

'Girl Event' aims to help female teens reach goals

1,300 girls to meet in Mississauga

Conference to boost self-esteem

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You either have it or you don't -that's the common misconception about self-esteem, says teen counsellor Karyn Gordon.

The author of a book called *Analyse Yourself: A teen's guide to understanding their friends, parents and themselves!* says esteem isn't necessarily something you're born with, it can be learned.

"Self-esteem is about figuring out what your values are and learning to be true to your values," said Gordon.

Tomorrow she'll tell about 1,300 girls, aged 13 to 18, how they can assess their own self-esteem and recognize it in others. Gordon is among the speakers at the Girl Event, a daylong conference at the Mississauga Living Arts Centre. The girls will explore topics ranging from personal creativity to the beauty industry and hear a motivational speech from triple-Olympic gold medallist rower Marnie McBean.

Gordon, who started counselling teens when she finished her PILD at age 22, says girls' self-esteem issues aren't greater than boys' - girls just handle conflict differently.

"When it comes to conflict what I have known to be more typical of girls is they'll bottle it up and keep it to themselves or they'll tell a third party!"

Gordon has recently begun giving workshops for parents to help them recognize whether they're creating an environment that nurtures self-esteem.

"I can talk to teens until I'm blue in the face, but until I talk to parents about how to create that environment I can only work so far," she said.

Experts say poor self-esteem contributes to eating disorders, pregnancy and bullying, but the organizers of the Girl Event say the conference has a positive slant.

"We're not trying to fix anything said Jennifer Hillborn "The idea is to come to this event to get the tools to get the life you dream of. It's not to wallow in classic issues."

Hillborn and Sarah Varley, partners in a company called the Esteem Dream, plan to take the Girl Event on the road to Calgary, Vancouver, Ottawa and Toronto in the spring.

"I think we've learned that if you own the choices in your life and you take control, you have a better chance of creating the life you love," said Varley.

The organizers say girls are coming from across southwestern Ontario, mostly with school groups.

But can a day make a real difference in a girl's life?

Newmarket teacher Emma Gatlea was so sure it could, she signed up 59 girls and three staff to attend tomorrow.

"I thought it would be in the girls' best interest to take a look at just how wonderful they can be and take steps from letting the peer group decide who they are," said the Grade 8 teacher at Denne Public School.

Gatlea said a series of self-esteem and wellness workshops delivered to Grade 7s and 8s by the Ontario Mental Health Association at her school raised flags with 10 students, who received help as a result.

"I really believe that if its going to reach 10 out of 60 kids, thats 10 more that I don't have to worry about when I turn out my light," she said.

A teacher for 23 years, Gatlea said she's seen the damage wrought on girls by the bombardment of media messages and peer pressure.