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More girls fighting with fists

Criminal charges against violent teen girls have more than doubled in 20 years as assaults earn respect and admiration within cliques

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

A hint of bravado creeps into the voice of 17-year-old Chiina as she describes a fist fight she got into three weeks ago.

Sounding more like the winner of a boxing match than a teenage girl still nursing bruises from a recent scuffle, she gives a play-by-play description of the exchange.

"I saw her across the street and she just came at me. She punched me and I got her up onto a tree and started punching her," says Chiina, a student at the Etobicoke School of the Arts who asked that only her nickname be used.

It was the second fight between the two girls, which Chiina says stemmed from a Grade 7 altercation after the girl insulted her. This one was more serious, leaving both girls injured and Chiina with a black eye.

"After she punched me in the face, I kned her face and stomped on her ribs. Now she has a broken nose and broken ribs," Chiina says. "I'm happy. She deserved it."

Girls fight with their words and boys fight with their fists. At least, that's the popular perception of how girls display what experts call "social" or "relational" aggression.

Girls, they say, covertly create cliques, gossip and maintain power through social techniques, rather than physically fighting or attacking.

But as the number of adolescent girls being charged with violent crimes



AARON LYNETT/TORONTO STAR

Chiina, above, is one of a growing number of high school girls who opt for physical confrontations to solve differences.

Playground dynamic a draw for online battles

Jamillah Mensah-Brown, 18, didn't expect the uproar when she posted a video of a girl fight on Facebook three weeks ago.

"People were threatening me. They said I should get beat up because I posted it. People were getting really emotional about it," says the first-year University of Toronto psychology major.

in Canada continues to rise, researchers are discovering more about the nature of physically aggressive and violent girls – and how that aggression affects the relationships of the people around them.

"For centuries the stereotype has been that girls and women are nurturers, non-aggressive and seek relationships, while men are aggressive, combative and seek dominance," says Dr. Debra Pepler, professor of psychology at York University and director of the LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution.

"What we are learning is that girls certainly have the capacity to be aggressive. ... However, our hypothesis is that girls are mainly aggressive in the context of close relationships such as siblings, peer groups or dating partners."

According to a Statistics Canada report released in January, the number of females aged 12 and up accused of violent crimes climbed between 1986 and 2005. The rate at which female offenders in Canada are charged with "serious violent crime" has more than doubled, from 60 teens per 100,000 in 1986 to 132 per 100,000 in 2005.

The paper *Aggressive Girls*, published by the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, lists factors that can contribute to aggressive behaviour in girls: family, community and social issues, poverty, mental health problems and drug use.

But the main difference between female and male aggressors, argues Pepler, is whom they target.

"Girls very seldom are out wandering the streets late at night attacking strangers," says Pepler, who consults for and leads the SNAP Girls Connection, a program for aggressive girls and their parents at the Child Development Institute.

Girls are more likely to attack in order to strengthen their social relationships, such as going after someone who is marginal in the group, she says.

Sitting in a crowded bookstore in Mississauga, Krista Mayers, 17, agrees that when she used to fight, it was always within her circle of friends.

The T.L. Kennedy Secondary School student was in Grade 8 when she first got into a fight with another girl.

Mayers describes how the girl was going into the subway with a group of girls when she heard her say, "Oh, we don't need Krista."

"I felt like she was looking down at me. Like I was not being included in something and I just kind of lashed out at her," Mayers says.

The video shows a girl being brutally beaten by a group of girls in the Islington subway station. Some of the girls, who look to be between 14 and 17 years old, are laughing. At least one video-records the fight on a camera phone.

In the video, which was originally posted on photobucket.com, a group of girls smash the victim's head against the ground and stomp on her face. As the beating continues, the victim drops her hands, which were covering her face, and lies limp on the ground. The video ends with the girls walking away.

Mensah-Brown says she posted the link, originally called "Best Girl Fight Ever!" because she wanted to show others what young girls were doing to each other in Toronto.

"It was disgusting. Videos of girls fighting like this are being glorified on the Internet and people are looking at it like it's cool and it's not," says Mensah-Brown.

Toronto police have

"We just started fighting ... there was no real reason for it. It was really catty. I scratched up her face and she threw me around a lot."

A teacher driving by saw the fight. According to Mayers, she honked her car horn and then pulled over picked up only the other girl. When she returned to school that afternoon, Mayers was arrested. She remembers thinking it was unfair because "it takes two to tango." The girl's mother decided not to press charges.

Bullying, in the context of fighting, is a group phenomenon that occurs within groups of both girls and boys, says Pepler.

"Young people will do things to get attention with peers that they wouldn't do ... in a context all by themselves without the reinforcement of the peer group," says Pepler.

Such was the case during Mayers' fight.

"There were lots of bystanders. It was weird, because we were all friends and the people we thought were our friends were egging us on," says Mayers.

"Instead of saying, 'Krista, don't do that,' they just laughed and watched."

And that's how the vicious cycle continues, with girls' positive attention tending to reinforce their peers who fight, or bully, by giving them power and status within their group.

"That's what we are hearing from the girls. They get lots of positives for doing that. They get a higher status," says Pepler.

"So if you get all those things, you don't learn it's not an effective way to relate. You may continue acting like that in your marriage or at your workplace."

Inroads have been made in dealing with female aggression in Toronto. The SNAP Girls Connection has seen significant changes in the girls they have treated in their 12-week program, says Pepler.

"The most effect way to treat aggression, in both girls and boys, is treating their parents," she says.

"Teaching them how to be effective parents, how to set limits, how to be supportive and the right way to discipline," says Pepler.

"The girls who do the best in the program are the girls whose parents also do the best in the program."

While Chiina says she will probably fight again, she doesn't seem particularly worried that the girl, or any other girls, will want to fight

since removed the video from the original site and Mensah-Brown closed the Facebook group. An investigation into the attacks is pending. Calls to determine the identity and health of the victim were not returned.

The phenomenon of posting videos online of girls fighting seems to be growing. On YouTube, videos called "Girls Fight For Man!" or "Girl Fight!" show teenage girls viciously punching each other.

It doesn't surprise Dr. Debra Pepler, professor of psychology at York University and director of the LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution, that girls are posting their fights online.

"The Internet is not that different from a playground, where we found 85 per cent of children will stop and watch if a fight is occurring," says Pepler. "I think it's a very high-arousal event. I think there is a great deal of curiosity about power and status and who's up, who's down. Online just magnifies

her.

The fight was not on school property and subsequently no charges or arrests were made.

Despite Chiina's defiance, there is a moment of reflection.

"It all has to do with where you live and how you are raised. Personally, I was never in a good area. You have financial issues, issues with family, bad stuff going on.

"So you get angry, you get pissed and you want to do something about it," she says.

"So you punch someone."

that."

"Honestly, I think people get a kick out of watching girls go at it like that," says Mensah-Brown.

"Girls can be so cruel sometimes."

Simona Siad