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Artists aim to make girls media-savvy

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MADISON — What if parents could vaccinate their adolescent daughters against the siren song of the mall? Is there any way to get them to just say no to the power of brand name clothing, accessories and cosmetics?

And what should be done about the barrage of marketing messages telling them they can never be too rich, or too thin, and that they must be hot, hot, hot as they shop, shop, shop, even if they're only 10 years old?

Artists Kelly Parks Snider and Jane Bartell, working with a diverse group of about 30 middle school girls from across Madison, think they've found some answers to those questions through an arts-based initiative that explores the impact of the media and marketing on girls.

"Before I joined Project Girl, I wanted to be that model I saw in the magazines," said Ana Lynn, a seventh-grader at Edgewood Campus School. "Now I know the picture I see is not real, and I can say, 'Oh, that is so-o-o-o Photoshopped, and so fake!' It's helped me just want to be myself, instead."

A multimedia art show, inspired by nearly a year's worth of Project Girl meetings, discussions and workshops, opened recently at the Sonderegger Science Center at Edgewood College. The opening celebration included an introduction by Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton and a talk by nationally recognized developmental psychologist Lyn Mikel Brown, whose most recent book is "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes."

The Project Girl Exhibition will continue at the Science Center through April 22. Experts like Brown have said they are hoping that the show will be available to tour the rest of the country when it completes its run in Madison. Snider and Bartell are eager for the show to travel elsewhere, creating discussions about girls and the media in other communities, too.

The purpose of the show, which features work by Snider, Bartell and the middle school girls who have been attending monthly Project Girl gatherings, is to help share some of the insights they gained from their in-depth exploration of how marketing, the media and popular culture uses girls.

After a year of meeting and sharing their ideas with poets, artists, academics and researchers, the Project Girl participants are ready to speak up.

"It's really changed our outlook," said Edgewood eighth-grader Molly Winding.

"We're a lot more critical of what we see, and what we buy. I know that the models in the magazines actually look totally different. They can change a picture to make someone's head smaller, their eyes bigger, their neck thinner, their lips bigger. And then they pile on the makeup. They're definitely objects," she said.

It's important for girls to recognize the myriad ways they are being manipulated by marketing, and how the images they see in the media affect the way they see themselves, Bartell and Snider said.

"We're mothers, and we have kids this age. What girls, in particular, are seeing and hearing in the popular culture isn't very healthy. The messages the kids get seem to reinforce all these really limited stereotypes," Snider said.