

T.O. program treats girls' behavioural problems

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Nine-year-old Trisha kicked, screamed, and even defied her teacher. She suffered from extreme aggression, but because Trisha is female, her mother Jacklyne had a difficult time finding help. That changed when Jacklyne discovered the Girls Connection program at Toronto's Child Development Institute.

"We know that girls express aggression differently than boys do," Erin Rajca, who works at CDI, told CTV News. "A treatment program needs to tailor itself to the unique needs

of girls and that's what we've done."

The program was perfect for Trisha's mother, who found it difficult to control her daughter's violent behaviour on her own.

"I think one time she hit the teacher," Jacklyne said. Girls Connection has a special anger management strategy to help girls like Trisha overcome their aggression. Called SNAP, it stands for "Stop Now And Plan."

"We're teaching girls to stop, think before acting and learn to calm themselves down," Rajca said.

CDI created the program in 1996. Girls are placed in a 12-week anger management group, while parents attend a 12-week parent management training group. After the 12 weeks are completed, daughters aged eight and above join their mothers in Girls Growing Up Healthy groups, which promote stronger familial bonds and education about sexual health. The program continues to help girls until they turn 18, and individual family counseling is also available.

CDI treats both mothers and daughters because behavioural problems are often passed down from one generation to the next. This was true for Lark, who found that her daughters Shaylene and Ayisha inherited much of their aggression from her own behaviour. "I found myself yelling and screaming all the time," she said. "For a lot of their behaviour, I had to step back and realize that it was coming from me."

Although Shaylene admits she still fights with her sister, she said "it's not as bad as before." Her mother said she's noticed a big change since the family first came to the program for treatment. "We've been coming here for three years now," Lark said. "If you could see the difference in both my girls, even individually, they're both so much more mature and responsible." According to police, aggression in girls is a growing problem in Canada, with more young women joining youth gangs.

"This is a trend that has emerged over the past five years," Insp. Thomas Carrique, of Ontario's York Region police, told a seminar on gun violence in Toronto this week. Police estimate that females comprise six per cent of the membership of Canada's 340 known gangs. Only five years ago, the percentage was zero.



Rajca says 'Were teaching girls to stop, think before acting and learn to calm themselves down.'

Despite the trend, Girls Connection has no ongoing funding. Instead, it operates on contributions from individual donors, foundations and corporations.

Based on a report by CTV's Weekend Anchor Sandie Rinaldo