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An Emotional Safety Check; Girl Scout Survey Shows Teasing and Taunting Rank Highest on List of Concerns

By Karen Ann Cullotta, Special to the *Tribune*

Growing up in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood, Girl Scout Jessica Felix memorized a handful of basic safety rules, not to earn a merit badge, but to ensure her survival.

Never stand in front of windows, always walk in groups, and mind your own business were a few of them, she explains.

Of course, when it comes to protecting herself from the dangers of bullying and teasing, 18-year-old Felix learned that basic safety rules do not apply.

"Girls worry a lot about what they wear, and they don't want to be nerdy," says Felix, adding, "it's mostly competition for boys, and about who's got what material stuff."

Indeed, Felix's bad memories of schoolyard bullies are echoed by 2,341 girls ages 8 to 17, who shared their experiences in an online survey and in focus groups for the Girl Scouts of the USA's study "Feeling Safe: What Girls Say."

According to the survey, 32 percent of the girls said what worries them the most – their top day-to-day concern – is not fear of physical harm, but fear of being teased and made fun of.

Conducted in conjunction with Harris Interactive Inc., the study was launched in 2003 to determine whether the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon heightened young women's fears of terrorism and violence. And though the survey did find that fears about gang violence, school shootings and terrorist attacks make girls feel physically unsafe, it is worries about their emotional safety that overwhelmingly haunt their everyday lives.

For example, when asked what worries them most on any given day, 32 percent of girls said they fear being teased. In addition, 38 percent of girls said they worry about their emotional safety when they are with their peers.

Though 72 percent of girls defined safety as not being physically hurt, 46 percent described it as not having their feelings hurt.

In addition, the study found that 34 percent of teen girls worry about finding people their own age to talk to and trust, with almost one-quarter of teen girls saying they have fewer than three adults they could go to if they were in trouble or needed help.

According to a statement from Judy Schoenberg, lead researcher for the study, the fallout from feeling emotionally unsafe is depression, diminished self-esteem, loneliness, difficulty paying attention and poor grades in school.

Still, the study's findings were no surprise for longtime Girl Scout leader Mary Lou Raiz, who says that leading her Logan Square troop transcends the traditional three Cs: camping, cookies and crafts.

After the suicide death of her 19-year-old daughter in 1987, Raiz glimpsed the frightening landscape of young womanhood, a terrain often littered with lost dreams, low self-esteem and love gone bad.

"I remember a time when one of my former Scouts called me from her cell phone at 2:30 a.m.," Raiz says. "She was hysterical, because she was drunk and out on the street and didn't know where she was. I told her to tell me the names on the closest street signs."

Raiz recalls walking up her husband of 38 years, Gerald Raiz, getting in the car, and picking up the distraught teen and a friend, both of whom had been dumped in a strange neighborhood after a double date went awry.

"We picked up doughnuts and coffee and got them sobered up," Raiz says. "It has been [two] years, but they still come back to visit."

Violence and Other Fears

As Girl Scout leaders will attest, there has never been a harder time to be a young woman, and often troop meetings are one of the only havens available in a world fraught with challenges. And for many girls living in low-income neighborhoods, the daily specter of crime and violence is an added burden.

As she huddled with her fellow Girl Scouts around troop leader Phylistene Ward's dining room table to discuss an upcoming Silver Badge project, 14-year-old Jasmine Hudsteth pondered her future, sharing her dream of someday working as a pediatrician in the Chicago neighborhood she calls home.

"I'd like to raise my own kids in Austin where I live, but only safer," says Hudsteth, who has grown accustomed to hearing gunshots and seeing police officers on her block, sometimes as often as twice a day.

“You get used to it,” she explains.

“Girls are very concerned about what other people think,” adds Ward, who holds troop meetings at First Baptist Institutional Church in Chicago’s Lawndale neighborhood. “Boys will have a fistfight and be through with it, but girls will hold a grudge. By 10 or 11 years old, girls can be spiteful and nasty to each other.”

Dr. Colleen Cicchetti, a psychologist with the department of child and adolescent psychiatry at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago, says she has worked with parents whose children are victims of teasing and verbal abuse from classmates – boys and girls – as early as preschool, suffering from taunts such as “I don’t like your clothes” and “You can’t be my friend.”

“I wish I could just announce over the loudspeaker at every school, ‘There will be no more teasing,’ but it will never happen,” says Cicchetti, who instead takes a practical approach to a timeless problem through the hospital’s “Mental Health in Schools Project.” The program brings a message of self-esteem and coping techniques to Chicago-area children in 2nd and 3rd grades.

Bullies tend to single out youngsters who react most to teasing, Cicchetti says. Thus, children in the program learn to walk away when the teasing begins. If that proves impossible, Cicchetti suggests they counter the negative remarks with positive thoughts, a form of “self-talk” that involves visualizing one’s strengths, while refusing to give the bully a reaction.

Look for Warning Signs

Nonetheless, many times children remain victims despite their best attempts at ignoring the teasing, and for parents who suspect this is the case, Cicchetti recommends alerting school officials to the situation immediately.

In addition, parents are encouraged to seek professional treatment for their child if they notice warning signs, such as daily tearfulness, a fear of attending school, falling grades, or changes in sleep patterns and appetite.

“All you have to do is look at an elementary school playground,” adds Rosalind Wiseman, the author of “Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence” (Three Rivers Press).

“The kids who are the farthest away from the playground supervisor have the most power,” Wiseman says. “Teachers need to figure out the lay of the land.”

Wiseman says she travels across the country training teachers and administrators how to read their school’s social landscape.

Instead of ignoring the culprits, Wiseman urges school officials to hold the bullies accountable for their actions and establish immediate consequences. For parents and teachers who trivialize teasing as a rite of passage, Wiseman explains the terror of feeling emotionally unsafe.

“I tell adults to imagine they are walking down the aisle of the local supermarket, and every neighbor they pass is whispering behind their backs, or saying, ‘You’re stupid,’ or ‘Don’t walk down this aisle again,’” Wiseman says. “Imagine living your life as a child who is constantly being knocked to their knees, when every day people are talking behind their back and undermining everything they do.”

Well aware of the day-to-day bullying and teasing many children suffer at school, Girl Scout leaders are trained to be vigilant about members treating one another with dignity and respect at troop meetings and trips.

“There’s no ‘shut-ups’ and no name-calling,” says Ward, regarding her Lawndale troop. “They don’t bring it in here, because they know I have different expectations for their behavior.”

As for Logan Square troop leader Raiz, who has raised eight children as well as a granddaughter, she has learned that the best way to deal with adolescent angst is to let teens talk about anything, from drugs and unplanned pregnancies to domestic violence and sexual abuse.

“I don’t react – I just listen, and we talk,” Raiz says. “I might say, ‘Do you really like the way your hair looks purple? And 9 out of 10 times, they don’t. They just wanted someone to notice them.’”

Fear Factors

Percentage of girls 8-17 who say they worry about:

- Being teased or made fun of 32%
- Being kidnapped 26%
- Being forced to do something sexual 24%
- Being called names 18%
- Terrorist attacks 16%
- War 15%

Source: Results of online survey with 2,279 girls 8-17 responding

More on Safety

For more information on girls, teens and safety issues, visit the following Web sites:

- www.girlscouts.org: The Girl Scouts of the USA site has multiple issues of interest, including safety.
- www.studio2b.org: The Girl Scouts of the USA's site for teens.
- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/safety.html: The National Institutes of Health site has sections relating to preventing physical harm.
- www.talkingwithkids.org: Talking With Kids About Tough Issues is a national initiative by Children Now (www.childrennow.org/) and the Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org) designed to encourage parents to talk with their children about sex, HIV/AIDS, violence and drug abuse.

Source: "Feeling Safe: What Girls Say"

GRAPHIC: PHOTO (color): Brownie members Tamara Nelson, 8, (from top), Taylor Miller, 7, and Kharunnissia Aguirre, 8, all of Chicago, watch a cartoon video during an overnight outing hosted by troop leader Phylistene Ward. The sleepover served as a more affordable camping trip for the Lawndale-based troop.

PHOTO (color): The overnight outing hosted by troop leader Ward accommodated three levels of Girl Scouts: Brownies, Juniors and Cadettes. Pictured here are (from left) Dominique Smith, 12, Adriana Alexander, 15, Carlissa Landfair, 11, Damiana Gigger, 12, and LaRhonda Turner, 11, all of Chicago.

PHOTO: "By 10 or 11 years old, girls can be spiteful and nasty to each other," says troop leader Phylistene Ward. Photos for the *Tribune* by Margo Cohn. PHOTOS 3

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