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Girl Talk helps teens cope with peer pressure

- A Deerfield-Windsor School student starts a weekly program for middle school girls to help build their self-esteem.

Valerie Benton

ALBANY — Haley Kilpatrick describes her 13-year-old sister, Kelly, as “spunky” and “happy.”

But when her younger sister entered middle school, Kilpatrick watched her quickly transform into a tearful, depressed variation of herself.

Haley, 16, immediately recognized the symptoms of middle school angst and began reliving her own middle school experiences through her sister. “It was complete *déjà vu*; middle school was very difficult for me,” Haley said. “You tend to distance yourself from your parents and their advice.”

In addition, she remembers being treated like an outcast, particularly by other middle school girls, who, she said, could be cruel. “Sometimes you feel like you don’t even exist, and it’s a terrible feeling,” Haley said. “It’s a real difficult stage.”

Haley, a Deerfield-Windsor high school student, decided to help her sister and, in the process, help other middle school girls who were experiencing similar anxieties and peer pressures. With the guidance of several school officials, Haley started “Girl Talk,” a program that focuses on social issues associated with middle school.

Among the topics that the group of about 20 sixth-through eighth-grade girls has addressed during their weekly sessions have been friendship, gossiping, materialism, leadership, forgiveness, outward appearances and popularity.

Through Girl Talk, Haley isn’t promising the girls a perfect world, but is offering ways to deal with issues they are confronted with in their world.

Collins Goss, 13, is among those who have found the middle school setting socially challenging. “Girls judge you by what you wear and what you look like,” Collins said. Through Girl Talk, she’s learned to see through their misconceptions and that “people are going to love you for who you are.”

Haley said the class is not only breaking down barriers created among peers but also between grades. Girls learn that they don’t have to be friends with everyone in school and are encouraged to make friends outside of school in different arenas of life.

Jackie Ellis, 12, says she’s discovered how to get along better with her peers and her family. She adds that the Girl Talk sessions have taught her, “You are someone special.”

Haley is optimistic about the future of the program, as well as the impact on the participants. “It could change the way they view middle school,” she said.