

# Gender gap closing — badly!



## Defusing the rise of aggression among Canada's teenage girls

CANADA IS spearheading the study of girlhood aggression, an issue that will resurface when the Reena Virk teen murder case goes to trial for the third time in October. Toronto's Child Development Institute is North America's only agency to offer programs specifically for aggressive girls under the age of 12.

Social aggression, which can be as benign as befriending a girl and then ostracizing her, can escalate into physical violence. Such perplexing cases of aggression with young girls — social and physical aggression — seem to be on the rise although they are still small compared to boys' aggression.

"The gender gap is decreasing slightly every year, though we as a society have not taken this seriously," says Kathy Levene, early intervention director at the Child Development Institute (CDI), formerly Earlscourt Child and Family Centre.

Three Toronto-born sisters of Portuguese descent — Kayla, 9, Dizla, 8 and Rissa, 6, (they asked their last names not be used) were enrolled in the Girls' Connection dur-

ing its first year, in 1996, for severe sibling rivalry.

"We would fight with our parents and with each other," recalls Dizla, now 16, a peer mentor and counsellor at CDI's inner-city Camp Wimodausis along with both her sisters.

"We would be screaming, yelling, and occasionally it got physical between us, with hair pulling, slapping, biting, scratching and wrestling. It was driving my mom crazy."

Kayla, 17, adds, "We never meant to hurt each other, but we didn't know other ways to deal with our anger."

Their mother, Bernadette, remembers being hit or strapped by her father when she was very young. "My parents were always screaming and didn't know how to communicate, so I grew up witnessing hitting and screaming matches," she says.

"I had a bad relationship with my mother. She didn't listen to me, so I swore, if I had kids, I wouldn't be that way. But the first time I caught myself hitting them, I started going to parenting groups until I found the Girls' Connection."

About 70% of aggressive girls

have witnessed or experienced verbal, physical or sexual abuse and over 50% come from single-parent homes.

"These two risk factors for girlhood aggression have emerged from our new study," Levene says. "So many of our girls come from single-parent families, where their only model is their mother, who's often struggling, with no support. Girls are more affected by their mother's behaviours than their father's."

Kayla, Dizla and Rissa, who live with both their parents, admit they hated going to the Girls' Connection at first, but strategies for anger management and other life skills they learned there helped them control their aggressive tendencies.

They still bicker a little, says their mother, who also attended sessions with her daughters, but they now deal with their arguments

themselves and don't fight physically anymore.

"Now, talking to our mom is much easier and our relationships with her have improved," says Kayla.

"She was like the enemy," says Dizla. "We were in a power struggle, but now we're equal. It comes with age and maturity. Also with respect. She felt helpless, and too controlling."

Rissa, 14, adds: "Now we understand where she's coming from and that her parents fought and were very strict, which is why she was so strict with us."

Since graduating from the Girls' Connection, Kayla, Dizla and Rissa have continued on through its Leader-in-Training programs and remain very active year-round at CDI.

"We enjoy being role models for other girls," says Kayla.



REENA VIRK  
Murdered in B.C.



SANDY NAIMAN

## Sisters made the connection

■ THREE SISTERS Kayla, 17, Rissa, 14, and Dizla, 16, are all smiles as they pose for this picture at the Child Development Institute. But until they enrolled at the Girls' Connection they were having serious problems with sibling rivalry. Kayla said they never meant to hurt each other, but they didn't know other ways to deal with their anger.

— Ernest Dorozuk, SUN

## 'Little girls know the power of groups'

JUST HOW does the aggressive behaviour of boys and girls differ?

"In many girls who escalate to physical aggression, it starts in socialized aggression — exclusion, gossiping, whispering, — whereas boys go directly to physical aggression," says the University of Western Ontario's Alan Leschied, co-author of *Research and Treatment for Aggression with Adolescent Girls*.

"Little girls know the power of groups, and how to use them. They know how to use social networks," he says. "We've found in terms of victimization, the wounds experienced from social aggression are much more damaging than wounds from physical aggression. They're long term and they cut deeper."

Research into aggressive behaviour in young girls is relatively new and scarce. However it has uncovered disturbing underlying links to

depression, self-mutilation, eating disorders and even suicide attempts, Leschied adds. There is a sense of powerlessness and isolation in girls not seen in boys.

"Boys and girls begin the same, but what makes some girls continue on in aggressive behaviours can be the environment into which they are born," says Margaret Walsh, a research co-ordinator analyzing results of study on the Girls' Connection.

### Girls' Connection

"Even violent behaviour towards the mother when she is pregnant, plus her nutrition, smoking, alcohol, the criminality of the parent, and the abusive history of the parent are all risk factors for aggressive behaviour in children," she says.

Girls' Connection was launched in 1996, drawing on the Child Development In-

stitute's existing program for aggressive boys and girls started in 1985. Because it wasn't working as effectively with girls as it was with boys, several different components were added for this new girls program called the Girls' Connection.

Besides the initial 12-week program where the girls and their parents learn strategies for anger management, an additional eight-week session for mothers and daughters called "Growing Up Healthy" helps them improve their communication skills, says Kathy Levene of CDI.

Without intervention, social aggression among young girls, which can typically begin with sibling rivalry, can result in their dropping out of school, turning to criminal activities or being ill-prepared as young mothers and perpetuating aggressive behaviours with their own children.

— Sandy Naiman

## TIPS FOR WORRIED MOMS

Alert Yourself to Girlhood Aggression:

- Some aggressive behaviour is normal in girls under 12, but note any signs of depression: Do they say they hate themselves? Are they sad? Do these feelings persevere and interfere with their normal functioning?
- Be aware of your daughter being socially and verbally abused. Often kids will keep it a secret.
- Keep in touch with your children's teachers.
- Note if your daughter's friends stop calling her.
- Be aware of any sexually precocious behaviour in your daughter, like inappropriate hugging or touching.
- The influence of the media

can't be discounted. Be proactive. Girls tend to dress like rock stars and ape their sexuality. Help your daughter to stay a little girl as long as possible by encouraging her to participate in sports and to stay focussed on being well balanced.

- Keep the mother-daughter lines of communication open.
- Try to talk to your daughter about sensitive subjects — body image, sexuality and stereotyping.
- Early intervention is key to a more successful outcome.
- The Child Development Institute takes calls directly from concerned parents of children under age 12 without referrals. Each call will be taken seriously. Telephone: 416-654-8981.