

MEHVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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## Program gets moms and preteen daughters talking

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When her 10-year-old daughter started asking questions about the birds and the bees, Rebecca Fehlig wasn't exactly prepared.

"I found I kept avoiding them or talking about flowers. I was not giving direct answers," said the St. Louis city mom.

Through an online parent forum, she caught wind of Girls in the Know, a local education series that addresses her daughter's grown-up questions. GITK is a four-week speakers series that brings in female professionals to talk to middle-school-age girls about the changes that come with puberty, as well as topics like healthy body image, Internet and telephone safety and self-esteem.

"It's all about opening the door to important conversations between a mother and daughter that will hopefully lead to healthy choices as a teenager," said Gina Marten, GITK executive director.

GITK was launched in 2009 by Lori Lander, a Chesterfield mother who found herself in a similar situation to Fehlig. She wanted to create an information source to help mothers talk to their daughters and foster communication.

So she organized the four-session series for mothers and daughters to attend together. Each session has a different topic. In the first workshop, mothers and daughters are visited by a licensed counselor, who talks about self esteem, healthy friendships, bullying and how to empower preteen girls.

A nutritionist speaks at the second workshop about healthy body image, exercise, meal planning and eating disorders. The third session focuses on telephone and Internet safety, with input from a police officer, who also talks about how girls can stay safe when staying at home alone. In the final week, a female obstetrician-gynecologist talks with mothers and daughters about puberty, anatomy and reproduction.

"For a lot of moms it provides an opportunity to start a conversation that might otherwise be awkward and uncomfortable," Marten said. GITK is targeted at girls ages 9-13. Those are critical years for opening dialogue, Marten said.

"Girls at that age are still very open to spend time with their moms and open to talking," she said. "They are curious and want to hear more about these topics."

The one-hour, four-session series will be offered at several locations next month, including

Bernard Middle School in the Mehlville School District beginning April 12. It will be the second year the series is offered through Mehlville's Community Enrichment programs.

"I liked that its about strengthening the mother-daughter bond and empowering girls and getting them information. I thought it was a beneficial thing to offer our students," said Becky Jackson, who runs Mehlville School District Community Enrichment.

Any mother-daughter pair can sign up for the GITK program at Bernard Middle. The series is also being offered at schools in Chesterfield, Clayton and St. Albans.

Fehlig brought the GITK program to her daughter's school, St. Margaret of Scotland. She said it not only helped her learn how to talk to her daughter about tough topics, it also taught her what topics she needed to be talking about.

"I feel more empowered to set guidelines," she said.

Since attending the series, Fehlig said conversations are easier between her and her daughter.

"When she's ready to talk, we both felt more comfortable about it and using the proper terminology," she said.

## **Upcoming series**

Girls in the Know is open to mothers and caregivers and girls ages 9-13. The four-week series cost \$90 per pair. The program will be offered at:

- Glenridge Elementary, 7423 Wellington Way, Clayton. 6:30-7:30 p.m. on April 3, 10, 17 and May 1. Call 314-854-6284 to register.
- Bernard Middle School, 1054 Forder Road, St. Louis County. 6:30-7:30 p.m. on April 4, 11, 18 and 25. Call 314-467-7821 to register.
- Immacolata Parish School, 8900 Clayton Road. Seventh and eighth graders only. 6:30-7:30 p.m. April 16, 23, 30 and May 7. Call 314-991-5700, ext. 332 to register.