

Dark side of girl power

Guess who's catching up to boys when it comes to punching, kicking and biting?

A Toronto program, the only one of its kind in the world, is helping families cope

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LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN
FEATURE WRITER



In his new book *See Jane Hit*, child psychologist James Garbarino lauds Toronto's Child Development Institute

years of searching for help.

"But there are so many more families — some with worse stories than ours — who need help and can't get it because government doesn't recognize this as a priority," she says.

When it comes to physical aggression and violence, child psychologists say girls are catching up with boys. There are many theories about why it's happening — violent female images are more prevalent in the media; girls play more sports and are more physically active; and the social expectation that girls don't "act out" is rapidly disappearing.

But apart from hand-wringing — and some debate over whether girlhood aggression is really on the rise — few are doing anything about it or talking about why we need to act.

The Girls Connection is trying to change that.

The program was developed 10 years ago by Earslcourt Child and Family Services, which merged with Toronto's Creche Child and Family Services in 2004 to become the Child Development Institute.

Since 1996, program staff has been conducting groundbreaking research on girlhood aggression and has developed a treatment and prevention program for girls ages 6 to 12 that is making a difference.

It has been recognized in scientific circles as one of the only research-based gender-specific programs of its kind in the world. And this spring, well-known American child psychologist James Garbarino lauded it in his new book *See Jane Hit: Why Girls Are Growing More Violent and What We Can Do About it*, as a model for others to follow.

Imagine a mother who can't think of a good thing to say about her 9-year-old daughter.

"I knew she had a beautiful smile," Lena recalls tearfully. "But she didn't smile enough."

From about age 5, Lena's daughter wore a constant frown. She punched and kicked her parents and other children. She threw rocks at her neighbours' homes and eggs at their cars. At school she talked back to the teachers, hit her classmates and stole their belongings. She was sent home from church camp for attacking fellow campers. And once she lunged at her mother with a knife.

The angry little girl with the explosive temper became a pariah. She was never invited to birthday parties, play dates or sleepovers. Even Lena's friends and family stopped calling and visiting.

"It was heartbreaking," Lena says. "We were so distraught we just wanted to hide."

Today, Lena's daughter is a funny, considerate and compassionate 16-year-old. She has friends. She is doing well at school. And she's helping others stay out of trouble.

Lena credits Toronto's Girls Connection, a small, privately funded program run by the Child Development Institute.

"The program saved me, my daughter, my family — our lives," says Lena, who stumbled into the program seven years ago after four frantic

'I want to punch her in the stomach'

"I just haven't heard of other programs with the same seriousness to them that are actually doing something," Garbarino said in a telephone interview this week from his office at Chicago's Loyola University.

And yet for all its acclaim, the Girls Connection doesn't receive ongoing government funding, nor has it been able to secure mainstream charitable support from groups like the United Way.

EarlsCourt began working with children between the ages of 6 and 12 in conflict with the law in 1985 when the Young Offenders Act increased the age of criminal responsibility to age 12, leaving a huge gap in service for younger kids. The program has received provincial funding ever since. But in 1996, clinicians noticed that the small percentage of girls in the program weren't having the same success as the boys. They were either becoming more aggressive or withdrawn. So the agency decided to seek private funds to set up a pilot project geared specifically to help girls. What they found was significant. About 2 per cent of girls in this age group have extreme behaviour problems, like those experienced by Lena's daughter, or worse, says program researcher Margaret Walsh. They kick, bite and punch on a daily basis. They injure household pets and beat up siblings. They lie, steal, cheat and bully. At school they are constantly fighting and verbally challenging teachers and other authority figures. Some set fires, smash windows and furniture. Risk factors for violent youngsters are fairly common across the gender divide and

include prolonged childhood hospitalization, physical or sexual abuse, learning disabilities, parental substance abuse, witnessing household violence and multiple out-of-home placements.

But researchers noticed two additional risk factors for girls — early onset of puberty and poor mother-daughter relationships. Girls who hit puberty at age 8 or 9 are not equipped emotionally or intellectually to deal with sexual attention from men and are at risk of early sexual behaviour and teen pregnancy, Walsh says. The resulting confusion can cause severe anger and aggression.

And just as psychologists are pointing to the importance of father figures in taming violent male youths, Walsh says their research shows girls need a positive relationship with their mothers or same-sex caregivers to learn what it means to be a woman.

The long-term outcomes for aggressive girls are generally poorer than for boys, she notes, because over time girls tend to internalize their anger. They suffer more from depression and become involved in more self-destructive behaviours such as drug

and alcohol abuse. They drop out of school, run away and become pregnant. Ultimately they link up with men who are equally troubled, she says. And without intervention, these young women are extremely ill-equipped to raise their children in a socially healthy environment.

"We believe the intergenerational effects are very serious and deserve more public attention," Walsh says.

"Lights. Camera. Action. Quiet on the set. Please and thank you."

Program co-ordinator Erin Rajca sits behind a two-way mirror and monitors a group counselling session of five girls ages 6 through 8, all with extreme behaviour problems.

The girls chant at the top of their lungs to cheer on the next performance — a role-playing exercise to practise how to

SNAP™ Hassle Log 8

Name: _____ Date: _____

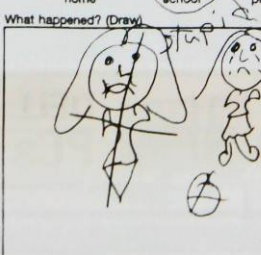
When was it? (circle one)

morning afternoon night

Where were you? (circle one)

home school playground mall other

What happened? (Draw)



I felt (circle one)

happy sad angry

My body told me I was feeling:

hot all over butterflies in my stomach

my hands are in fists tears in my eyes

other

I stopped myself by: (circle one)

counting to ten walking away taking deep breath I didn't stop

I said to myself (circle one):

I can handle this I can't handle this

I made my problem: (circle a number)

bigger 3-4-5-6-7 8-9-10 smaller

My plan was to: (circle one)

Do something else tell an adult check it out other: walk away

My parent's signature: _____ Date: _____

EARLSCOURT GIRLS CONNECTION

handle a potentially explosive situation in the schoolyard. (Names of girls and parents in

“What were you feeling?” she asks.
“I have tears in my eyes and

Tiffany puts her finger on her chin and gazes upwards.
“I would have asked someone else to play,” she says.
“Right on,” Clark says.



Erin Rajca of the Girls Connection sits behind a two-way mirror and monitors a group of girls with extreme behaviour problems.

the program have been changed to protect their identities.) Six-year-old Kira dances around the room seemingly lost in playful reverie. Tiffany, 8, approaches cautiously. “Do you want to play with me?” she asks timidly. Kira appears to ignore her and walks away. Tiffany stops, puts her hands in her pockets and takes a deep breath. Then she goes back to her friend. “Did you hear me when I asked you to play?” she asks politely. “Oh. No,” Kira says, looking surprised. “Would you like to play?” Tiffany asks again. “Sure,” Kira replies as the two girls link arms and take a bow. Group facilitator Jennifer Clark moves in to highlight the skills the girls have just demonstrated. “Very good,” says Clark, a Ryerson University social work student on a work placement.

butterflies in my stomach,” Tiffany says. “What do you want to do?” Clark asks. “I want to punch her in the stomach. I feel angry,” Tiffany replies. “That was a ‘hard’ thought,” Clark observes. “Did you have any other ‘hard’ thoughts?” “One of my best friends was ignoring me,” Tiffany says. “How did you stop yourself?” Clark continues. “I took a deep breath,” Tiffany answers again as Clark smiles. “And what was your ‘cool’ thought?” Clark probes. “My best friend just didn’t hear me,” Tiffany answers. “So what was your plan?” “Go over and ask if she heard me,” Tiffany says. “Excellent plan,” Clark says. “Now what would you have done if she didn’t want to play?”

The Girls Connection is a family-centred program that brings together parents or caregivers - primarily mothers - and daughters to teach anger management strategies and reinforce the mother-daughter bond. Girls who complete the program show statistically significant improvements compared with girls on the waiting list for treatment, according to a recent study funded by the Hospital for Sick Children and Ontario’s

Trillium Foundation. “The goal is to help the girls recognize a problem situation and to make it smaller rather than bigger through SNAP,” says program co-ordinator Rajca. SNAP is an acronym for Stop Now And Plan. It’s a tool both parents and daughters are taught to use when they encounter a situation that makes them feel sad or angry - emotions that usually trigger aggressive violent behaviour in the girls and exasperation in the parents. And how do the girls know they are sad or angry? Councillors draw the girls’ attention to how their body is reacting. The girls report teary eyes, dry mouth, volcanic head, butterfly stomach, sweaty palms, knotted fists and all-over body heat. The girls and their parents learn to quickly identify these feelings as a signal to use SNAP.

They learn to stop these feelings by counting to 10, taking a deep breath or walking away. And more importantly, they learn to recognize the “hard” or “cool” thoughts that go along with these feelings and to focus on a “cool” or positive thought that will help them plan to make the problem smaller, not bigger. Finally, they learn to make a plan and carry it out. Among those plans, they are encouraged to tell an adult or “check it out” before jumping to a potentially wrong conclusion, as Tiffany demonstrated during her role-playing exercise. During 12 weekly 90-minute group sessions, parents and daughters meet separately with

Violence crosses cultural divide

In *See Jane Hit*, Dr. James Garbarino shows that the rise in violence among girls is the result of various cultural developments. An excerpt: The process of female liberalization and equalization is nearly complete when it comes to aggression, and the mass media have provided one of the most important vehicles for achieving that dubious transformation. If Tremblay’s findings that infant girls and boys start out equally aggressive turns the theoretical world upside down, then Eron and Huesmann’s finding that girls used to be immune to the effects of TV violence but no longer are turns the social world of kids upside down. When it comes to the role of gender in the culture of violence, it truly is a new ball game, and we are all going to have to learn some new rules for playing.

trained facilitators to learn the technique and practise how to use it. Staff members monitor the sessions from behind two-way mirrors.

For homework, mothers and daughters must fill out a “hassle log” in which they record at least two instances each week when they used SNAP in their daily lives.

After the 12 weeks, girls over age 8 and their moms participate in a group that promotes sexual health and mother-daughter bonding.

The program also offers individual family counselling, tutoring, befriending, a summer camp and a mentoring program for girls over 12 and for moms who want to stay connected once the formal program is over.

Most families are referred to the program through their schools, the child welfare system or hospitals. It can handle about 130 girls each year including about 50 new admissions and 80 ongoing cases. But demand is high. And space in the next session, beginning in September is already full.

It operates with just three full-time staff on an annual budget of about \$350,000, or about \$3,000 per girl — half the staff and budget of the agency’s provincially funded program for aggressive boys.

At a Toronto meeting of senior brass for Ontario children’s mental health agencies this week, Tony Diniz, executive director of the Child Development Institute, looks around the room and despairs for the future. Except for a 3 per cent increase several years back, provincial funding for the entire sector has been frozen for 12 years, he notes.

“Everyone is suffering,” Diniz says. “For everyone, this has meant a 25 per cent cut in service at a time when the need is growing.”

Diniz knows it’s difficult to snare public funding for girls’ mental health when there has been so much focus on violent teen boys.

However, he believes helping girls before they reach the teen years, with the accompanying risks of leaving school and teen pregnancy, will pay huge social dividends down the road.

“If we can prevent these girls from becoming mothers to more troubled boys and girls, the savings will be huge,” he says.

He lauds the private philanthropy that has kept the Girls Connection afloat. But he wonders when the program’s plea for core funding from government and public charities will be answered.

A spokesperson for Ontario’s child and youth services minister Mary Anne Chambers says the province is always open to new requests.

“If they have new evidence maybe we can take a look at the proposal again,” said James Ip. “Certainly we’d be open to that.”