

Strong bonds of sisterhood can keep the peace

Our community has been shocked and saddened by the recent shooting death of 15-year-old Ramirez Smith Jr. that stemmed from a fight involving girls at Northwest High School. Any violent death is a tragedy, but this event is especially devastating because of the ages of the alleged perpetrators. It casts a light on the apparent prevalence of girls engaging in aggressive and violent behavior.

The FBI Uniform Crime Report shows that the number of girls ages 10 to 17 arrested for aggravated assault has doubled over the last 20 years. At home, a study titled "2007 Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Use by Indiana Children and Adolescents" found that 22 percent of

MY VIEW

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sixth-through-12th-grade females reported being in a physical fight at least once; and nearly 56 percent reported being in a shouting match at least once.

A 2006 report by the Cook County (Ill.) Commission on Women's Issues identified a number of social conditions that promote girls' involvement in violence, including poverty, unemployment and underfunded schools — problems that also exist in our community. Moreover, the report noted that if young women felt they were successful and powerful in other areas of their lives, they wouldn't feel the need to beat up or tear down other girls.

As we grieve over the devastating effects of violence in our community, Girls Incorporated of Indianapolis stands ready to

assist neighborhood-based partners to prevent recurrence. The Cook County report recommends that "effective interventions should be gender-focused, and should include opportunities for girls to build healthy relationships, promote girl empowerment by teaching girls to make better choices, build the self-esteem of girls, and provide a physical space and program content which takes into account the physical and emotional safety of girls."

Girls Incorporated is a provider of girl-specific programming designed to inspire all girls to be strong, smart and bold. Among the dozens of age-appropriate programs that we offer for girls between 6 and 18 is our Allies in Action curriculum, which helps girls build tools for communicating and managing anger or hurt feelings while strengthening bonds of empathy

and sisterhood. Girls learn how to deal with anger and de-escalate confrontations before violence occurs. Beyond that, we offer many programs that give girls the opportunity to build their self-confidence while exploring their interests and talents and learning how to become engaged, productive women. A positive, goal-oriented young woman is not prone to violence.

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We believe that caring adults in girls' lives must take a proactive approach to preventing violence by encouraging open lines of communication. Our violence prevention programs:

- ◆ Help girls identify a network of trusted adults to whom they can turn when difficult or dangerous situations arise.

- ◆ Teach girls to identify when a situation is merely irritating or upsetting versus life threatening, so girls may choose their verbal and physical re-

sponses accordingly. Too often, small incidents explode into catastrophes that could have been avoided.

- ◆ Address the fact that girls who bully others have often been victims themselves.

- ◆ Encourage girls to "walk in someone else's shoes" by cultivating feelings of empathy and sisterhood.

We fulfill our mission by offering our programs in partnership with schools, community centers, libraries, churches and other youth-serving organizations. Girls Incorporated programs are interactive. We use games, exercises and reflective questioning to help girls learn what they need to know. In the process, girls learn how to think through issues and problems.

Our winter programming cycle, beginning in January, features the Allies in Action program as one of several options for neighborhood-based partners. Reach us at (317) 283-0086 or www.girlsincindy.org.



Wachtel is CEO of Girls Incorporated of Indianapolis