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Program Focuses on Coping with Betrayal and Pain in Middle School

By Sophie Braccini



Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School participants in the Communication Skills for Girls workshop. Photo provided

bathroom because they didn't want to hang out with her anymore. "It was a metaphoric punch to my gut," she recalls.

A Bentley Upper School junior adds that throughout sixth and seventh grade she can't remember a day when her "friends" weren't saying things like, "You're pathetic" or "You're a selfish brat," or "No one cares."

"Being turned off by friends is one of the worst feelings a young girl can experience in her early teenage years," she says.

Tween and early teen years can be hard for growing girls, and can result in a culture that's confusing for young women. Moraga School District Superintendent Bruce Burns asked AAUW's Valarie Burgess, who's been managing the Sister-to-Sister project in Lamorinda for 15 years, to offer a multi-week program for female Joaquin Intermediate School students to work on communication issues and healthy relationships. The pilot program, called Communication Skills for Girls, was held in the fall; the Sister-to-Sister summit scheduled March 22 is a one-day opportunity for young girls to experience how to better navigate the emotional roads of middle school.

The programs offered are managed by high school facilitators - local high school girls who can testify to the difficulty of middle school years and to the better times that lie ahead. They are trained by AAUW members year-round.

"The purpose of the six-week program at JM is to empower girls and raise their emotional intelligence," says Burgess. "It teaches healthy communication and relationship skills, raises awareness of negative cultural and social messages, and helps the girls to be resilient and proficient advocates for themselves and their peers." Burgess designed the program with Laura L. Wittenberg, a marriage and family therapist, based on their participation in the Rachel Simons' Boston Girls Leadership Institute.

"People who act mean are sometimes the most insecure, and they are the ones who would need help," says Miramonte senior Elizabeth Chenok, who was a facilitator. "The girls who work with us learn techniques to identify and handle their own emotions, without lashing out or being overwhelmed." The senior thinks that middle school is a time of change and insecurity, when all people desperately want is to fit in.

April Lindblad, a sixth grader at JM, participated in the program. "We had a lot of fun learning new skills," she says. "We practiced the 'I' statement - when you say what you feel rather than accusing someone about what they did - or how to identify and defuse 'pushing' statements. We learned how to avoid being bullied and we made new friends."

April's mother, Sarah Tabler, appreciated the information session that was held for parents before the series started, and the follow-up emails sent every week to reinforce what the girls were learning. "They learned to avoid using 'always' and 'never,'" she says. "They learned how to name emotions, recognize feelings. They also discussed the importance of having your own thoughts and being your authentic self."

Burgess hopes to offer a second Communication Skills for Girls session starting in April. All the girls who participated in the first program have been invited to the March 22 Sister-to-Sister summit, held from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on the Bentley High School campus in Lafayette. For more information or to register, go to oml-ca.aauw.net/s2s/.

When you ask high school girls from the Sister-to-Sister series - a life skills program for middle school girls offered by the Lamorinda branch of the American Association of University Women - about the most painful memories of their years in middle school, half of the time their response is "betrayal" - betrayal by girls who they thought were their closest friends.

One Miramonte High School senior's worst experience in middle school was that suddenly her best friends stopped talking with her on the phone and stopped inviting her to hangout. When confronted about it, they started sending awful texts and putting her down.

Another Miramonte senior, who also asked not to be named, was part of a very close knit group of friends and was ostracized one day when one of the girls said that their group was "too exclusive" and it was that girl's fault. The same thing happened to an Acalanes High School senior one day in middle school when she heard that her friends were hiding in the

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[back](#)

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