough to stop it every time it happens.

### ***Riley: Constructing a Timeline***

The only knowledge the school’s guidance counselor had to go on when Riley entered her office that day was the reported fact that Riley had been caught choking a classmate. On that single bit of information, Riley could easily have been (dis)regarded as the bully in the situation—a traditional schoolyard aggressor.

To truly understand the causes of conflict amongst kids, however, adults must be willing to look beyond a child’s surface behaviors and take the time to explore the underlying thoughts and feelings that drive their actions (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) training guides adults in the process of establishing Timelines, giving kids like Riley the opportunity to talk about—and gradually make sense of—the events that drove her aggression. Likewise, by gathering information about the arrangements made to humiliate Riley during recess each day that week, an adult would be able to discern and respond appropriately to the hidden aggression perpetrated by Jada and Liza.

### ***Understanding the Set Up***

The Set Up is a sub-type of the Manipulation of Body Boundaries Reclaiming Intervention, taught in LSCI training. In this dynamic, kids who are typically aggressive but not very socially aware become easy targets for being set up and controlled by manipulative peers (Long, Wood & Fecser, 2001). The LSCI process helps adults readily recognize and diagnose this bullying dynamic as it is occurring and intervene with both the bullied and the bullies.

For Riley, the adult's goal in a Set Up intervention is to help her develop insight into the fact that when she responds to Jada and Liza's manipulation by acting out aggressively, she is giving up control of her own emotions and behavior and she is the one who gets in trouble. Riley will benefit from gaining an awareness of this patterned dynamic and then practicing new skills (see below) to avoid allowing others to manipulate her.

Jada and Liza can also benefit from LSCI intervention, as they learn with certainty that they can no longer hide their bullying behavior, but rather adults are aware of their actions and will not accept that kind of behavior. The Symptom Estrangement Reclaiming Intervention (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001) can be very effective in directly confronting bullying behavior.

### **Learning New Skills**

As a practical matter of safety, impulse-control, and healthy socialization, Riley needs to learn that physical aggression is never an acceptable way to cope with her feelings. Once Riley has had the positive experience of talking about the events leading up to the incident and developing insight into her pattern of being set up by manipulative peers, she will need specific instruction and repeated practice of new skills for assertive—rather than aggressive—emotional expression.

In particular, one of things that girl bullies thrive on is over-the-top, emotional overreactions by their targets. Riley's predictable outbursts give Jada and Liza a sense of power by confirming their beliefs that they can control Riley's reactions. Likewise, when kids like Riley display aggressive or dramatic responses, they tend to become even more socially isolated by their peers, who might know that what the bullies are doing is wrong but who also want to distance themselves from a peer who seems out of control. In short, the more kids like Riley learn to use measured, assertive responses, the less appealing they become as targets of bullying.

Finally, for many socially awkward kids, the drive to form friendships is strong but the knowledge of how to go about doing so is underdeveloped. Kids like Riley are prone to misinterpret social cues and mistake manipulation for friendship. One of the simplest, yet most impactful, steps adults can take with kids like Riley is to spend focused time helping them identify the qualities to look for in real, positive friendships and teaching skills for seeking out and establishing quality peer relationships.

Engaging kids in conversations around the topic of friendships is one of the most important things that supportive adults can do to help young girls navigate the choppy, often confusing waters of peer relationships.

### **Summary**

By the early school years, most girls have experienced unspoken—but not unobvious—acts of social aggression that shake the carefully laid foundations of their self-image and beliefs about friendship (Whitson, 2011). Girls benefit from having a supportive network of trustworthy adults who are informed about the nature of girl bullying and open to meaningful dialogue about real friendship. Though lingering social norms may still discourage girls from acknowledging conflict directly, adults can help kids rise above these damaging constraints by teaching them practical skills for expressing anger in constructive ways and giving them new insights to readily recognize incidents of cruelty disguised as friendship. Children should not have to find their way through friendship challenges alone.

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