



MICHELLE STOCKER/THE CAPITAL TIMES

From left: Maddie Snider, 15, Alexandra Endres, 14, and Jasmine Bauer, 14, work on an art project at the Lussler Family Heritage Center as part of Project Girl, a program intended to form positive bonds among students.

Programs help girls cut tensions

Girls not only fight differently from boys — more slapping, hair pulling, gouging, scratching and screaming — they generally fight for different reasons, experts say. Programs to help them resolve their differences and take charge of their lives in a positive way need to be different, too.

Dave Thorson, metro delinquency intake supervisor for Dane County, observed that peer mediation programs and discussion groups are often helpful in reducing tensions among girls.

"With girls, it (fighting) often seems to revolve around boys, or 'you did something mean to me two years ago,'" he explained. Well-facilitated discussions that get at why they are mad at each other can make a big difference.

He also said it is important to do assessments for aggressive juveniles that include looking at factors like trauma, mental illness and alcohol or other substance abuse.

Pride and self-respect are also factors, he said, which are common in fights among boys, as well.

"There is a great need among kids to protect their reputation, and to save face," he added.

Gang-related violence, however, is another matter, and needs to be dealt with differently.

Thorson observed that turf battles about whether a gang has the "rights" to a particular area are unlikely to be resolved through a discussion group.

There are a number of programs and projects that are aimed at helping girls get along in life, and with each other.

For example, a group of girls from Atwood Community Center's Girl Neighborhood Power project are leaders this semester in peer mediation groups at East and La Follette high schools.

And Project Girl, an innovative program that is using both art and discussions about how girls are portrayed in the media, is creating bonds among girls from all walks of life, from schools across the city.

The girls have been meeting monthly for over a year and their frank conversations range from how they respond to graphic descriptions of women and sex in song lyrics to how they feel about what is considered beautiful, and images of women in advertising.

An art show featuring work from Project Girl is planned for the spring.

— Susan Troller