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New program gives girls the chance to discuss problems, find support

By **THERESA WINSLOW**, Staff Writer

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Can we talk? Julie Rejman hopes that when it comes to middle-school girls, the answer is an emphatic, "Yes."



Arienne Teeple — For The Capital

Hannah Grimes, left, and Mikayla Walker, seventh-graders at St. Anne's School of Annapolis, hold a scarf and make up a story about a princess while Susan Judge, the school's director of community programs and events, listens in. The story was part of an ice-breaking exercise that will be used in Girltalk, a new discussion series for middle-school girls that starts later this month and is open to the public.

Rejman is the founder of Girltalk, a new program aimed at providing a safe space for girls in grades five through seven to open up about issues such as cliques, body image and school stress.

"They're the most beautiful and tumultuous years a girl can experience," said Rejman, 37, a preschool teacher at St. Anne's School of Annapolis. "Yet, I feel most of the time, girls are not given the opportunity to talk about it."

Prior to moving to this area, Rejman, a mother of two, had a long career working as a middle-school administrator. Her previous post was as dean of students and head of school at a Michigan girls middle school. Girltalk is her way of continuing her work in that area.

Rejman and Guiliana de Grazia, a 23-year-old graduate student at St. John's College, will serve as facilitators for the discussion sessions, but the idea

is to get the girls to support and nurture each other.

"I'm not judging them," Rejman said.

A three-session pilot program is scheduled to begin next weekend, with weekly meetings held at the orthodontics office of Dr. Mairead O'Reilly in Annapolis. Rejman's husband, Dr. Daniel Rejman, is a partner in the practice, and O'Reilly has two teenage daughters herself, so she said she recognized the need for Girltalk.

Although O'Reilly's daughters have already made it through middle school (they are 15 and 19), she said those years are tough on girls. "I think it's very exciting to have this open forum in Annapolis," she said.

The first session is slated to cover the subjects of friendships, cliques and fitting in; the second will cover issues like body image, self-acceptance and boys; and the third will discuss getting along with parents, surviving the stress of school and girls supporting girls.

EVENTS CALENDAR

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- Mar 05 - 4th annual Live Art Auction and Exhibit
- Mar 06 - Mar 15 - "The Wizard of Oz"
- Mar 06 - Mar 22 - 'Of Mice and Men' performance at Church Hill Theatre
- Mar 07 - MRE Ambassador's Ball
- Mar 07 - Meet and Greet Jay Jay the Jet plane
- Mar 07 - Maryland's Underground Railroad Gallery Talk

VIDEOS

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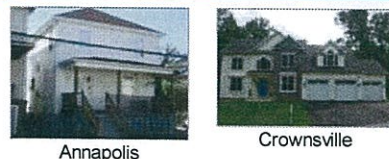


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"I think it's good," said Emily Judge, 13, an eighth-grader at St. Anne's. "You can be open."

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Her friend, Emy D'Andrea, also in eighth grade, added, "It's a good (thing) to let it all out."

Both girls said they get plenty of support themselves and have lots of friends, but also recognized that not every middle-schooler is in the same situation.

Talking points

If all goes well with the pilot program, Rejman hopes to offer more sessions of Girltalk.

There are already plans to add a six-week session to the fall schedule of Enrich Annapolis, St. Anne's slate of activities open to the community.

Rejman said Girltalk isn't meant to minimize the problems boys face during the middle-school years; it's just that her expertise lies in working with girls.

The program is loosely based on the Girls Circle model, in which both Rejman and de Grazia received training. Girls Circle is a California-based nonprofit organization aimed at establishing discussion circles for girls ages 9 to 18.

Rejman said she's adding her own touches, like lessons on building time management skills and heightened emphasis on role-playing. There also will be songs and skits, but Rejman pointed out that every group is different and the activities will be based on the interests of the girls involved.

Two issues that won't be addressed are birth control and sex. "If something comes up that's not appropriate, the conversation will stop and we'll redirect them," she said.

De Grazia already does some work with girls in her job with the Annapolis-based Touchstones Discussion Project, so she knows the value of this kind of work.

"(Girltalk will) be providing them ... with a place to express themselves and feel confidence and respect; respect for one another and yourself," she said. "I just hope it works out,"

So does Sandy Schachter, head of guidance at Crofton Middle School, who voiced support for the idea when told about it. "Girls need to be able to talk about things," she said. "They're at an age when they don't want to go to their parents. ... They really need to think out loud."

Schachter said the sessions should be about "empowering" the girls, but she also cautioned that these kinds of discussions can "open up a can of worms." That's why the talks needs to be handled in a professional way by experienced leaders, she said.

Rejman recognizes this, and said she'll redirect any negatives that come up into positives. "Certainly as a facilitator you have to look out for that chronic negativity, but (girls) feel flattered other girls are opening up to them and feel positive and supportive," she said.

For more information about Girltalk, call 443-949-8583 or e-mail girtalkinannapolis@yahoo.com. The winter pilot session consists of meetings from 12:30 to 2 p.m. Feb. 21, Feb. 28 and March 7 at the office of Dr. Mairead O'Reilly, 888 Bestgate Road, Suite 301, Annapolis. The cost is \$75. Financial assistance is available.

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