First-year writing, one of Stanford’s oldest educational traditions, has been taught since the founding of the University. Current courses in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) provide a setting in which students new to the University can focus their intellectual energies intently on the art and craft of writing. PWR’s small seminar/workshop classes offer students the opportunity to develop their writing abilities in analysis and research-based argument with the careful and consistent guidance of an experienced writing instructor.

The PWR requirement at Stanford currently consists of two courses. While the second-level PWR 2 course emphasizes oral and multimedia presentations of research, PWR 1, the first-year course in which students write the essays nominated for the Boothe Prize, centers on various forms of analysis and substantial research-based projects. The essays selected as the Winners and Honorable Mentions for the Boothe Prize represent the best of students’ work in these areas; it is our pleasure to share them with the larger Stanford community.

The PWR curriculum aims to lead students toward strong performance in all elements of writing, including crafting a persona that will effectively appeal to a particular audience, developing a compelling argumentative thesis drawing on primary and secondary sources, putting forward cogent proofs with persuasive evidence and reasoning, and writing with power and grace. Each of these essays demonstrates the ways in which PWR courses guide Stanford’s first-year students in presenting their ideas with the intellectual rigor and stylistic force expected of University students.

As Directors of the Program, we have been impressed over and over again by how well these newest members of the University community have met the challenges of first-year writing. We value the intellectual curiosity, freshness of thought and expression, and engagement with the ideas of others represented in the essays published here, and we offer our deepest congratulations to these writers as well as to their instructors.

—Nicholas Jenkins
Faculty Director, Program in Writing and Rhetoric

—Marvin Diogenes
Co-Director, Stanford Introductory Studies
Managing the Mean Girl: California’s Incomplete State Policy on Social Aggression

KIRSTIN WAGNER

What do girls think of each other? Middle school girls interviewed by Rachel Simmons offered the following disturbing perspectives:

“Girls are secretive.”

“They destroy you from the inside.”

“There’s an aspect of evil in girls that there isn’t in boys.”

“Girls target you where they know you’re weakest.”

“Girls plan and premeditate.” (16)

Is it possible that Simmons merely happened upon a group of particularly misogynist preteen girls? Research would suggest not: these girls’ harsh condemnations of the duplicitous behaviors of their own sex are echoed across numerous studies of girls’ aggression.¹ And why should they have anything nice to say about each other when so many of them experience victimization at each other’s hands? In a recent study, all ninety-eight of the girls involved reported having been victims of social aggression, which includes gossip, exclusion, or betrayal at the hands of other girls within a several week time-span (Remillard and Lamb). Noting the number of girls who engage in this behavior, past researchers concluded that females must be genetically

¹ See Owens, Brown, Ringrose and Renold, and especially Simmons’s Odd Girl Speaks Out for further examples of girls’ negative opinions of each other.
predisposed to social aggression (Brown 3). However, in 2002, sparked by Simmons’s book *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, researchers came to the new consensus that our culture “refuses girls access to open conflict” and “forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and covert forms” (Simmons 3). They also found that social aggression occurs predominantly in schools (O’Malley), and may even be unintentionally reinforced by teachers and staff (Brown 209).

In response to these and other findings concerning bullying at school, several researchers began analyzing state anti-bullying policies and publications directed towards schools to ensure that states were effectively addressing social aggression, as well as other forms of bullying. These researchers examined the definitions of bullying that states provided to make sure that social aggression and other behaviors were included. Apart from inspecting the definition, however, these researchers did not analyze how state policies specifically address individual bullying behaviors such as social aggression or direct aggression. Instead, they evaluated the state based on how its proposed strategies dealt with “bullying” as a whole. Even in the lone study that focused exclusively on social aggression in state policy, the only measurement used for determining whether a state addressed this behavior was its presence in the definition of bullying (Temkin). Each of these researchers’ methodologies operates on the same flawed assumption—that the policies and programs effective for decreasing direct aggression, which includes behaviors such as verbal abuse and physical harm, would also be effective in decreasing social aggression, which includes behaviors such as gossiping and social exclusion. According to this line of reasoning, a state needs only include social aggression in its definition of bullying and provide strategies for decreasing “bullying” in order to effectively address this behavior.

Based on my study of California laws, policies, and publications on bullying, this premise does not hold true. Though California generally does a thorough job of defining social aggression and including it in the definition of bullying, the strategies provided, or the lack thereof, do not supply schools with the information and techniques that they need to reduce the prevalence of this behavior. My research suggests that state policies reflect a problematic conceptualization of social aggression as simply the “girl” version of direct aggression, which is a stereotypically masculine behavior. This misconception appears to have led policy makers to the belief that these two forms of aggression are similar at heart and can therefore be tackled in the same way, hence the state policy’s monolithic approach to decreasing “bullying” rather than specific behaviors. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the current California state policies and publications on bullying are oriented toward direct aggression and, as such, provide inadequate guidance to schools on social aggression. Throughout, I will offer suggestions for how the state’s policies may be altered so as to effectively address this behavior; my recommendations are summarized in Appendix A. When the language of state policy explicitly addresses social aggression, it gives teachers and girls the ability to do so as well.

**NOT JUST HURT FEELINGS: WHY SOCIAL AGGRESSION AND STATE POLICY MATTER**

The ongoing debate over the appropriate terminology for this type of aggression has created confusion that may contribute to state policy’s incomplete coverage of this behavior. Initially, it was called *indirect aggression* to distinguish it from *direct aggression* which “includes physical reactions such as hitting, pushing, and tripping as well as overt verbal attacks such as name calling, taunting, and threatening” (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, and Little 1186). However, many researchers have objected to this term on the grounds that the descriptor *indirect* falsely implies that bullies always conceal their identity from their victims (Underwood 18). Girls often act in very direct ways to hurt each other and do not bother to conceal their actions; one girl overtly excluding another from a group is an example. Another term, *relational aggression*, attempts to capture the mechanism by which girls manipulate and hurt each other—their relationships (Underwood 22). However, this term, like *indirect aggression*, was defined as excluding direct expressions of anger, meaning that aggressive behaviors both relational and direct were left without a name; an example would be one girl demanding a favor from another and threatening to end their friendship if the other girl did not comply. In order to create a more holistic definition, Britt Galen and Marion Underwood advocate for the term *social aggression*, which “is directed toward damaging another’s self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take such direct forms as verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion” (589). I have chosen to use this term because it offers the most comprehensive definition of girls’ aggressive interactions with each other.

Though some researchers still differ on the correct name for this behavior, all agree that it has devastating effects on girls. Our culture, on the other hand, tends to trivialize girls’ fights, imagining them as merely petty squabbles which result in nothing more than one girl issuing another a short-lived prohibition from attending 2 See Temkin, Orohko, Halford; Limber and Small; La Rocco, Nester-Rusack, and Freiberg; Stuart-Cassel, Bell, and Springer.
her next birthday party (Brown 1). Indeed, popular movies, books, and T.V. shows such as Mean Girls, The Clique, and Gossip Girl have sensationalized and normalized girls’ fights, reworking them as a humorous rite of passage and suggesting that in years to come, girls will look back on their high school antics and laugh. One such film ends with a montage of scenes in which the girls from the former power clique engage in comical activities while the protagonist explains, “all the drama from last year just wasn’t important anymore” (Mean Girls). However, for most girls affected by social aggression, this is far from an accurate depiction of their experience. One woman described the lasting effects of social aggression, saying, “it’s not gone away, and it’s been twenty years. It’s never gone away. I’m the most insecure person in the whole world” (Simmons 229). In a qualitative study by Laurence Owens, another girl reported that vicious rumors and social exclusion had made eighth grade “the worst year in [her] whole life” (“Guess What” 367). Certain their torment will never end, and that other girls will be too afraid to help them, many “consider suicide as an option to end their suffering” (“Guess What” 367). In a wide range of studies on social aggression, girls report feeling overwhelming pain, fear, and anxiety, including a debilitating loss of confidence in themselves and in future relationships. While the psychological and sometimes life-threatening harm associated with social aggression is every bit as real for boys as it is for girls, I have limited the scope of this paper to girls’ behavior because research has shown that girls consistently use social aggression more than their male counterparts, whose conflicts are generally characterized by direct or physical aggression.

So can state policies help schools prevent social aggression? Several researchers are wary of this approach to the problem because they have found that schools vary in the degree to which they implement state policies or use state publications (Temkin 6). However, importantly, one of these researchers noted that the lack of implementation was likely due to “noticeably loose language in the law and the challenges then inherent in interpreting the intent” (LaRocco, Nestler-Rusack, and Freiberg 20). This explanation “seemed particularly apparent” when principals were asked to define a certain phrase found in the anti-bullying law and the responses varied greatly. In other words, it appears that the lack of implementation is not intrinsic to anti-bullying law but rather arises from its ambiguous language. Furthermore, other researchers have found that school anti-bullying policies do not closely follow those of the state (Stuart-Cassel, Ariana Bell, and Springer 80). For example, in one South Florida school district, the anti-bullying policy matched the state policy almost exactly, even “copying the state model policy verbatim for several items” (Richman 234). While it appears that state policy is more influential in some cases than in others, the magnitude of the problems caused by bullying requires serious consideration of every avenue that has “potential to influence the policies and practices of local school districts and individual schools” (Limber and Small 446). Thus, focusing on California as a case study, I will carefully examine the way this state’s anti-bullying laws, policies, and publications tackle social aggression. My evaluation of the state’s policies will be based on what the major researchers in this field have found to be the necessary components of any program that aims to diminish girls’ use of social aggression.

“GIRLS WILL BE GIRLS”: THE CASE FOR EXPOSING THE ORIGINS OF SOCIAL AGGRESSION

While California anti-bullying policies discuss the relationship between societal expectations and boys’ use of physical aggression, they neglect to reveal the cultural roots of social aggression; this omission perpetuates the belief that social aggression is inherent to girls and, consequently, has detrimental implications for both girls’ and teachers’ behavior. When Lawrence Owens asked teenage girls in Australia why they gossip and “bitch” about each other, they often replied that they simply “cannot help” themselves (“Victimization” 233). Rather than dismiss this response as a petty excuse, we must consider the immense challenge it poses to the prevention of social aggression. Any attempt to diminish this behavior will have to begin with convincing girls that their sex does not determine the way they express anger. As it is, girls have no reason to believe that social aggression is not inherent to them; they see other girls exhibiting this behavior on a daily basis, and popular media consistently showcases girls backstabbing each other. One teacher’s disparaging comment to Owens that girls model their behavior “on the soaps” may have more validity than he realizes (“Victimization” 224); in an interview with Brown, a fifteen-year-old high school girl reported that vicious rumors and social exclusion had made eighth grade “the worst year in [her] whole life” (“Guess What” 367). In a wide range of studies on social aggression, girls report feeling overwhelming pain, fear, and anxiety, including a debilitating loss of confidence in themselves and in future relationships.

3 For further information on the devastating effects of social aggression see Owens; Svahn and Evaldsson; Johnston, and Simmons’s Odd Girl Speaks Out.

4 For a review of studies done on gender differences in expression of aggression, see Underwood 149-150.

5 Based on their extensive research into the causes of this behavior and current schools’ attempts at dealing with it, several researchers have written plans to help schools address this issue, including “The Road Ahead” in Simmons’ Odd Girl Out, “This Book is an Action” in Brown’s Girlfighting, and “How to Intervene” in Underwood’s Social Aggression Among Girls. I will evaluate state policies by comparing them to the programs that these researchers have deemed necessary for combating social aggression. These components will be mentioned throughout my paper as I discuss California state policy’s inclusion of them.

6 See Brown’s Introduction.
girl explained, “TV, media, newspapers, it’s like they teach girls you’re supposed to fight” (18). Girls’ everyday experiences with other girls and with the media thus act to normalize their use of social aggression and persuade them that this is simply what girls do.

Furthermore, the notion that social aggression is inherent to girls encourages teachers to ignore this behavior in the classroom. One deputy principal told Owens that “it’s part of their psyche, part of their make-up…. They’re just born that way” (235). Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold found that teachers tend to pass over behavior that is considered “normal” for girls and boys instead and the effect is to punish as bullying “that which transgresses normative performances of young masculinity and femininity” (577). In other words, a girl who openly acknowledges her anger at another student might be punished by her teacher because she expresses her aggression in a direct, “masculine” way, whereas a girl who gossips would be disregarded because she is merely engaging in standard “feminine” behavior. Thus, girls limit expressions of anger to the covert, indirect forms of social aggression to evade being punished by their teachers. Exposing the cultural origins of this behavior will help convince teachers that it is avoidable, and therefore worth trying to prevent.

In order to persuade girls and teachers that females do not suffer from a genetic disposition towards rumor spreading and social exclusion, researchers have concluded that we must “unveil the dynamics at play,” and help girls understand the way their behavior is engineered by “the pressures and limitations imposed on girls who do not comply with feminine ideals” (Brown 201; 208).

One of the foundational California anti-bullying publications, Bullying at School, starts off in the right direction by placing a discussion of the relationship between cultural norms and bullying in a prominent position under the heading “Gender and Bullying” (9). Importantly, the authors note that “expectations of behaviors based on gender…still exist for both girls and boys” and “being perceived as outside these standards may be costly to students developing self-concepts” (9). In the paragraph that follows this introduction, however, the authors limit their application of this theory to the interaction between boys and cultural norms, describing the “boy code” that “interferes with boys’ ability to effectively communicate” and mentioning the damaging effects of the “‘masco’ expectations of what a man should be” (10). Instead of following this valuable analysis of the social norms that restrict boys’ behavior with a similar one for girls, this section then concludes with two sentences explaining that “girls often demonstrate great cruelty in more subtle forms of harassment” (10); several examples of this behavior are then listed. This brief description of the ways girls generally bully does not further the understanding that social aggression is rooted in cultural norms. In fact, when seen in contrast to the full paragraph discussing the societal causes of boys’ aggression, the absence of any discussion of the cultural causes underpinning social aggression does more to perpetuate the idea that this behavior is innate to girls than to debunk that misconception.

Furthermore, in a “Frequently Asked Questions” sheet based on this publication, the authors encourage community members to “share positive cultural perspectives, norms, and expectations as models for youths” (“Bullying Frequently Asked Questions”). This suggestion is questionable because of the problematic nature of many of our seemingly “positive” cultural expectations and norms for girls, such as that they should always be “nice” and never express aggression (Ringrose 587).7 The authors here propose that aspects of our culture might be used to tackle the issue of social aggression, even though researchers on social aggression have almost unanimously condemned our culture as the cause of this behavior.

Another publication by the California Department of Education, “Getting Results: Update 4,” explains the state’s approach to developing anti-bullying programs and, in doing so, offers insights as to why state policies do not discuss the origins of social aggression. According to the state, we must analyze “the function(s) that bullying serves” in order to create “targeted interventions” (20). Recognizing the “need for control over others” as the primary purpose of bullying, the authors suggest that anti-bullying programs should include confidence-building activities (21). While researchers on social aggression fully agree that this is an essential component of any anti-bullying program, they argue that other approaches are also vital for developing strategies to decrease social aggression (Simmons 231). According to them, we must consider not only what function bullying serves, but also why girls bully the particular way they do. Only when we have acknowledged that girls engage in social aggression because our society restricts their expressions of anger will we be able help them deal with conflict in a healthier way. This approach will lead to more specific strategies such as “encourag[ing] girls to embrace respectful acts of assertion and provid[ing] them with representations of female aggression that are neither sensationalized nor the stuff of fantasy” (Simmons 231). Thus the state must diversify its approach to the problem of bullying or risk overlooking critical facets of the solution to social aggression.

7 See Ringrose pg. 587 for an extensive list of studies corroborating her claim that the cultural expectations for girls are that they always be “nice.”
HOW TO RECOGNIZE GOSSIP AND WHY WE SHOULD TRY: TRAINING FOR TEACHERS AND STAFF

Researchers consider teachers to be “one of our best hopes” for diminishing the use of social aggression (Simmons 225); when appropriately informed, their actions and words have proven instrumental in limiting this behavior (Leadbeater 590). Unfortunately, many of them are unable to recognize it in the classroom and, furthermore, do not understand how serious and damaging it is (Simmons 226-230). For these reasons, Brown and others have stated that an effective anti-bullying policy must include “teacher education on alternative forms of aggression,” including training on how to “spot and understand” them (215). After reviewing the research done on teachers’ ability to identify social aggression and their perceptions of its potential to harm, I will explain how California has failed to address these issues in their anti-bullying policies.

While the nature of overt, or direct, aggression makes it easy to identify (Simmons 227), as discussed above, many teachers find it very difficult to distinguish the diverse and subtle mechanisms that girls employ against one another.8 One teacher interviewed by Simmons explained, “we’re not trained to look for that” (227). The challenge teachers face in attempting to detect these behaviors is exemplified in Johanna Svahn and Ann-Carita Evaldsson’s unique ethnography of several middle school girls in Sweden, which exposes the subtleties of peer exclusion. In one anecdote from their study, two girls, Elena and Josefin, chatter about their favorite childhood pets (13). When a third girl, Natalie, tells a story about Max, her hamster, the other girls fall silent, staring at her blankly. Looking for support, Natalie says, “you can ask Linnea yourself” (13). Linnea, standing near Natalie, acts as if she does not remember this story. As Elena and Josefin begin speaking again, Linnea changes position to place herself by them, rather than by Natalie (14). The benign nature of their conversation about favorite pets belies the more serious way in which the group of girls excluded Natalie by “neglecting a shared history” and “bodily disaligning” themselves from her (13). Svahn and Evaldsson emphasize the subtlety of these tactics by explaining that the girls’ processes of exclusion “were not apparent at first glance” (4); they only became clear after reviewing the video recordings of the girls several times.

Even when teachers do happen to catch social aggression, many are likely to dismiss it because of the mistaken belief that this behavior is trivial and harmless in comparison to direct aggression (Temkin 6). In a study done on teachers’ reactions to different forms of aggression, Jina Yoon and Karen Kerber reported that “teachers view social exclusion less seriously, and are less likely to intervene than in cases of verbal and physical aggression” (32). Sheri Bauman and Adrienne Del Rio, in a similar vein, found that teachers “had less empathy for victims of relational bullying… and would take less severe actions toward relational bullies and victims than those involved in physical or verbal bullying” (225). These teachers’ reactions to social aggression are problematic because ignoring this behavior reinforces girls’ belief that it is a socially acceptable way of expressing aggression.

California state publications like “Bullying at School” do acknowledge the potential for teachers to limit bullying, noting that “teachers are the adults who interact the most with students” and, as such, “are powerful role models” (19). Furthermore, the state recognizes “the importance of considering more subtle forms of aggression,” and “how important it is that teachers prevent and stop not only overt aggression… but also relational aggression” (Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office 33; 16). However, despite this affirmation of the important role teachers play in decreasing bullying, the state never proposes any sort of education for teachers on how to recognize social aggression. Nor does it suggest explaining to teachers how serious and harmful this behavior is.

The absence of teacher education on social aggression is particularly alarming because California state policies and publications encourage schools to emulate the Olweus anti-bullying program, which depends almost entirely on teachers seeing and reacting to bullying (Counseling and Student Support Office 16). The influential founder of this program, Dan Olweus, has said that “it all boils down to a matter of will and involvement on the part of adults in deciding how much bullying should take place in our schools” (qtd. in Brown 199). While this approach might be effective for direct forms of aggression that are easily distinguishable by teachers and staff, it is unreasonable to expect that teachers will always be able to identify and stop a near-invisible behavior, especially one they have not been taught to recognize. For this reason, researchers on social aggression have criticized Olweus’s program for being too narrow and centered on direct aggression (Brown 200; O’Neil 29). The prominence of this program in California state policy suggests that it, too, is oriented around physical and direct forms of aggression. To ensure that their anti-bullying policy is equally effective for social aggression, the state will have to include teacher education on this behavior as well as specific strategies for dealing with it.

8 See Crick, Casas, and Nelson 99; Brown 215; Simmons 250; O’Neil 14.
DON’T “STOP AND THINK”: RESPONDING TO SOCIAL AGGRESSION

In 2002, following a series of tragic school shootings in the 1990’s, the U.S. Secret Service issued a report that named bullying as the underlying cause of this violence (Vossekui). In response, 120 bills were passed by state legislatures between 1999 and 2010 that created school bullying policies (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, and Springer xi). Given that the bullying that triggered these shootings was largely direct aggression, the programs that states developed for dealing with bullying focused on this behavior and many states have only minimally altered their anti-bullying policies since creating them (Richman 232). While California, along with twenty-eight other states, has changed its definition of bullying to accommodate social aggression (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, and Springer 26), it has yet to include specific strategies for dealing with this behavior.

Assuming that techniques originally designed for dealing with direct aggression will also be effective in diminishing social aggression is dangerous because they can actually elicit higher levels of social aggression. For example, the “stop and think” strategy is widely used to discourage impulsive bullies from acting out of anger and physically harming other children; however, this same approach does little good for girls who engage in social aggression and are already much too proficient at suppressing their anger to take out their revenge later through gossip and social exclusion (Underwood 214). Telling them to “think” some more may only encourage girls to internalize their anger rather than address it openly.

For this reason, the most extensive and well-intentioned anti-bullying policies and programs can actually exacerbate the problem of social aggression if they are not carefully created with this behavior in mind. For example, after implementing an anti-bullying program of their own creation at four schools, researchers Peter Smith and Mike Eslea found that boys’ aggression had decreased in all of the schools, whereas in three out of four of them, girls actually exhibited increased aggression. The researchers concluded that “efforts must be made to ensure that anti-bullying work is not skewed by a male stereotype of bullying behavior, and that it properly reflects and addresses the problems experienced by girls, and especially the nature of indirect bullying” (217). In their study of thirty-four schools’ anti-bullying policies, Sarah Woods and Dieter Wolke reached similar conclusions after finding that children reported more problems with social aggression in schools that had “more detailed and comprehensive policies, compared to schools which had less thorough policies” (396). Supporting Eslea and Smith, they deduced that “anti-bullying policies and whole-school interventions may be failing to consider the problem of relational bullying, and placing exclusive emphasis on direct bullying behaviour only” (396). This explanation is further supported by the number of recent studies demonstrating that programs designed to deal with social aggression do significantly diminish its prevalence in schools (Leff et al., Nixon and Werner; Cappella and Weinstein).

Providing teachers with specific strategies for dealing with social aggression is particularly important because research suggests that current techniques may only be reinforcing this behavior. For example, several researchers have found that teachers tend to “resolve” girls’ conflicts by stressing the importance of their friendship, implying that friends do not fight (Ringrose and Renold 587; Yoon and Kerber 32). This practice reinforces girls’ false belief that direct conflict ends relationships (Simmons 31), and thereby encourages them to continue expressing in indirect and covert ways the occasional feelings of frustration and anger that are normal to any friendship. Without feasible ways of working out their conflicts, girls may find that “a minor disagreement can call an entire relationship into question” (Simmons 31). Yet despite the importance of teaching girls how to resolve conflicts with their friends, a recent study found that California school psychologists rated “friendship interventions” as one of the least important strategies for dealing with bullying (O’Malley 50). In light of girls’ distorted views about friendship and conflict, however, such interventions may in reality be one of the most important ways of addressing social aggression.

One California state publication, “Getting Results: Update 4,” acknowledges that “most prevention efforts are on overt forms of aggressive behavior. However, more subtle forms of aggression, such as relational aggression, have a significant impact on children’s adjustment, particularly for girls, and should be considered” (74). Recognizing that different strategies are necessary for direct and social aggression is an extremely important step towards creating effective anti-bullying policies. However, this solitary statement is obscured and contradicted by the rest of this and other California publications, which only present “anti-bullying strategies” and never differentiate between techniques more effective for one type of aggression than another. For example, in “Bullying at School,” the state promotes the strategy of “positive adult involvement” (3). As discussed above, there is much potential for adults and teachers to create environments that do not support social aggression; however, state publications leave schools and teachers without any hint as to what
that involvement looks like and how it might be different for diverse forms of aggression. To improve its leadership in this area, the state will need to provide schools with specific strategies for dealing with social aggression and alter its language so as to make clear that not all strategies are equally effective for different forms of aggression.

CONCLUSION

“There’s a little part of me that will never quite trust [girls]. There’s a little part of me that believes they will turn on me at any moment.” –Marcy, late 20s (qtd. in Simmons 270)

While individual researchers such as Simmons have done much to expose “the hidden culture of aggression in girls,” state anti-bullying laws and policies, with their broader scale of influence, have the potential to begin deconstructing the restrictions our society places on girls’ emotions to create communities “prepared to value all of girls’ feelings and not just some” (15; 270). In order to truly diminish the prevalence of this behavior, states will have to do more than call it bullying; they will have to publicly acknowledge the cultural origins of social aggression, provide education for teachers on how to recognize it and how harmful it is, and modify anti-bullying policies so as to include strategies designed specifically for dealing with this behavior. Ignoring these critical components of any plan meant to diminish social aggression will prolong the suffering and anguish girls and women feel as they engage in “halfhearted, unsatisfying forms of communication, that…do not satiate the universal human need to express anger” (Simmons 231). The state’s goal, then, should not so much be seen as regulating a cruel behavior, but as teaching girls to speak a language that they have previously been denied.

WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

A NEW LANGUAGE FOR GIRLS: DIRECTIONS FOR CALIFORNIA STATE POLICY

By including social aggression in their definition of bullying, California state policies and publications have taken an important step towards creating “a shared public language to address girls’ conflicts and relationships” (Simmons 261). However, it is clear that this simple modification of an anti-bullying policy designed for diminishing direct aggression will not give schools the guidance they need to deal with this complicated and harmful behavior. Below is a summarized list of the steps discussed above that California must take to truly address this behavior.

1) Debunk the myth that this behavior is innate to girls by explaining its origins in our society’s construction of the “nice” girl who never feels angry.
   a. This will prevent girls from engaging in this behavior out of the belief that they are genetically unable to refrain from it.
   b. Knowing that this behavior is not innate, and therefore avoidable, will help convince teachers to do what they can to stop it.

2) Provide workshops for teachers where they can learn how to recognize social aggression and how harmful it is.
   a. Teachers can be very effective at limiting this behavior if they understand its serious nature and know how to identify it.

3) Alter anti-bullying policies and programs to include strategies specifically for social aggression and differentiate between these and techniques meant for direct aggression.
   a. A number of researchers have provided detailed lists of strategies for dealing with social aggression. These include:
      i. Teach girls to immediately interrupt spiteful gossip. Research has shown that if the first girl to respond to another girl’s gossip speaks positively, the conversation tends to continue in a positive trend; however, if the first response is negative, the conversation tends to continue in a negative trend, regardless of any subsequent positive comments made (Underwood 226).
      ii. Offer assertiveness training that urges girls to display courage in everyday interactions with other girls (Underwood 223).
      iii. Work with girls to help them become comfortable with healthy expressions of anger and frustration (Simmons 231). Role-playing exercises may be one way to do this (248).
      iv. Teach girls from early on that social aggression is just as wrong as kicking and punching. Many girls mistakenly believe that going behind someone’s back is the “nice” thing to do (Simmons 250).
      v. Encourage girls to discuss this behavior with teachers and counselors and assure them that it will not be trivialized or dismissed as inconsequential (Simmons 250; Brown 200).
      vi. Facilitate classroom discussions about different forms of aggression (Simmons 250).
      vii. Create opportunities for girls to feel powerful and important, whether that be through participating in school clubs, or taking part in a discussion forum concerning school climate (Brown 228).
      viii. Help girls develop media literacy and question society’s ideal girl (Brown 208).
      ix. Reduce the competitive nature of the school climate (Underwood 219).


c. It is important to note that these researchers have no intention of focusing anti bullying policies uniquely on social aggression; it is just as important that these policies address physical and direct aggression.

While ongoing research will provide more concrete answers for states as to the best methods of decreasing this behavior, these three steps will do much to help the state balance its policies so that it addresses social aggression as responsibly as direct aggression.