

SAMHSA Grantee Sponsors Conference on Girls' Aggression and Violence, Releases Report

In recent years, there has been increased interest in and concern about aggression and violence among girls. However, insufficient research, theory, and practice have been focused on girls' violence or on male-female differences in violence risk and protective factors. A one-day conference, *Girlfighting: Preventing Girls' Aggression & Violence*, brought together educators, staff of social service and community-based agencies, and juvenile justice personnel, among others, to learn more about the problem and ways to address it. The event, which was sponsored by the Governor's Prevention Partnership, drew a capacity crowd of more than 200 to Central Connecticut State University in New Britain.



The keynote address, “Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls,” was presented by Lyn Mikel Brown, associate professor of education and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. Dr. Brown, the author of three books on girls' social and psychological development – *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (with Carol Gilligan), *Raising Their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger*, and *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls* – has also written extensively on the lives of working class girls; the influence of race, class, and gender on girls' lives; and girls' feelings of anger, self-knowledge, loss, hope, and desire.

While acknowledging that a range of studies has found that boys bully and are bullied more often than girls, Dr. Brown added that this gender difference may be due – at least in part – to the manner in which girls bully others. While boys are much more likely than girls to use physical aggression, girls tend to practice more covert forms of bullying that are often difficult to detect and estimate, such as teasing, spreading rumors, and socially isolating other girls. She explained that at an early age, girls are subjected to strong messages from society in general and the media in particular that they must conform to certain ideals of femininity, beauty, and romance to be popular and successful. In doing so, they should not trust other girls with whom they are in competition. In addition, historically, females have not been permitted to use direct aggression, so have not had much practice at it. The result: relational aggression. “Girls really are, I think, fighting to be somebody,” she said.

According to Dr. Brown, in contrast to boys who bully, girl bullies are often sad about the conflict and are less likely to be impulsive about engaging in this behavior, exhibiting more talking and forethought prior to action. In addition, they are not as likely to be aggressive toward adults.

Dr. Brown discussed the current media hype surrounding “mean girls” and pointed to media literacy as critical to preventing girls' aggression. During her presentation, she used magazine advertisements, trailers from movies, clips from television shows, and commercials for dolls and board games to illustrate the denigrating messages about their gender that girls are given via these media sources. During her presentation and in materials distributed to conference participants, Dr. Brown offered suggestions for preventing girlfighting. Those recommendations, as well as information about aggression and violence among girls, are available on Dr. Brown's website: www.HardyGirlsHealthyWomen.org.

The keynote presentation was followed by release of *Preventing Girls' Aggression and Violence*, a report of the statewide group, the Girls and Violence Task Force. The report, written by SAMHSA-funded project director Leigh Jones-Bamman of the Governor's Prevention Partnership in Hartford, Connecticut, is a valuable source of information on girls' pathways to violence that also offers recommendations for prevention. To download a copy of the report, visit the organization's website: <http://www.preventionworksct.org/pdf/G&Vfinalreport.pdf>.



Panel member Fred Chappelle, Multicultural Leadership Institute.

A panel discussion and workshops followed. Brief workshop summaries are presented below.

Allies in Action: Building Healthy Relationships Between Girls

Presenter: Annette Klinefelter, Girls' Initiative Network,

The Girls Initiative Network (GIN) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating social change for girls through advocacy, education and activism. The Network's primary programs are Allies in Action, workshops for dismantling girl-to-girl relational and physical aggression, and Girls' Empowerment Groups to build self-esteem, promote resiliency, and develop life skills. Through Allies in Action, GIN is working to transform ingrained patterns of relational aggression among girls. GIN is taking an all-school approach to address girl-to-girl aggression, which manifests itself as shunning, name-calling, rumor spreading, intimidating glares, and physical violence. The Allies in Action model, designed for late elementary and early middle school girls, is used to change the climate of competition and hostility among girls.

This workshop provided an introduction to the Allies in Action model, which was developed by SAMHSA-funded grantee Annette Klinefelter. The Allies in Action model supports middle and high school girls as the leaders of change in their schools and prepares school staff and parents to support their efforts. All participants are trained: a one-day (6-hour) training for 15-25 girls to become peer facilitators, conducting activities and dialogues with other girls about relational aggression; a one-day training for school staff that explores the nature of relational aggression between girls and offers culturally relevant and age-appropriate prevention and intervention strategies; and a one-evening workshop for parents and community members to help them understand relational aggression and identify ways to prevent it through dialogue, communication, and societal deconstruction.

For additional information: Annette Klinefelter, Executive Director
Girls' Initiative Network
1233 SE Stark
Portland, OR 97214
(503) 230-0057
www.girlsinitiativenetwork.org

Girls' Circle

Presenter: Kitty Tyrol, Trainer, Community Solutions, Windsor, Connecticut

Girls' Circle is a model of structured support groups for girls 9-18 years old. It is designed to foster self-awareness and self-esteem, help girls maintain authentic connections with peers and adult women in their community, counter trends toward self-doubt, and allow for genuine self-expression through verbal sharing and creative activity.

Each week, a group of girls of similar age and developmental level meet with a facilitator. During these group sessions, the girls take turns talking and listening to one another respectfully about their concerns and interests. The girls also express themselves via such creative activities as role playing, drama, journal writing, poetry, dance, drawing, and collage-building. Gender-specific themes and topics are introduced which relate to the girls' lives, such as being a girl, trusting oneself, friendships, competition, decision making, body image, goals, sexuality, and not using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Participants in the workshop had an opportunity to explore the structure and format of a Girls' Circle session, talk about the girls with whom they work and whether such an intervention would be of interest to their population, and network with others doing similar work.



For additional information: Tides/Girls' Circle Association
458 Christensen Lane
Cotati, CA 94931
(707) 794-9477
<http://www.girlscircle.com>

Building Human Service and Education Systems that Understand and Proactively Address Relational Aggression

Presenter: Alyssa Benedict, Executive Director, CORE (Creating Opportunities through Research and Education) Associates, LLC

This workshop provided an overview of approaches that *all* systems can adopt to increase the capacity to understand and proactively address relational aggression. Alyssa Benedict began the session with a call to action: Systems must recognize that relational aggression affects all settings and therefore change their aims to address it effectively. According to Ms. Benedict, CORE believes that relational aggression, as girls are exhibiting it today, is a unique pattern of “emotions expression” resulting from girls’ socialization into a society that “undermines their self-esteem, diminishes their voice, and erodes their personal power.” Because of high visibility, systems are now challenged to respond to relational aggression.

CORE’s Model for Enhancing Systems consists of the following steps, presented in a circle to represent the continuity of services: (1) observe, (2) listen, (3) educate/train, (4) develop, (5) act, and (6) evaluate. Strengths-based language is also central to CORE’s gender-specific programming. It involves the reversal of negative/stigmatizing language, such as “clique” or “bitch,” into phrases or titles that identify behavior or character traits as positive rather than negative. For example, “cliquey” can be turned into “alliance-building.” This practice can be adopted system-wide, at any time, and involves minimal training.

In order to maintain girls’ safety and provide them with opportunities to rediscover personal power, CORE calls on system policies and practices to:

- Create environments that harness strengths and meet needs.
- Foster interactions that harness strengths and meet underlying needs.
- Create conscious responses to relational and overt aggression grounded in research and best practices.

For additional information: CORE Associates
1020 Park Avenue, Suite 101
Cranston, RI 02910
860-260-0830
<http://www.coreassociates.net>

Comment [OR1]: It would be better if I included a graphic, although there might be copyright issues.

Comment [OR2]: This is just filler until I get more terms from the presenter. My notes only contain the ‘clique’ example but she promised to send a whole sheet of examples

Urban Women Against Substance Abuse (UWASA)

Presenters: Donna Owens, Arts Incentives Program, United South End Settlements, Boston
Lourdes J. Hernández-Cordero, Community Research Group, Columbia University

The workshop provided an overview of the Urban Woman Against Substance Abuse (UWASA) project, including a review of the curriculum *Empowered Voices*. UWASA is a gender-specific, five-year substance abuse prevention research and demonstration project of the Institute for Community Research. The organization has identified risk factors for substance use – juvenile drug abuse, dropping out of high school, early initiation of sexual activity, teen motherhood, and sexual abuse – as well as such protective factors as positive gender and cultural identity formation among girls, and support and community leadership in adult females.

Empowered Voices is gender-specific curriculum that is also culturally and developmentally appropriate for use with urban pre-adolescent and adolescent Latina (Puerto Rican), African, and Caribbean girls. The goal of this curriculum is to decrease and delay the incidence of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use and other negative risk behaviors through identity development, strengthening of voice, research, and action.

The curriculum focuses on: (1) girls’ development, including improving and maintaining high-self esteem, (2) strengthening the relationship among girls and between girls and women, and (3) building critical thinking, problem-solving, and other skills. Central features of the UWASA curriculum are its use of participatory action research methods and its focus on building cultural and gender identity, ATOD knowledge, and HIV awareness, and providing exposure to educational and career options. An important and unique component is the concurrent program for the girls’ mothers.

Development of *Empowered Voices* began as a project of the Institute for Community Research (1996-2001), which has been recognized by the Western Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies (CAPT), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) as a promising program for substance abuse prevention.

For additional information: Institute for Community Research
Two Hartford Square, Suite 100
Hartford, CT 06106
860-278-2044
<http://www.incommunityresearch.org/>

SAFE-T Program (Sexual Abuse-Free Environment for Teens)

Presenters: Stephanie Haines, SAFE-T Clinical Facilitator, and Jenny Alzate, Prevention Specialist, Wheeler Clinic

An overview of the SAFE-T Program and its implementation in two Hartford schools was described. Two representatives from the Wheeler Clinic shared their experiences of working with adolescent girls in a voluntary after-school program.

The SAFE-T Program is a comprehensive health education and violence prevention program designed for adolescent girls in middle and high school communities. Prevent Child Abuse Vermont developed the 30 hour research-based curriculum to prevent sexual victimization and promote healthy relationships. The program promotes a safe and harassment-free school environment by creating awareness among school staff and empowering girls to speak up and seek help from parents, teachers, and community members. The curriculum includes classroom presentations and activities, home dialogue assignments, school community change projects, and a teacher's guide. Participants learn risk factors and prevention skills, communication skills, empathy, empowerment, and peer protection from three perspectives – victim, offender, and bystander.

What they have found works:

- Trust-building exercises, activities, music
- Ground rules developed by the group
- Incentives for participation of students and parents (e.g., food, raffle tickets to win prizes)
- Community presenters
- Providing girls with opportunities to have a voice
- Always identifying strengths
- Using culturally relevant videos; one example: *Women Make Movies*

This joint project of the Prevention Programs of Wheeler Clinic and the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Mental Health Services.

For additional information: Wheeler Clinic
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860-793-3375
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Prevent Child Abuse Vermont (SAFE-T curriculum)
800-244-5373
www.pcavt.org