

Students learn power of positive thinking



A new program is designed to help girls understand the destructive power of popular culture and how to rise above it, writes KATELIN MCINERNEY.

In a world seemingly obsessed with glamour and celebrity, young people are having a tough time trying to find the confidence to just be themselves.

Experts, educators and parents are growing increasingly concerned about the impact this "toxic culture" is having on the mental health and well-being of the next generation at a time when children as young as six have eating disorders.

However, an innovative and powerful new program is helping girls make sense of the contrary messages transmitted through popular culture.

The girls at St John Vianney's Catholic Primary School in Fairy Meadow are full of a new determination not to let themselves or their friends be sucked into the world of celebrity and glamour that has snared so many older teens.

Their new-found determination has come courtesy of entrepreneur Dannielle Miller whose company Enlighten Education has empowered thousands of young girls across the country to resist the destructive power of popular culture.

"I usually work with high school (students) but a representative of St John Vianney's had seen me at a conference and said they were worried that issues around body image and self-esteem for girls were creeping into primary schools," Ms Miller said.

"It was quite inspiring because the school's attitude was, rather than wait until the girls were really in crisis in high school they wanted to be pro-active and build them up now while they're still young and very responsive to positive messages."

The ramifications of not teaching girls how to navigate the minefield of modern popular culture were beginning to show in the statistics.

"A recent survey by Mission Australia clearly showed that body image is incredibly high on the agenda for young girls," Ms Miller said.

"Sixty-eight per cent of teenage girls think they're less beautiful than the average girl, 25 per cent of teenage girls want to change

everything about themselves, 25 per cent of teenage girls want to have plastic surgery and one in 10 girls self-harm.

"We're seeing a rise in eating disorders, an increase self-harm, an increase in binge drinking and dangerous sexual practices.

"The second most common medical procedure for adolescent girls in Australia is pregnancy termination.

"Our girls are responding to this crisis by acting out or internalising that anger and frustration and turning it on themselves."

Ms Miller spent a day last week with the Year 5 and 6 students at St John Vianney's in an effort to head off the kinds of self-destructive behaviours so many young Australian women now display.

Students completed a series of workshops designed to break down many of the negative stereotypes and messages perpetuated in everything from dolls to Saturday morning music video shows.

"Enlighten Education is about giving girls the tools to respond intelligently to what is going on around them," Ms Miller said.

"When I was a teenage girl, of course we had concerns about being popular and we had friendship issues, but I think it has become much more complex and the toxic culture that surrounds young girls these days is much more insidious than when we were young."

Ms Miller uses the example of a popular toy to illustrate her point for both students and their parents.

"If you look at Bratz dolls they are so sexed-up and have mottos for girls like - don't theorise - accessorise. This is scary stuff," Ms Miller said.

"Music has become far more misogynistic and it has all become mainstream. No-one blinks anymore when the Pussycat Dolls song (*Don't Cha*, with lyrics like) 'don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me' appears on *Hits for Kids Volume Three* at Christmas time alongside the Wiggles and Hi-5."

Ms Miller said part of the program was to encourage girls to question the images being presented as "normal".

"When you put a Bratz doll up in front of girls and start to ask, 'Is this OK? Does she look comfortable? Could she eat with those lips?' they start to get a bit of an attitude and start to say, 'Well, that's not very nice is it?'" Ms Miller said.

"They start to say things like, 'She doesn't look like she could be comfy in those clothes' and then they start to see (these problems) for themselves."

It was clear from the responses of the St John Vianney's students that Ms Miller and her philosophy had a powerful impact.

Year 5 student Molly Simpson said she learned a lot about the value of friendship during the workshop and loved the positive affirmation cards Ms Miller had left them.

"It was a learning curve for us on friendships and I loved the cards she gave us at the end. They have a good thought on it for each day of this month like, 'I am a positive person'," Molly said.

Fellow Year 5 student Dannielle Crapis was inspired by the positive message and hands-on, creative focus of the workshop.

"I liked the diary we made at the end too because it lets your feelings out. Anything bad you had on your mind goes away when you write down all the nice thoughts you had that day," she said.

Ms Miller said the workshop on friendship often proved the most popular.

"Friendship issues can be really devastating for adolescent girls because they have so much emotionally invested in their friendships and they don't necessarily have the strategies to know how to cope when things go skew-whiff," Ms Miller said.

As part of the workshop, Ms Miller worked through some of the ways girls could deal with situations where they became upset with their friends and look at how they can manage conflict.

"Who teaches you that? That's not on the school curriculum and I guess parents are busier and less connected," Ms Miller said.

She said the reason she can connect with young people is because they



Dannielle Miller from Enlighten Education teaches school girls at one of her self-esteem workshops designed to help them question the messages sent by popular culture.

don't preach to them.

"What you have got to do is engage them head, hand and heart. Give them information and strategies, let them play with it, and practise it but more importantly emotionally connect with it," she said.

Ms Miller said internet friendships and cyber-bullying were growing problems that young girls were ill-equipped to handle.

"These girls look more grown up, but they're not more grown up," Ms Miller said.

"I think that we assume because our young people are quite techno-savvy that they are relationship-savvy and the two things are very different.

"Although they might be connecting with lots of young girls via the internet and have lots of friends on Facebook, the friendships and relationships are

incredibly superficial. Real-time face-to-face conflict is just as frightening as it ever was.

"You never have to deal with complex (issues) because you can just press delete."

Ms Miller also conducts seminars for parents and educators to help dispel some of the common misconceptions about "raunch" culture and outline ways they can combat its negative influences (see box).

"So many people say 'yeah, what's the problem with that?'," she said.

"It is just mainstream; now this stuff goes under the radar with parents."

Ms Miller said part of the problem lay in the fact many older women were struggling with the same issues of self-esteem and self-criticism as their daughters.

"I tell mums, 'You are more like

your daughters than you think.'

"The issues that mums are struggling with are the same as the girls - which is why they can't call this stuff dangerous - they've been sucked into the same vortex," she said.

"You can't say to your daughter, just be yourself, you're beautiful as you're running out the door to get Botox."

Ms Miller said many parents simply did not know what to do for their children who are faced with endless images of perfection and impossibly high standards.

"American writer Courtney Martin said knowing that images are airbrushed or Photoshopped does not take away the impact those images have on your soul," she said.

"If anything, girls say it makes it worse when you look at an image with that knowledge you still think,

'Well she looks really good, and I don't'.

"But then you have this extra layer that goes something like, 'You know it's only Photoshopped you're an idiot'. You are not even smart enough to realise it is bullshit when you see it and then you start to doubt your own intelligence."

Ms Miller said the biggest drawback of the Enlighten Education program was that it re-introduced the notion there was a way to fight the "toxic culture" from within it.

"We re-introduce the idea of hope and love," she said.

"There is a lot of that missing nowadays, there is a lot of raunch and sexuality out there, but there is not a lot of mention of love and connection, and there's not a lot of talk about the fact you've got choices.

"You don't have to buy into this. There could be all this stuff around you, but you don't have to physically buy into it and once you start showing girls that, they start to see it themselves."

Ms Miller said once the girls had been given permission to talk about the way their emotions and feelings were being manipulated by images and messages from popular culture, it became empowering.

"The biggest thing girls say at the workshops is I'm so glad I'm not alone," she said.

"We need to open this up to allow girls to talk about it because they never get a chance to talk about this with the whole form.

"It's the chance to put their hand up and say, 'I'm struggling, I don't think I'm beautiful anymore' and then for all the other girls to look around and realise, 'They're like that too?'. It is a big moment and they feel for the first like they're not isolated.

"I think a lot of the sisterhood and connection between girls has been lost and instead there is this massive competition - and the beauty industry encourages that. Once you give girls permission to deconstruct the media in this way, they love it, they are naturally good at it and it then becomes a fun empowering thing to do."

How parents can help

1. Help girls deconstruct the media and and talk back to it - encourage them to be critical consumers. Set up a Wall of Fame and a Wall of Shame to help differentiate between examples of positive and negative representations of women and discuss the reasons why.
2. Stay informed - know what is going on in both research circles and in a child's life. Log onto www.enlightenededucation.edu.au for updates and expert opinions.
3. Set a good example - girls cannot see what they cannot see. Be careful not to send contrary messages about body image by paying lip service to ideals and not demonstrating them in practice.
4. Use purse power - money talks so do not buy something that is conveying the wrong message to children either through their products or advertising campaigns.
5. Celebrate and enhance their childhood and allow them to remain children for as long as possible.
6. Be positive. Bombard them with positive messages. Move away from mainstream "chick flicks" and choose films and music with empowering, alternative images and messages. Source: *Enlighten Education* www.enlightenededucation.com

Bold Beautiful Babes can get you feeling your best

In an attempt to combat poor self-esteem, a new program gives girls a makeover, both inside and out discovers KATELIN MCINERNEY.

An inventive youth outreach program is helping disadvantaged young girls break the cycle of poor self-esteem by giving them a confidence makeover and a fresh, new look.

It started out as a program to build the self-esteem of young mothers but Bold Beautiful Babes, run by the Southern Youth and Family Services

(SYFS, has become a way of combating poor self-image of teenage girls across the Illawarra.

SYFS Youth health program manager Kirsten Day said the eight-week program incorporated both a physical

makeover element and a group therapy approach aimed at building self-esteem in young women and helping them break

the cycle of disadvantage and poor self-image.

"We have volunteer hairdressers, beauticians and make-up artists who come in and give the girls a radical new look while talking about everything from personal hygiene and good eating habits to skin care and how to apply make-up and present yourself well," she said.

Ms Day said the idea was to bring girls together in a non-threatening social setting to help girls build a more positive self-image and curb the cycle of

destructive behaviour like binge drinking, self-harm and dangerous sexual practices.

"So they are not just getting a radical new haircut, they talk about lots of stuff and socialise with their peers as well as talking to our staff and having a bit of time out," she said.

Warilla High School welfare co-ordinator Bob Pastor is a believer in the powers of the Bold Beautiful Babes program.

"There have been radical changes in the girls - the program has improved their self-esteem and self-image and

it makes them feel really good about themselves, which is so important," Mr Pastor said.

"Not only do they get a radical new haircut they are getting handy tips on how to feel better physically and mentally and talking to other people about their problems."

Mr Pastor said that because adolescence was such a challenging time for students, it was important to develop programs that helped them feel comfortable and confident.

"It is a very vulnerable age, that 13-15 year-old age bracket,

and that is why it is all about making kids feel good about themselves," he said.

The school is developing a similar self-esteem program for boys, focusing on improving self-confidence and providing boys with positive role models.

"Boys need role models like girls do and we know a lot of boys find it hard to present themselves well for job interviews and the like so we feel there is a real need to offer a program to improve that," Mr Pastor said.

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