

Girls candid about sex harassment

YWCA offers place to vent about vulgar talk in school hallways and learn value of respect

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They can get grabbed on the breast or the backside at any time in the halls.

They hear girls being called "skank," "ho" or "slut" every day at school. Every day, sometimes from other girls.

And with sad regularity, they hear guys yell out which part of the male anatomy they want them to suck. "Guys always say that – it's disgusting, but a lot of girls laugh it off," says 16-year-old student Megan Brownlee.

"I'm shocked when girls don't get mad, because deep inside, you know the guys don't respect you."

Yet in the sexually charged halls of today's high schools, where lawyer Julian Falconer's recent report on school safety in Toronto uncovered "alarming rates" of harassment and assault, many girls don't seem to know how to say Stop, according to a group of young Scarborough women who attend what may be the only all-girls centre in Canada.

In a recent two-hour rant about harassment from boys, 10 teenaged girls from five east-end high schools sat in the lounge at the YWCA's Girls' Centre on Kingston Rd. and described the minefield of sexual tensions they navigate each day at their schools, which include R.H. King Academy, Cardinal Newman Catholic Secondary

Combatting taunts in the hallways

Ten girls from a YWCA girls' program shared their suggestions with the Star recently:

When you're talking about bullying in grade school, tell boys and girls about sexual harassment as well; explain what it is (unwanted sexual attention) and that it's degrading, and wrong.

Teachers should speak up on the girls' behalf when they overhear sexual taunts in the hall, not just walk by.

Make self-defence a compulsory part of Grade 9 physical education for girls, just like first aid.

Provide more centres like the one run by the YWCA – safe places for girls where they can learn why this behaviour is wrong, learn their rights and

School, Woburn Collegiate, ASE Alternative School and Birchmount Collegiate.

learn self-respect.

In the spirit of confidentiality this centre promotes, the *Star* agreed not to identify which school each girl attends.

But more prevention programs like this are among the 126 recommendations of Falconer's report on school safety prompted by the shooting death last spring of 15-year-old Jordan Manners.

While the girls agree this kind of boy-free spot provides an oasis where they can talk discreetly about these touchy subjects away from school with input from trained youth counsellors, they admit the issue is complicated.

"You hear stuff like 'What's up, bitch?' and 'Hey, ho' every other second," says Tanya, 14, a Grade 9 student. "I would be so scared to say anything back."

At 18, Jhanelly Porter fears "it's too late for our generation" to re-set the gender balance, to get guys to respect girls, to get girls to respect each other, to get girls to respect themselves – especially against the backdrop of the sexually degrading lyrics of hits like "Crank That" by Soulja Boy, which refers to oral sex, or "Tip Drill" by Nelly, which refers to anal foreplay. The video shows the singer swiping his credit card between a woman's buttocks.

"It's horrifying, but music has an influence. Some guys at school will swipe their credit card on your arm as you walk by," says the Grade 12 student who just finished a project about sexist lyrics in hip-hop music.

Falconer focused much of his investigation on gender violence after discovering that a Muslim girl at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate had been forced by six males to perform oral sex in a school washroom, and the school had failed to report the assault to authorities.

At this girls' centre – the sort of agency Falconer says can be crucial in preventing sexual harassment – girls aged 9 to 16 come for help with everything from homework to healthy relationships.

They often open up about harassment precisely because they are not at school, but away from "the sense of prudishness some girls associate with school staff," said Amanda Dale, the Y's director of advocacy for Toronto.

"Kids aren't as trusting of teachers to tell them when something like this happened," says Piramila Ravindiran, 16, a Grade 11 student. "And guidance counsellors are more there to talk about your career."

But at an off-site centre, "girls talk to us about exactly what the Falconer report discovered – that sexual harassment has become so common, it seems 'normal' to many of them," said Dale.

"You can't expect the school system to handle this problem on its own. You need outside agencies like ours where girls feel comfortable enough to disclose (incidents of harassment)," said Dale.

At this recent three-hour program, where girls eat dinner first and then discuss topics such as stress, self-esteem, sex and sexual harassment, the girls are candid.

They speak openly about girl fights they have witnessed at school, at the Kennedy subway station, at Scarborough Town Centre – and how guys often fight one-on-one whereas girls summon backup by cellphone from other girls and sometimes guys.

Staff counsellors gently steer the conversation to broader issues of safety at school, and power, and the use of violence. The Y is working to replicate the Girls' Centre in other cities across Canada. The modest program in a Scarborough office building recently won the Mayor's 2007 award for safety for its Safe Sisters prevention program with pre-teen girls.

With these teenaged girls, the program seems to be having an impact, as the girls start to brainstorm how to fight back.

"I know sexual harassment is almost something you can't avoid at school," concedes Puja Bagri, 17, a Grade 11 student, "but kids don't realize it's actually bullying."

Bagri says she's been to "so many girls' programs, I know my rights now, and if someone said this stuff to me directly I would probably say right back, 'Do you know what you just said? You can't talk like that.' Sometimes that would be enough to stop them, just by answering."

Ravindiran, 16, agrees "the worst thing girls can do is ignore it. When they're teaching health in Grade 9 all about condoms and saying No to sex, they should also talk about how to deal with sexual harassment and name calling."

Bagri noted most schools hold a safety assembly at the start of the year where they talk about weapons and bullying – "and that's when they should talk about sexual harassment too, and explain that it's actually illegal."