

## **Teaching Idea: Using the film *Mean Girls*\* to teach Relational Aggression**

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Audience: Youth Professionals, Parents, Young Adults/Adolescents

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Engaging college students to learn about relational aggression can be a challenge, particularly when placed in a survey course on child development which demands that they focus on a large volume of material. Offering vivid examples of the youth experience when teaching parents and adult volunteers who work with youth is critical to full understanding. We created an innovative method of teaching relational aggression to undergraduate students that can equally be used with adults and adolescents. This popular, engaging and effective module uses the 2004 film “Mean Girls” (\*Michaels, Rosner & Waters) as the focus of the unit.

The film includes intentional examples of the behavior, consequences and influences that would serve to underscore points made in lecture, and give students a visual understanding of concepts regarding relational aggression among adolescents. In addition, the film is funny and entertaining, and is hugely popular with young adults. We find that college students now look forward to this section of the course as they enjoy watching the film and better understand the concepts.

The structure for teaching the unit on relational aggression with the film is as follows. Students are presented with a lecture on relational aggression following the usual course discussion of social development in middle childhood. Because prevalence of the behavior spans later middle childhood to middle adolescence, the topic serves as a good bridge from one age period to the next. Following the lecture to acquaint them with basic information and concepts, the class then views the film, “Mean Girls.” The film is viewed in class in its entirety or in clips, or is assigned for individual viewing outside of class. The film is 96 minutes in length. Students are given an observation guide to complete while watching the film. The guide asks focused questions that encourage observation of behavioral characteristics of relational aggressors (bullies and bystanders), family risk factors (e.g., permissive parenting), teacher involvement to guide moral reasoning, and consequences to victims. After watching the film and taking notes, the class discusses shared observations about motivations and influences on the girls’ behaviors and the roles played by adults in their lives, particularly parents, teachers and the school environment. Using critical analysis, students examine how the larger social structure of the school and society may play a role in maintaining aggressive and competitive behavior in girls, which might affect their social and self development. Application of concepts identifies potentially useful interventions and preventive actions that schools and families can take, along with a comparison of current strategies by individual schools, organizations (e.g., The Ophelia Project) and resources available to parents, teachers, other adults, and to girls.

## **Testing the Teaching Module**

### *Pilot testing*

In the fall semester of 2005 we piloted the teaching module in three sections of FMST 332, Children in Families, an undergraduate child development course. Each semester 3 or 4 sections of the course are offered, each section with approximately 60 students (primarily junior and senior). For the pilot, each instructor was given the same teaching notes, PowerPoint slides to integrate into their lecture and background research articles. Human Subjects approval was secured for the project. Students were given the option not to participate in the testing, but still participated in the teaching and discussion phases of the unit.

Before the lecture, students' knowledge of the topic was assessed with a 20 item forced choice test. Following the lecture, they were given the observation guide and asked to view the film. In a separate class period, discussion of the film and concepts followed, then students were given a matched item post test. During the final exam, two items from the pre-post tests were used to serve as a delayed post-test assessment of knowledge retention.

Results from the fall 2005 pilot indicate that teaching relational aggression with film, and particularly with the film 'Mean Girls' supplemented with an observation task and in-class discussion, was an effective and popular method to aid students' learning of the content. Student scores significantly increased by two points from the pre to the post-test; the majority of students scored correctly on the final exam questions. As one student said, "*I had watched 'Mean Girls' before and didn't really get anything from it. Watching it for class and after lecture, I saw and understood what RA really was. Before viewing the film, I was just guessing.*"

Nevertheless, since all classes used the film to teach the concept, the pilot revealed that further testing was required to determine whether inclusion of the film is a more effective tool than teaching the subject with lecture and discussion alone. We also decided to revise/shorten the observation guide and upon review of comments offered by students, encourage instructors to engage the students in dialogue about their personal experiences with relational aggression.

### *Experimental testing of the teaching module*

In the spring semester (January to May) 2006 four classes are repeating the use of the learning module. Experimental conditions include two classes with lecture and complete film plus observation guide, one class with lecture and film clips, and a control classes with lecture alone. As of early May, pre and post test data has been collected. We are in the process of analyzing the data to explore how student background characteristics, film viewing and relational aggression experience contributed to learning outcomes. In addition, we will be assessing the differences between treatment and control modalities. Implications for integration of the module into undergraduate education, and continued use of film as a teaching method will be explored.

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*For more information about this module or the pilot tests, contact Susan K. Walker at [skwalker@umd.edu](mailto:skwalker@umd.edu).*