



The Toronto Star

RELIGION, Saturday, March 23, 2002, p. L17

Steering girls away from violence

Toronto's Earlscourt centre is renowned for helping angry, troubled young girls

Isabel Teotonio

Toronto Star; FILE ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS VAN ES

Dropping out of school. Teen pregnancy. Unemployment.

These are just a few of the grim prospects facing angry young girls. But researchers at Earlscourt Child and Family Centre, a Toronto treatment centre for aggressive children under the age of 12 and their families, think early intervention can set them on a different course.

In Canadian cities, about 2 per cent of girls between the ages of 4 and 11 have behavioural problems such as running away, skipping class, beating up other kids, hurting the family pet, stealing and setting things on fire, says Kathy Levene, the centre's clinical director. For boys, the figure is about three times higher.

Although the percentage seems statistically small, the ripple effect that 10 violent girls can have in a school of 500, for instance, can be extensive. Their hostility in the playground and disruptions in class can affect most students and staff.

But there's promising news. Earlscourt staff have been treading into uncharted territory called "girlhood aggression."

Since 1996, they've been running the Earlscourt Girls Connection, a groundbreaking program that deals specifically with aggressive girls in Toronto.

About 300 girls have toiled through the program at this centre nestled in a quiet residential street in the west end. They're just the tip of the iceberg, says Levene. She estimates there are about 3,000 girls in the city who could benefit from such a program.

But the privately funded program, which accepts referrals from police, social workers and schools, is busting at the seams and has a waiting list.

Maria, a Toronto mother of three teenaged daughters, credits Earlscourt Girls Connection for saving her children from a bleak future.

On the surface, they appear to be typical teenagers. The oldest is a brainy and intuitive bookworm. The second is charming and boy crazy. The youngest is an introverted tomboy. But beneath their façades, they struggle to contain their anger and control their violence through the breathing and time-out techniques they've been taught.

(The names of Maria and other Earlscourt clients in this article have been changed.)

When they were little, Maria blamed sibling rivalry as the root of her daughters' outbursts. But when the yelling escalated to swearing, and the slapping to punching, she found herself a powerless parent.

After wresting a knife from one daughter who had lunged at her during a screaming match, and hearing that her youngest had confided in a teacher about thoughts of suicide, she realized their problems went far beyond petty rivalry.

Rare data has been compiled and risk factors and patterns are emerging

With no support from an indifferent husband, she enrolled herself and the girls, ages 6, 8 and 9, in the program. Five years later, they remain involved with the centre, volunteering in a variety of programs.

"I'm always trying new techniques on how to communicate better and how to deal with them," says Maria. "It's a slow process but I've seen good things come out of it."

During the mid-90s, amid rising rates of teen pregnancy and girls charged with criminal acts, Earlscourt was grappling with the failure rates of girls who had been lumped into the same treatment groups with boys.

Boys had always outnumbered girls in these programs and few studies had been done on early female aggression. But cases like that of Reena Virk, a teenager slain by other girls, soon turned the spotlight on the issue.

Earlscourt Girls Connection has filled the research gap and received international attention for being the only registered agency to compile statistical data on angry young girls.

Patterns and risk factors linked to early aggression are emerging: The majority of the girls come from families on government assistance. Most are led by single mothers, many of whom had rough childhoods themselves. Their parents' separation or an absent dad is a major source of distress. Many parents admit to being at their wits' end when it comes to disciplining their daughters, and resort to telling them off or simply giving in.

"The girls who are referred to us are as troubled as the boys but the treatment they respond to is different," says Levene. "It's frightening to think that we didn't think about this before."

Unlike boys, girls are more apt to explore their feelings and respond to therapy involving discussion, role-playing and self-control strategies. Their anger is more covert and tends to manifest itself through bullying, teasing and swearing.

Because this behaviour isn't as visibly disruptive as physical attacks that boys are more prone to, it rarely gets the same attention.

However, data compiled by researchers for Earlscourt Girls Connection are warning signals that girls can be equally violent. Of 98 randomly selected cases, 93 per cent throw temper tantrums, 85 per cent are bullies and cruel to others, 61 per cent physically attack others, 40 per cent steal from home and 20 per cent are mean to animals.

Without early intervention, these girls may embark on the path toward dropping out of school, unemployment, depression, anxiety, dating violence and teen pregnancy, says Levene.

"These girls are also vulnerable to experiencing parenting problems that are associated with conduct problems of the next generation. The cost of serving one girl is approximately \$2,000 a year. Contrast this expenditure with the potential social and financial burdens."

Part of the program's aim is to keep girls, some of whom are already young lawbreakers, from turning into hardened criminals. Because kids under the age of 12 can't be prosecuted under the Young Offenders Act, Earlscourt routinely accepts referrals from the police.

"The multitude of youth agencies are in the justice area, dealing with older kids," says Detective Sergeant David Saunders, youth crime co-ordinator for the Toronto police.

"But you've got to figure that it's easier, maybe, to deal with them at an earlier stage than to wait until they're racing with the wrong crowd."

Although youth crime in Toronto has dropped in the past decade, the rate of girls and boys under 18 charged with violent crimes has jumped 26 per cent for females and 37 per cent for boys.

"A lot more boys get charged with offences but what's disturbing is that girls are catching up, and so too is the level of violence, which was unseen before 1990," Saunders says, adding that girls are now into gangs, fighting with knives and stealing.

"It's serious, too, when you look at it from the victim's point of view," he adds.

"We've had young women kill themselves or become suicidal because they've been victims of youth violence by other girls."

Defusing a young girl's volatile behaviour before it reaches such heights involves targeting verbal, social and physical aggression.

The program

focuses intensely

on family dynamics EarlsCourt includes the Stop Now and Plan (SNAP) program to teach girls to think about consequences; a program on effective disciplinary strategies for parents; the Girls Growing Up Healthy program, at which mother and daughter broach sensitive issues such as sex and body image; and the Leaders in Training program that teaches girls to develop goals and later places them in community and day-care centres to work with other children.

Also, family counselling is provided at the centre or in clients' homes.

Only girls between the ages of 3 and 12 are accepted, but once enrolled, they can remain active in different EarlsCourt programs until they reach 18.

"The program is intensely family-focused," explains Erin Rajca, program co-ordinator.

"The responsibility for making positive changes in the home can't be put solely on the child.

"If parents aren't also willing to use self-control strategies and monitor how they're responding to their daughter, you won't see lasting changes."

For Susan, the single mother of 10-year-old twins Kim and Lisa, SNAP has been invaluable. In fact, she's using it herself.

"When I get frustrated, I've learned to pull myself out of the situation and breathe. I'll use it in everyday life, with other people," she says, recalling an encounter earlier in the day with a rude bank teller.

After mounting problems, a school official recommended Earlscourt Girls Connection.

"Kim was getting teased because she'd had a bad case of lice," Susan recalls.

"She was feeling depressed and not liking the other kids."

Since starting the program last summer, her daughters seem happier and more willing to share their feelings with her.

The greatest obstacle to success is when girls don't stick to the program or when parents don't support their progress, says Rajca.

"These are the kids who remain high-risk. We don't want to lose them ...

"We need to pay more attention to girls and seriously invest in their future."

Note(s):

For more information, visit www.earlscourt.on.ca.

Illustration(s):

FILE ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS VAN ES FILE ILLUSTRATION BY
CHRIS VAN ES

Category: Society and Trends

Uniform subject(s): Children; Sexual assaults and abuse; Sexuality and morals;
Teenagers and young adults

Edition: Ontario

Length: Long, 1230 words

Copyright © 2002 Toronto Star, All Rights Reserved.

Doc.: 20020323TS0GANAV40Q

Erreur Système! Code d'erreur = 26950378, No. d'erreur = 60000