

## Episode Twelve: IMPROVING THE WELLBEING OF TEENAGE GIRLS

With Linda Stade from Santa Maria College WA

24<sup>th</sup> July 2017

Improving the wellbeing of teenage girls is always a goal for parents and educators. While many girls are positive, strong and kind in their relationships, some girls struggle. Social media has become a strong influence in the lives of girls in the way that they communicate and interact with each other and the broader society. So how do we improve the wellbeing of our teenage girls? As educators, how do girls like to learn and what can we do to further their educational development? My guest today is Linda Stade, the Research Officer at Santa Maria College an all-girls college in Perth. Linda has worked in various teaching and management roles in education for twenty five years. She has worked in government schools, country and city, single gender and co-ed. Through her Santa Maria education blog and Facebook page 'Knowing Girls' Linda shares valuable information on the latest research information relating to educating and raising girls.

Tracy: It is a hot and sunny spring day here in Perth and I am at the beautiful campus of the Santa Maria College in the suburb of Attadale and I am joined by Linda Stade. Linda thanks for joining me.

Linda: You're welcome and thanks for the invitation.

Tracy: Linda can you tell us about your unique role here at College as the Research Officer? What does it entail?

Linda: I am very lucky Tracy. I am, as you said, the Research Officer and I work closely with the office management team researching new educational developments or programs that they would like to introduce and make sure that they are best practice. I also work in the community relations department working on parent engagement that includes writing a blog.

Tracy: Speaking of your blog, that is how I first heard of your work. On your blog you published an article called 'Girls and their frenemies.' You said that in reality the more likely destructive influence on an adolescent girls day to day life is the damage they do to one another in their friendship groups. What's going on?

Linda: I think anybody who works with girls or who has girls knows that the friendship issues that they experience in adolescence can be completely heart breaking for them. And often the effects of these conflicts carry on late into life.

Tracy: Linda, you have worked in both an all-boys and co-ed education system. This article is specific to girls and you mentioned the term 'relational aggression' can you tell us what that is?

Linda: Relational aggression is what we call in layman's terms 'mean girl behaviour' or straight up 'bitchiness' unfortunately. It is a patterned behaviour that you often see in school aged girls but it is not exclusive to them. You see it in adults as well. In fact, where do teenage girls learn it from, if not from adults? You have probably experienced relational aggression yourself and you know when it happens to you as it really stings. It's when people hurt you with your relationship with them. It sounds a bit complicated but it's things like exclusion, gossip, when you get the silent treatment, or belittling. Belittling is often hidden with 'I'm just joking' and conditional friendship. Young girls will experience that deep knowledge that if I don't go along with the group I am going to be on the outer and I'm going to be excluded, and I need to go along with it, and that's why you see nice young girls behaving quite poorly. I often think of relational aggression as using your relationships as a weapon, it's got nothing to do with friendship and it's got everything to do with power.

Tracy: Do you think this is specific to girls and adolescent girls?

Linda: I think it's becoming less and less so because there is more intolerance to violence in our community, and in the past boys used to use physical aggression or humour or athletic ability as a way of creating their niche in a social structure. That's becoming less acceptable, so by all accounts boys are becoming much better at relational aggression.

Tracy: So why do girls specifically practice this time of behaviour in their relationships?

Linda: I think as adolescents start to move away from their parents as their main influence and their significant adults and they move towards their peers, that sorting out of where they fit, and who they are, in relation to their peers becomes very important. Girls use social interaction as a way of sorting that out much more than boys do, so I think that's why.

Tracy: You use the term frenemy, who or what is a frenemy?

Linda: A frenemy is a blend of a friend and an enemy. They're someone who is a friend who treats you badly and uses you as a way to boost them up. It has nothing to do with friendship.

Tracy: Why is inclusion so important to girls?

Linda: Again that attachment thing, moving away from adults and moving towards kids. They worry about their self-definition a lot and them as themselves; questions like, Am I in? Am I out? Am I balanced? Am I unbalanced? That's why all these relationships and dysfunctional relationships occur.

Tracy: Girls are masters of communication and socialisation so perhaps they're just drawing on innate skills that they have.

Linda: Absolutely

Tracy: You made a point in the article and to quote, "girls learn from a very young age, that when you create exclusion you create inclusion." I find that such an interesting point, can you talk about that for us?

Linda: Kids think very black and white, they polarise, and they don't understand the grey areas. So they do think in terms of I'm in or I'm out and if you're out then I'm in. That sounded very complicated, did it make sense? It's as clear cut as that.

Tracy: It's quite interesting to think that by excluding, I'm including.

Linda: Yes

Tracy: Girls have mastered that skill.

Linda: It's really important not to be excluded, so sometimes they will go along with behaviour that they don't believe in and disappoint themselves even by the behaviours they will go along with, in order to be included.

Tracy: Linda, that leads to my next point, Santa Maria College psychologist Jane Camignani says that kids often know what is happening is wrong but they don't have the language and confidence to

stop it. Even when they are the one being the mean girl; that girls often show remorse for their mean behaviour, so why do they keep going?

Linda: Well first of all not all of them do. Many will stop as soon as you encourage empathy in them and ask them to walk in the shoes of the person they are being mean to, some will back off and won't persist. For the others I think it comes from a place of fear, a fear of not belonging or not being good enough.

Tracy: When you have this situation here at Santa Maria or indeed just in your experience. What strategies do you use to counsel girls to behave more appropriately, to behave in a kinder, more compassionate way?

Linda: Any teacher will tell you this is a really difficult thing to tackle and you need to be really skilled, and using school psychologists, having that resource to draw on, is really useful. But if you can get kids together in a safe space and talk about, well how is this making you feel and every person has to hear how each person is feeling, that works. However, it needs to be monitored, you have to hold kids to a higher count and make sure that you check up on them often afterwards. That they are going forward with the agreements of good behaviour that they promised. I think though, it's more useful or more effective to start a culture in a school that is against that behaviour. We need to be explicitly teaching kids' empathy, there seems to be a gap in young kids' social skills at the moment in empathy and I think that's really important, because when they see it and you explain it to them, they do understand it. It's just that constant drip, drip, drip reminder that we need to be empathetic, we need to be kind. I think also naming it, we need to be able to say this is what relational aggression is and this is what it looks like and this is how it feels, do you recognise that and they will all inevitably say yes. Then you can also teach them their personal responsibility in all of that so you can teach students to be upstanders; who are the people who stand up for victims. Research says that if you can stand up to a bully for eight seconds, it is likely that they will back down. Eight seconds is a long time when you are standing up to a bully and we acknowledge that with kids and we role play it so they have had experience in it. Then rewarding kids for having that brave behaviour is important too. Distractors, we need to teach kids how to distract, it's a skill that we have as adults, we know when an awkward situation is coming up and we will change the subject or we will pause movement or move along so that it doesn't happen, and teaching kids that is possible. If we can teach it to them earlier it will save them a lot of grief. And supports, even if kids are strong enough to be upstanders or quick enough to be distractors they can be supporters and that can just mean making eye contact with the child who is having a bad time and letting them know, you're not alone, I see you and I understand. In an ideal world you would be able to teach them very clearly what friendship is and what a good friend is, unfortunately I think we've got the term friendship and butchered it a bit because in children's earlier years we say everyone has to be friends, everyone has to play together, everyone needs to be friends. Consequently friendship ends up meaning obligation and it doesn't necessarily mean the things that you and I mean when we say friendship, which is loyalty, support, shared interests, shared values. That's not what kids understand to be friendship at that stage.

Tracy: It's difficult for parents who have daughters of this age, what advice can you give parents when they have a situation when their daughter comes home and has experienced bullying or exclusion or any of the other number of things that can happen? What advice do you give parents?

Linda: When they come home upset like that, we need to sit with them and their emotions and they need to be able to name it. What am I feeling? How does it feel? We need to acknowledge that that's happened. I think the trick is in not overreacting because the more you overreact, the more you make it worse than it is. I think if we can, then get them into the gentle rhythms of our family

lives and the safe rituals and the safe routines we have, that will settle them. Parents running in to save their children, I don't think is a great idea, sometimes it gets to an extreme and you have to do that and you have to work with the school to overcome those problems but kids will have conflict with their peers and the more parents rush in or teachers and separate kids, put them in different classes, all of those things that we tend to do. The less chance kids have to learn the skills of resolving this kind of conflict.

Tracy: It's a very difficult area to deal with isn't it Linda and it's not a one size fits all solution.

Linda: Absolutely not, the solution for one child might be complete different to the solution for another. And I can't give you a piece of advice that is going to work in every case, if we could do that it would have all been solved long ago and this won't be a problem.

Tracy: Let's move on to another article you wrote on your blog called "What if my child becomes the bully?" We don't often think about this one, the focus is more often on the child being bullied but carrying out bullying behaviour or being a bully can actually negatively impact a teenage girl's development, can't it?

Linda: Yes, research shows that kids that bully tend to be more unhappy at school, they have lower levels of engagement at school, poor academic achievement, higher levels of truancy, difficult behaviour, increased chance of getting in trouble with the police and the school and certain mental health problems and disorders are more prevalent in children who bully.

Tracy: So what makes kids bully each other? Why would a child become a bully?

Linda: There are tons of reasons why a child would become a bully. Bullying can be a social shortcut, it's a way of getting what you want quickly and for a child who hasn't got well developed social skills, that's an easy way of achieving their desires I suppose. That said, lots of bullies have really highly advanced social skills because they have learned already how to recognise strengths and weaknesses in others and how to play on those. Bullying can happen in the home and kids learn from what they see. When I was talking about the social problems of kids who have bullying it's very hard to separate whether those problems are caused by the bullying itself or from the home environment they are coming from. It's important to look at what's valued at home when you look at bullying because kids can completely misconstrue things. If parents model that you are good when you are in control or you are a leader when others are scared of you or you are popular when you are feared or you are popular when you are exclusive and exclude other people, then children can sometimes live those ideas out in bullying and not understand some subtleties of it. A child who is bullied is more likely to bully themselves, they have learned from the master and they have seen how it worked on them, so it's likely that they will go on to bully. Not always obviously but it's more likely. Neglect can cause bullying, children fighting for attention, any sort of attention. Unfortunately the punishment for it is often "well I'm going to neglect you more, go away." And so the sort of cycle keeps going on. I think also in popular culture there is a lot of bullying on television, kid's drama is actually quite interesting when you watch it on TV. There are only so many forms of drama that you can create for 10, 11 or 12 year olds on television, so often bullying behaviours is a part of that and they see it a lot. Also bullying is a way of fitting in, when we were talking about frenemies, being included sometimes means excluding others.

Tracy: No parent wants their child to become a bully. What can we do to ensure that children don't grow up to be bullies?

Linda: Again name it and shame it. Right from the beginning you need to create a culture that bullying is not acceptable in our family, it's one of those things we don't do here. I think you need to say what bullying is, explain what bullying is, and give examples of it. A bully is someone who forces people to do something they don't want to do. A bully is somebody who hits other people. A bully is somebody who takes or breaks other peoples' property, and these are all very simplistic forms of bullying but then I'm talking about very young children. Some psychologists suggest having those things written around the house and those sorts of things, just so it's really reinforced constantly. Clear boundaries and positive attention are really important in most parts of educating kids or bringing up children. That doesn't mean ignoring your child's negative behaviours, it's just that kids respond to clear boundaries and predictable consequences. Develop empathy in children, if they can understand how somebody else feels then they are less likely to treat them poorly and with little kids you can start with pets or siblings, you know, how does the dog feel when you pull its tale, that sort of thing. Obviously as they get older that questioning can broaden to friends and teachers and even strangers on the news or TV dramas, how might that character feel, but it's something we teach. It doesn't come naturally to all people. Don't ever look past bullying, we condone what we walk past, so when you walk past bullying or you see it and don't say anything to your children, that's saying to them, that's okay with me and I think it's really important we don't do that. Internet use has become a much bigger problem with bullying, never let your kids have their internet in their room, where they can't be monitored, so much of what used to happen on the playground now happens on the internet and it's 24/7. So I think it's really important to disconnect kids, not all the time but monitor them when they are on the net and give them lots of time disconnected.

Tracy: I think it's important to remember here that with a bully, it's not a good thing for the bully. As parents we might think well that's okay my child's top dog and at least I don't have to worry that they are the one being bullied. But as you said there are negative impacts on the bully as well.

Linda: They are often very isolated. Kids aren't silly, they know who is hurting them so they will go along with certain behaviours but when it comes time for them to choose who they would like to spend time with; they're not going to choose a bully. So it can be very isolating.

Tracy: Linda, you outline the importance of parents working with the school, why is this an important step?

Linda: Look if the school approaches you and says that your child is bullying, there is a very good chance that it is happening. It's really hard to tell a parent that their child is being a bully so they don't do it lightly and I think it is something that parents would take seriously if they were approached in that way. If you argue with the school about the behaviour, particularly in front of the child, you are telling the child to carry on. In the long run that does your child no favours. Schools do make mistakes but they do see your child for six or seven hours per day so they do have an idea of what's going on and it's important to work with them.

Tracy: Linda, when it comes to social media, what do girls need to know?

Linda: It's important that they know that there are people out there that don't have their best interests at heart. Early adolescents have a really disconnect here, they hear you say that people might be watching them or want to take advantage of them but deep down they don't really understand it.

Tracy: There is no easy solution here is there? We can't just ban social media.

Linda: Absolutely not and you won't want to because there are lots of good things about social media.

Tracy: Yes because it is a huge issue, and we won't have time to go into a lot of detail today, but Linda, can you just give us some simple practical strategies that parents and indeed students can be aware of?

Linda: For parents, the office of the Children's e-safety Commission was established about twelve months ago and it's a new government office that provides young people with online safety education, they also intervene in severe cases of cyber bullying so I would highly recommend to parents to go have a look at their website because there are terrific resources there. In terms of a really simple strategy for talking to kids about what they post online; Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?

Tracy: Linda I would like to finish today on focusing on your article *What Girls Want*. Can you tell us through your research, how do teenage girls want to learn?

Linda: We had a forum recently where we talked to a large group of our girls about how they like to learn, so the points I'll make are a combination of what the girls told us and what I know of my own experience in teaching girls. I find that girls like narrative, they love a story, they like to see the links between ideas and facts and events and if you can present a concept loosely as a story, girls will engage with the content much better, so I find that works. Girls like to work collaboratively and they tell us that every day and I think it's important because they get to share their ideas in small groups and get that approval that girls often need in order to heighten their confidence and then they can share them with a bigger group but that collaborative work really works for them. Girls are really task orientated as a teacher moving from a boy's school then coming here straight to a girl's school I got a shock at the amount of content girls will get through in a period because they like to get things done. Sometimes that means they don't go into things in enough depth but they do like to get things done and achieve tasks. Girls like very clearly structured notes and they tell us that, the challenge with that for me, comes with the fact that life isn't that simple. You don't get all the instructions and then sit the test and move on to the next thing, learning is a bit more like life, it should be a bit more unstructured and messy. We provide project based learning at our school to challenge the kids and make sure that they do that messy learning with lots of challenges popping up. Rather than just here's the notes, learn it for the test, as much as they would like us to just do that sometimes. Girls are often visual learners but I think that's kids generally these days. We've got such a screen culture that kids do learn better visually or quickly visually but I think we need to provide them with lots of other types of learning as well. I think that's the challenge in this screen era.

Tracy: How do girls vary in their learning?

Linda: I find that girls like to find the right answer and please their teacher and that's problematic as they get a bit older because there isn't always one right answer so we need to be role modelling for girls that there is often lots of ways for approaching a problem and lots of different ways of getting to an answer so that sort of learning needs to be increased for girls, role modelled for girls and rewarded in girls for thinking outside of the box. Girls are a bit prone to fear of failure, especially at the top end. You might have heard the Wimbledon Girls School in England that now has a failure week so that they set their girls up to fail for a week, so that they can learn the skills of failure and they learn that failure is a learning tool that's a way forward and I think that's really good and I would like to see more of that here because we do find that girls have a fear of failure and it can be quite debilitating and can stop you from taking the learning risks that you need to take. Girls love nice learning spaces, when you teach girls you know that they like to colour things and they like to

make things pretty and they like to present their work in a particular way. They tell us also that they like classrooms to be like that. They like colour and light so I think that's just an extension of what they like for themselves, they like in their classrooms. Ultimately I think the biggest thing for girls is that they are relationship based, they need to trust their teacher and they need to feel liked and they respond much better if they feel that the teacher has confidence in them and they have confidence in the teacher. That the teacher cares about them and under those sorts of circumstances girls tend to thrive.

Tracy: You said that girls often underestimate their ability, how so?

Linda: Well we find that when we offer specialist programs particularly maths and science, girls underestimate their abilities. There are far more talented girls than there are people who put themselves forward for talent programs. Again the challenge here is to provide lots of risk taking opportunities where they have a go.

Tracy: Is part of this social conditioning?

Linda: I think so, yes, and they don't want to be put in a situation where they will feel shame or embarrassment and taking a risk potentially puts them in that situation but it stifles their learning.

Tracy: There was an interview on ABC Breakfast this morning talking about new careers and the guest was saying that in a job application a man, or a boy if you like, may only have one of the skills of the ten and he will apply, yet a girl might have seven and think, oh well I don't have all ten therefore I won't apply.

Linda: Absolutely and that starts at a very young age. Some research shows that by grade 2 that girls underestimate their ability compared to boys.

Tracy: And finally Linda, what should teachers always remember when they are teaching girls?

Linda: That girls like to be liked, like all of us, they want to be heard and respected and they want a positive relationship with teachers.

Tracy: Ultimately your research here at Santa Maria College, where is it taking you? What is your goal through your blog and through your work here at the school?

Linda: I really want to see more parent engagement, rather than involvement. We involve parents in jobs in schools and we get them to come into events and things but we don't engage them in educational issues, educational best practice. We don't talk to them about the wellbeing issues that affect kids in their adolescence and I think that's really important that we work together. Schools are supposed to be a partnership between parents and teachers and often I think we don't involve parents enough in that sort of conversation.

Tracy: Thank you so much for joining me today, it's been great Linda.

Linda: Thanks for having me.