



Building Self-Esteem One Lap at a Time

Program sets pre-teen girls on the path to confidence

By Janice Billingsley
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SUNDAY, Jan. 22 (HealthDay News) -- Hitting puberty can be like hitting a brick wall for a girl.

One day she's playing soccer and softball and hanging out with her girlfriends. The next day she can feel pressure to be pretty, thin, flirtatious and not too smart if she wants to be popular with boys.

How's a girl to navigate her way around this trap?

Molly Barker of Charlotte, N.C., thinks she's hit on a solid solution. She's the founder of *Girls on the Run*, an innovative program that prepares young girls for the pitfalls of puberty by combining a big dose of running with games, exercises and discussions designed to enhance a girl's self-esteem so she can enter her teens with confidence.

"I really believe that women struggle to remain true to themselves," said Barker, a former Ironman triathlete with a master's degree in social work.

When she was a teen, Barker wrestled with the pressure to fit into what she calls "the girl box," to be popular. *Girls on the Run* is her effort to reach young girls before they encounter such teen-years turmoil.

The effort seems to be paying off. Begun as an after-school program in 1996 with 13 third-graders from Charlotte, *Girls on the Run* now operates in 198 cities in the United States and Canada, and has reached approximately 40,000 eight- and nine-year-olds, Barker said. Half of the girls who participate in one 12-week, 24-lesson session sign up for more. And a new program called *Girls on Track* is being unveiled for older girls who are entering middle school.

"The activities make you feel really good about yourself. I've learned that you don't have to look like a supermodel to be loveable," said Madeleine Moore, a 10-year-old graduate of the Charlotte program.

"I have more confidence," agreed Tuesday Welch, an 11-year-old Charlotte graduate who has signed up for *Girls on Track*. "I've learned to look at myself on the inside, and not listen to what other people say about me."

A *Girls on the Run* program, which meets twice weekly after school, offers running at a track as the centerpiece for each session. But exercise is only part of the goal. The broader aim is to enhance the girls' social, emotional, physical and spiritual health, Barker said.

"The program is founded on three key concepts," Barker said. The first four weeks help the girls to think about themselves in an objective way -- "This is what I believe and this is what I stand for," she said.

To make it fun, Barker has created games, including one in which the names of different emotions -- anger, anxiety, joy and sadness, for example -- are written on separate index cards. The girls race each other while compiling a bingo-like collection of the cards, then talk about their own emotions and how to best manage them.

The second four weeks of the program, again including relay races and other physical activity, focuses on teamwork, dealing with conflict (such as learning how not to gossip) and building a sense of connectedness with each other.

Finally, the girls learn to understand they're part of a larger community and can use their skills and power to change the community for the better.

Nadine Kaslow, professor and chief psychologist at Emory University School of Medicine, said, "This is a wonderful age to start this. The healthier foundation you have, the more you have to build on so that when things get stressful, you have the resources to cope with them."

And, she added, the non-competitive nature of the program teaches the girls teamwork and builds their self-confidence.

Melissa Welch, Tuesday's mother, is delighted with the lessons her daughter has learned from *Girls on the Run*, and wishes it could continue as her child gets older.

"It's going to end before she outgrows it," she said.

More information

To learn more, visit [Girls on the Run](#).

SOURCES: Molly Barker, MSW, founder, *Girls on the Run*, Charlotte, N.C.; Madeleine Moore, 10, participant, *Girls on the Run*, Charlotte, N.C.; Tuesday Welch, 11, participant, *Girls on the Run*, Charlotte, N.C.; Melissa Welch, Tuesday's mother, Charlotte, N.C.; Nadine Kaslow, Ph.D., professor and chief psychologist, Emory School of Medicine, Atlanta

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