

SUGAR AND SPICE NO MORE

A unique Toronto program helps young females who turn to violence

CELINE BAUTISTA skips into the second-floor room at Toronto's Earlscourt Child and Family Centre and says a perky hello to her four classmates. The girls, all of whom have histories of being violent, are settling in for their fourth session of Girls Connection, a 12-week program that helps them deal with aggression. Their calm demeanours belie this part of their lives. Celine, 11, comes across as the overachiever. "Did you get angry this week?" the facilitator asks. "Yes," says Celine, her hand waving. "When my mom asked me to go to bed. I didn't blow up. I thought about SNAP—Stop Now And Plan. I took a deep breath and my mom and I made a compromise. I could watch 10 minutes more of TV and then go to sleep."

Until she started at Girls Connection in April, Celine fought regularly with her mother. Their battles escalated to the point where Celine locked herself in her bedroom and threw objects, including a hammer, at the wall. Her anger was ignited by simple requests, like cleaning up her room or doing her homework. Celine, once a straight-A student, saw her marks plummet to Ds. Her mother read an article about Girls Connection in a parenting magazine and thought Celine should enrol. "Earlscourt helps me feel good about myself," says Celine. "When I get angry, I feel terrible. I cry really hard and I can't breathe. I feel very sad afterwards."

Incidents of verbal and physical violence by girls have rocked Canada in the past few years. There was the 1997 beating and murder of Victoria's Reena Virk—of the eight teens convicted in the case, seven were girls. Last year, another B.C. girl was convicted of criminal harassment after tormenting a 14-year-old classmate who subsequently hanged herself. The number of girls charged with crimes of violence, although still very low, has doubled in the past decade. Until now, though, little has been known about female aggression. It was assumed girls were violent for the same reasons boys were.

But new research shows girls are often aggressive for reasons quite different from those of boys. In *Research and Treatment*

for *Aggression with Adolescent Girls*, published last fall, Alan Leschied and Anne Cummings of the University of Western Ontario note that as many as 31 per cent of aggressive girls suffer from depression. In addition to being physically violent, aggressive girls often have accompanying conditions such as self-mutilation, eating disorders and—even as early as pre-adolescence—drug and alcohol abuse. Their domestic lives seem to play a significant role, too. Seventy per cent of aggressive girls are from broken homes, and 58 per cent have witnessed violence between parents. "Girls' aggression," says Leschied, "involves a sense of powerlessness, isolation and depression that we just don't see in boys."

That's where Girls Connection comes in. The only program of its kind in North America, it was launched in 1996 after Earlscourt found that girls enrolled in the co-ed anti-violence program weren't improving. Girls Connection draws on proven techniques for curbing aggression among young males,

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including anger management and social-skills development, but it also addresses the underlying issues and types of aggression more common among young females, such as gossiping and name-calling. Participants are all under 12, and most have been referred to the program after committing aggressive acts at school or home. Studies show that without intervention these girls are at risk of eventually dropping out of school, becoming young mothers and/or turning into criminals. "They're in real jeopardy," says Earlscourt clinical director Kathy Levene, "but so little attention is paid to them."

Celine is no exception. Her problems be-

gan four years ago when her parents separated. Tina Bautista, the girl's mother, had to take on two full-time jobs to support her family, so Celine was often left in the care of two older half-sisters. Celine felt abandoned by her dad, whom she visits four days a month. With her mother gone, she began to resist authority and throw tantrums. "Everything was confusing and hard," says Celine, who now knows where her anger comes from. "I wish I still lived with dad."

But Tina didn't understand the depth of Celine's despair. She believed her daughter would outgrow the troublesome behaviour. To get Celine to follow house rules, Tina resorted to threatening to cut off some of her child's favourite activities, like soccer. When Tina and Celine arrived at Earlscourt, they weren't speaking. "My communication with Celine had become very short," admits Tina, 50. "There were 25 things taking me away from sitting down with her."

Tina was enrolled in her own 12-week course at Earlscourt, which looked at how her parenting has contributed to Celine's aggression and how she could bridge the rift between them. "The mother-daughter relationship is crucial in a girl's development," says York University psychology professor Debra Pepler. "When you look at the background of aggressive girls, most have problems with their mothers."

While Celine has never been physically abused, many in Girls Connection have. According to Statistics Canada, nine per cent of young Canadian girls say they've been battered, and one in five high-school girls reports having been physically or sexually assaulted. Among aggressive girls, 45 per cent say they were beaten or burned, supporting research that girls use violence after having experienced it themselves. Kelly's father uses physical force, including spankings and hair-pulling, to discipline his daughter, another participant in Girls Connection. Kelly, 8, landed in the program after repeatedly striking a boy who teased her in gym class. It wasn't the first time she'd been aggressive with another child. Kelly (her real name has



been withheld to protect her from her father) knows her behaviour is wrong, but admits it's the only way she knows how to react. "I feel so bad," she says tearfully. "But I can't stop."

Adding to Kelly's problems is that her mother, Helen, was battered by her own father. "The way I was brought up is that when a child doesn't do what they're told, the parent hits them," says Helen, who is now divorced and has custody of Kelly. "Even though I had chosen not to discipline in this way, I felt the urge. I needed to unlearn this reaction and learn healthy parenting behaviour." Pepler understands all too well

Celine and mother Tina are friends again

the cycle of violence. "By not taking girls' seriously," she says, "we've forgotten that they become the mothers of tomorrow."

No behaviour has come under the microscope as much in recent years as social aggression. Many girls harass or make fun of other girls who are perceived as different, or as threats. Such things reach their peak when girls go through puberty and begin forming cliques based on their clothes and activities and the boys they like. "Boys are more physical—boom and it's done," says Leschied. "Girls, on the other hand, are so-

cialized to isolate other girls whom they don't want as part of their culture."

Girls at risk of being aggressive, but who do well academically and stay in school, are better able to avoid violent behaviour. Most important, notes Leschied, "is having a peer or adult to confide in who takes an interest in a child's strengths, not deficits." And then there's Girls Connection. "What I'm learning may seem so simple: like stepping back, thinking about why I'm mad and speaking calmly," says Celine. "But it's a light bulb for me." And also for a society just beginning to grapple with a disturbing new trend. M