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Participants play with sand during a recent GLOW club meeting in Pilsen.

ANTHONY VAZQUEZ/SUN-TIMES



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# Pilsen group encourages positive self-talk, coping skills in young girls

BY MARIAH RUSH, STAFF REPORTER  
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Nine-year-old Vanessa scribbles with sparkly markers on a plate that will soon become part of her “zen garden.”

The eight girls around her are doing the same in a color blocked room at the Union League Boys & Girls Club’s Club One location in Pilsen after school last Thursday. The “meditation room” is papered with handmade signs displaying positive affirmations like “Dust settles, you don’t” and “Slow progress is better than no progress.”

Vanessa doodles words and phrases like “yoga,” “I’m very smart,” “naps,” “I love myself” around the plate as affirmations and things that give her peace.

At the after-school group — GLOW: Trauma-Informed Mentoring for Girls — the youths work through traumatic experiences, friend problems, anxiety and negative self-talk. Any frustration is welcome in the GLOW meetings, and this quarter they’re focused on social and emotional wellness.

“This club is the only one we can express ourselves in,” Vanessa says.

Alice Perez is the group’s trained trauma-informed mentor.

“Before, the focus was preteens ... and all these protective factors to get them away from drugs, premarital sex and all these things,” Perez said.

“That’s kind of where we missed the mark. We’re not teaching them at a pivotal point in their life these positive coping skills and prioritizing self-healing and emotional intelligence. The sooner we get to them, the better, because then they already have those skills to become successful adults.”

While anyone can join the group, kids exhibiting worrisome behaviors at the Union League Boys & Girls Clubs may be approached specifically about joining the group.

“They’re a little wild, but the main thing is that they want to feel safe, that everyone is friends and they



**ABOVE:** Participants look at their plates during GLOW club at the Club One, an after-school program hosted by Union League Boys & Girls Clubs, at 2157 W. 19th St. GLOW club lets participants understand and express their feelings to help them navigate difficult situations. **RIGHT:** A participant fills her “zen garden” with sand. ANTHONY VAZQUEZ/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

want to feel peaceful,” Perez said.

While mental health techniques for kids as young as Vanessa may have been unheard of even a decade ago, stressors like bullying have always been an issue for young children.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3 in 5 teen girls in the United States felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021 — double that of boys, representing a nearly 60% increase and the highest level reported over the past decade.

“We’re also looking at post-COVID, and a lot of what we’re seeing is anxiety,” Perez said. “A lot of what we’re seeing is depression, self-isolation, very poor, negative views about themselves.”

That’s why the girls are learning techniques like positive self-talk, mindfulness and coping skills that many adults don’t have, Perez said.

Before starting their zen gardens, the group kicks off the meeting by sharing how they feel that day. The ritual wasn’t easy at first.

Nicole, 10, used to be hesitant to share her feelings with the group.

“But I thought if they could do it, I could do it,” she said. “After school, I get really stressed. I like to be able to share my problems and hear what my friends are going through. It’s OK to say you have problems.”

Next, the girls do a short medita-

tactfully. “And loud.”

Meanwhile, Naomi uses what she’s learned in GLOW to deal with boys.

“When boys try to make me mad at school, I have to use my coping skills,” the 10-year-old said.

These include taking several deep breaths, removing herself from the situation and looking at images of sunsets.

“We like to comfort each other, and I like when ... we’re all listening to each other no matter what,” she said.

Naomi loved making affirmation bracelets at GLOW.

“It says believe,” she said.

“I wanted to put, ‘You can do whatever you want, as long as you believe in yourself,’” she sighed. “But that was too long.”

Other girls lean on music to help them.

“How do you cope?” 10-year-old Delayza asks, her eyes wide open.

The questions these girls easily answer for themselves can have complex answers.

“I listen to calm music like SZA and the Weeknd, and Spanish music,” she says as she mixes sparkles that act as sand in the zen garden.

Her friend Mariela is happy she’s learned not to run away from her feelings and is able to calm herself down.

“I listen to K-pop,” the 10-year-old said, before showing off the K-pop group on the wallpaper of her Apple Watch.

Once the sand sparkles and seashells have been added to her zen garden, Mariela thinks about where she’s going to display it when she gets home.

“I have a shelf at home that’s my calm section,” she says. “I’ll put it on there.”

It’ll go next to her beloved K-pop albums.

At the sound of parents arriving, the girls peel out of the room together, shutting the door of the meditation room, where a sign on the door says, “You belong here.”



tion. The sound of waves crashing peacefully streams from Perez’s iPhone and continues throughout the meeting.

Boys aren’t included in two of the three weekly meetings, primarily because of the grant funding, said Anabel Hernandez, the interim psych director.

But the girls seem to like it that way.

“I feel like with the boys it just gets ... more crowded,” Nicole says