Girl power
Growing up naturally

Consider what your body is capable of doing, not what it looks like

Jody Forbes
school psychologist

PHILIP JOHNSON’S super spring menu

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Gordon Hamilton

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Girls are being given the tools they need to grow up happy and healthy, writes Jane Scott

Wo’d be a teenage girl in 2012? Yes, we have a female prime minister, some wonderful gold medal-winning role models, and some prominent female cultural and media figures (by whom I mean Cate Blanchett and the ABC’s Leigh Sales, not Lara Bingle and her ilk), but even so, Australian girls are subject to more pressure, from more directions, than ever before.

Be smart, but be pretty, they’re told; be yourself, but be popular; be strong, but be slender; be sweet, but be sexy. Feature in an “accidentally leaked” sex tape and you’ll find fame and fortune. Excel at maths? Not so much.

According to Beyondblue, teenage girls have significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and adjustment disorders than teenage boys (who have higher rates of disruptive behaviour disorders). But there are things that parents and girls can do to ensure a healthy transition to womanhood, some of them surprisingly simple.

Jody Forbes knows girls. A mother of two primary school girls, Jody, 39, is also school psychologist at Brisbane Girls Grammar School.

She points to the results of last year’s Mission Australia Youth Survey, which showed that body image was the biggest issue concerning Queensland girls (43.8 per cent of female respondents put body image at the top of their list, compared with 24.2 per cent of young men).

One of the best ways to tackle this, says Jody, is to get moving – not to sweat off the kilos, but to reap the psychological and cognitive benefits that exercise brings.

“I’m a big supporter of sport. Physical activity has been shown to help reduce levels of anxiety and in Britain, exercise has been adopted as the first line in treatment for people presenting with depression,” she says, explaining that our recent Olympic and Paralympic successes are great for young Australian women.

“Female role models in the sporting arena can encourage girls to consider what their bodies
are capable of doing, rather than what they look like. Athletes like Sally Pearson and Anna Meares demonstrate to girls the importance of taking risks and moving on following hardship or failure in life. Girls can be so scared of failing that they don’t try, and such athletes, as well as the Paralympians, model that failure and mistakes can be helpful.

As well as exercise (which need not be competitive – yoga, rock climbing or a good walk will do the job just as well), Jody points to service to others as another powerful weapon in the happy girl’s armoury.

“All the ‘happiness revolution’ research shows that volunteering and altruism are incredibly important for wellbeing. Service is a big part of what we do. We’re encouraging the girls to think about their community.”

Grammar girls raise funds for a number of charities and are encouraged to volunteer and, in Year 10, 15 hours of community service is a requirement. Older girls volunteer regularly, for example, at the Wonder Factory entertainment room at the Royal Children’s Hospital.

Service has always been key to the Girl Guides, an organisation that has been around for more than 90 years in Australia, and is experiencing a resurgence in numbers. Girl Guides Queensland state training manager Robyn Gibbs, 30, has been involved with the movement since she was 11, and now leads a Brisbane unit of 14 to 18 year olds.

“In the 1980s and early ’90s, Girl Guides saw a fairly significant drop in membership, but since then membership has been growing,” Robyn says.

“I think that’s because we’re teaching values that are not necessarily taught in schools, but are increasingly valued by parents: respecting yourself, doing a good turn, the idea of commitment and following through on a challenge.”

As a parent, there’s certainly an appeal to an organisation that will shore up our own attempts to counter the shallow, hedonistic messages contained in so much of the popular culture our children consume.

“The girls enjoy being able to give something back to the community, and they learn skills while they’re doing it. I had one guide through my unit who, instead of going to Schoolies Week, went overseas to work in an orphanage. She came back a different person who now confidently runs a guide unit and works a number of jobs. Volunteering really helps them grow in confidence.”

Girl Guides also offer a “safe” arena for girls, offering a respite from academic stress and the pressures that come with relentless social media interaction. At Guides, Robyn says, “girls can be just girls”.

“With outdoor activities, they don’t have to impress boys, who might be stronger than they are. Girls set their own challenges and are encouraged to reflect on what they can and can’t do. And we have a uniform, so there’s none of that worry about make-up, or having the best clothes and shoes.”

Marina Passalaris is an expert on make-up, clothes and shoes, and at first glance she appears to be an unlikely champion of girls’ self-esteem, but her experience in the beauty business has given her an insider’s perspective on girls and their concerns.

“I’ve worked in modelling agencies for over 14 years, training models in grooming and deportment. I loved the creativity, but there were a lot of issues with these young girls that needed to be addressed.”

Eight years ago, she launched Beautiful Minds, a grooming, etiquette and life skills course that ranks the ability to read a bank statement and say no to drugs up there with understanding skincare and dressing to suit your body shape.

Since launching in Brisbane and on the Sunshine Coast, the course is now offered across Australia, and has expanded to address emerging issues in girl-world, such as social media etiquette and media representations of female beauty. We often perceive 21st-century girls as savvy and sophisticated, but underneath it all, they’re as vulnerable and naive as any generation before them.

“If you give them the knowledge to challenge what they see, they can avoid taking on the message so literally,” says Marina, 34.

“They know images are airbrushed, but they can’t help but compare themselves to what they see in magazines.

“We show them exactly how it’s done. A photographer takes a photo of me, blows it up on a big screen, takes out all the wrinkles and makes me look like a 12 year old. Then the girls really get it, and it makes them feel better about themselves.”

At Beautiful Minds, girls also learn about the perils of social media, which is advice they may not accept from parents.

“We teach them that what you put up in the public domain doesn’t belong to you anymore,” says Marina. “It’s there forever, like a tattoo, and you need to think about the effects it can have on you later in life.

“Mothers say to me, ‘I’ve been saying x, y and z for years. Now that she’s heard it from one of your educators, she’s finally listening.’ Teenagers have this vibe that their parents know nothing.”

In that respect, at least, girls haven’t changed a bit.

BEAUTIFUL MINDS’ next Brisbane course is on Dec 17-21. For details, visit www.beautifulminds.com.au