



# Rites of passage

Innovative, holistic approaches to puberty education are replacing the awkward teach-and-preach sessions of the past. RACHEL POWER finds out more.

A group of girls is seated in a circle, sewing small felt hearts to hang on a ribbon around their necks. In a wider circle behind them, the girls' mothers are writing their hopes for their daughters onto tiny scrolls of paper, to be tucked into the hearts just before the final stitch is made.

They are taking part in a whole-day workshop about puberty and menstruation developed by Jane Bennett back in 2000 and being presented by local facilitator Janoel Liddy. The girls have spent the morning with Janoel, getting a lively introduction to the facts of puberty and menarche (first period).

Their mothers have joined them for the afternoon, when the girls will get a chance to hear the women's own stories of puberty, engage in an open conversation about the physical and emotional changes they can expect, and get answers to the many questions they all placed in a hat earlier.

Bennett established the 'Celebration Day for Girls' when her daughter's own school

was looking for a "fun, celebratory and holistic" approach to the subject. Its teachers had realised that the "embarrassed 'plumbing approach' to fertility and reproduction" had failed to address the importance of menstruation and the menstrual cycle in the lives of girls and women, she says.

She developed a course that recognises the fact that puberty and adolescence mark important transitions for girls – a time of emerging female identity and awareness. She also wanted to encourage self-acceptance, curiosity and celebration in a world where advertising images and myths of the perfect female body abound.

Research shows that where young girls enter puberty well-prepared, with a positive introduction and emotional support, especially from their parents and carers, it can have a profound and lasting impact on them, says course facilitator Janoel Liddy.

"It's a beautiful niche that the Celebration Day fills, because it's about creating a

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supportive space, sharing experiences between the mothers and the daughters, rather than the traditional facts-driven, biological approach," she says.

"I've heard stories of some girls coming away from puberty education classes thinking, 'It's going to be horrible, it's going to hurt', and that's their overall impression."

Involving mothers and carers is a key part of its success, she says. "Our approach means the space is held very safely. It's about opening up conversations between the mothers and their daughters, and also between the girls, who share this with each other."

Janoel says each group is a little different, but generally the kids enter the sessions "a little bit nervous and wide-eyed".

"Some girls like to busy themselves with a craft activity so it doesn't look like they're listening so hard, but usually within an hour they are fully engaged with the group," she says.

"I love being able to answer the girls' questions in a really practical, non-sensationalist way. And to give things a positive spin, without making it sound like everything's wonderful! It's about getting them into a healthy frame of mind where they can embrace change."

Anthony Atkinson, teacher at Merri Creek Primary School, says his school community realised that the standard sex education program was "increasingly not hitting the mark" with the students.

"Before, it was an old-school pedagogical approach – basically a teach-and-preach session. There wasn't an openness to engaging



PHOTO: RACHEL POWER

with the kids on some of their questions and a lot of topics still seemed to be taboo," says Anthony.

"At the parent information session, it became clear that the school community was looking for something more diverse. There was a feeling that questions were not being answered adequately, even things like kids understanding about IVF. It seemed to be restricted to traditional sex ed to avoid things that were perceived as 'minefields'."

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Janoel Liddy was engaged to run a series of classes for the Year 5/6 boys and girls, funded from its health and wellbeing budget. For a month, she conducted two-hour sessions a week with each class, some with girls and boys together and others separately.

"It was really positive," Anthony says. "All the anticipation and nervousness and

giggles they felt in the lead-up to it fell away pretty quickly due to the openness of the conversation and the kids' realisation that they were going to get straight answers from us."

Teachers were expected to be part of the discussion and actively involved with answering questions, he says, so that the students knew they could talk to their teachers as trusted adults.

"If you're a Grade 5/6 classroom teacher and you think you can abstain from that conversation with kids at that pre-adolescent age, it's unrealistic," Anthony says. "Sure, you can take them out for a run more often, but you must be willing to talk to them, too."

He says the open style of the facilitation meant the conversation expanded into issues related to body image and feeling safe, and the right to have control over who touches your body and so on.

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There was "definitely a big collective sigh of relief" at the end of the program, says Anthony.

"They'd asked questions individually but they were part of a collective experience and no one had been personally embarrassed. I perceived that they felt like they'd grown up a bit after doing the program. They'd passed a hurdle." ●