

# SAINT MARY'S HEAD LINES

A newsletter for  
Saint Mary's School Parents

## Educating Girls About the Gift of Failure

By Brendan J. O'Shea, Head of School

### FEATURES

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Educating Girls:  
About The Gift of Failure

How We Teach Girls:  
Girl World

Tips For Parents:  
Using Her Voice - You Can Help

Learning Hub

Upcoming Events

We typically think of failure in terms of an academic subject – a poor score on a test or quiz, a botched attempt on a science lab, or a homework assignment that just didn't make sense. We don't normally think of failure in terms of relationships and friendships. However, Jessica Lahey devotes a full chapter (see Chapter 6) to relationship failure in her book, *The Gift of Failure*. Lahey's observations and thoughts coincide with the themes Saint Mary's has been bringing forth with its fall production of *Mean Girls*.

While it is tempting to do otherwise, the best action parents can take is to not get involved in their children's relationship issues, whether good or bad. Learning how to manage relationships is a key part of the educational process for every adolescent, and, if parents take over relationship management for their children, it leaves their toolbox empty later in life. What parents can and should do is listen to their daughter when she is ready to talk, summarize information they have heard, and offer guidance only if their daughter wants it. While it is hard to see someone's feelings hurt, especially your own child's, try to remain focused on the bigger picture: you are preparing your daughter to deal with all that life will throw at her when you are not around.

*(continued on page 3)*

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(continued from page 1)

There are two excerpts from the book that are particularly poignant and highlight the role that parents can and should play for their children.

*“...the most important lessons of play and friend time are interpersonal, and these lessons are best learned when uninterrupted and free of adult manipulations and machinations. Adults should give kids the space and freedom to learn this language and work out the tough social moments for themselves, because those fights, tussles, silent treatments, and breakups are, despite the tears and heartbreak they cause, invaluable opportunities for growth.”*

*“...before you criticize your child’s friends, know this: making, keeping, and deciding when and how to part with friends is part of your child’s education. Something about that most dubious of friends attracts your child, and she is simply trying to figure out what that attraction is all about...No matter how nervous these friends make you feel, it’s vital that you stay out of your child’s social choices, particularly in adolescence. It may seem like a simple matter of a bad friendship to you, but your child is practicing empathy and learning how to get along with people who may not share the same background and goals; these are incredibly important social skills.”*

At Saint Mary’s, we focus on each girl’s academic development as well as her preparation for life. We take a proactive role in helping girls develop into citizens of outstanding character who choose their friends wisely and display care and compassion for all. The only mean girls one should find at Saint Mary’s are on the stage as actors. ■



# Tips for Parents

## Using Her Voice – You Can Help

Leslie Owen, Dean of Teaching and Learning

Dr. Kate Reedy, Director of Learning Support Services

“At five she was bold, audacious, and didn’t have a problem expressing herself. At 14 things changed,” notes Gwen Moran in *How Can We Help Young Girls Stay Assertive*. “Even as campaigns to promote strong young women get national headlines, and toys designed to get girls interested in science and math receive popular acclaim, an alarming trend happens to many girls when they hit adolescence. It’s a phenomenon called ‘losing their voice.’” Moran believes fear of outcomes is the main barrier to girls using their voice. Here are some strategies for what adults can do to make young women more confident:

### 1. Encourage her interest

Encourage your daughter to pursue areas where she has natural strengths and talents. When your daughter has an area where she feels confidence it can help her build confidence in other areas of her life.

### 2. Point out media pressure – including social media

Talking about how media puts pressure on women and how media images may be unrealistic can help your daughter see that not all messaging is accurate. Talk with her about how social media is an unhealthy outlet for criticizing or bullying others. Parents/Guardians should monitor interactions on digital formats to ensure your daughter is not losing her voice.

### 3. Watch your own talk

Pay attention to how people are talking around your daughter and how that can negatively impact her. Sometimes women unintentionally send the wrong message to girls when they say things like, “I don’t look good” or “I need to lose weight.”

### 4. Give them a safe place to express themselves

It is critical for your daughter to have people around her with which she feels comfortable speaking out. Girls have opinions – don’t be afraid to talk to your daughter about her ideas, even if they are contrary to your own.

### 5. Talk about the phenomenon

Talk about the phenomenon of “losing your voice” and how there may have been times in your life when you did not have a voice. Helping your daughter see that this can happen at any age can demystify the phenomenon for her.

As parents and teachers, we can help girls find their voice through dialogue. A simple conversation using questioning techniques helps girls get to the root of their concerns and plan out a conversation predicated on positive dialogue, which can reduce the fear someone might retaliate or be angry with them. At Saint Mary’s, we often use a coaching tactic called GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, What will you do?), which we recommend to take no longer than 20-30 minutes. By offering some coaching, this helps to frame the problem, helps your daughter reason through the problem and come to a possible solution. The most common trap for parents is wanting to rescue their daughter and try to solve it for her. While there is a time and place for advocating on behalf of your daughter, rescuing her early robs her of the opportunity to learn how to have difficult conversations – and use her voice.

Source: <https://www.fastcompany.com/3041179/how-we-can-help-young-girls-stay-assertive>



**“Our game focused on the changes one faces in life, and how choices at these points can affect your role in Girl World. We are always given the opportunity to either be a part of Girl World or to break free from it. The choice is up to us.”**

**Margaret Fountain '18**

## How We Teach Girls Girl World

Laura Novia, Director of Marketing and Communications

When Saint Mary's Theatre Department produced the play *Mean Girls* this fall, it provided a valuable context for candid conversations in advisory groups and classrooms about the emotional and social lives of adolescent girls – or as the play refers to it, Girl World. Based on a screenplay of the same name by Tina Fey, *Mean Girls* draws on the research of Rosalind Wiseman author of *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* and inspired the creation of Compass Explorations designed to let girls examine Girl World in different contexts and through different mediums.

Theatre Director Lou Catania '77C, used the *Mean Girls* script to engage girls in the study of the objectives, motivation, and subtext of each character in the play. Students explored Girl World expectations, the role of the “Queen Bee” and her “Court,” and how damaging cliques are for both insiders and outsiders. Armed with this understanding, girls drew on their performance and collaborative skills to reimagine scenes from the play and show what the scene might look like if the characters interacted in healthy, positive, and caring ways. When girls changed a “mean girl” character to a “champion” character, it dramatically changed the scene, relationships and course of events. Through this improvisation of new dialogue and interaction between the characters, students illustrated their social-emotional intelligence, exercised their communication and collaboration competencies, and deepened their understanding of Girl World issues and how to navigate them.

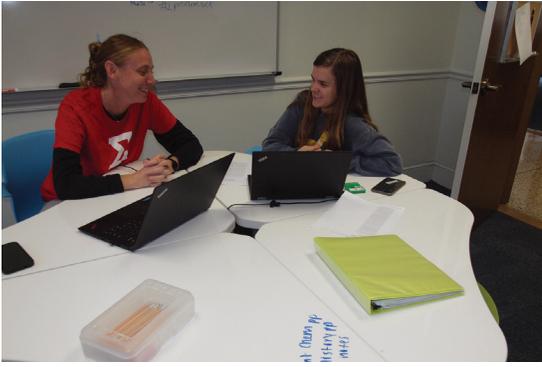
Instructor of English Virginia Boyd engaged girls in a deep dive with “Exploring Girl World.” Students took a comparative look at descriptions of the social hierarchies shaping girls' lives provided in Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabees* and the students' own vision of the world in which they live. What

they discovered was a wide range of opinions about the influence of social acceptance and popularity on their own sense of happiness and well-being. The girls were then given a design challenge – to create a Girl World game. Students pondered “What do you have to do to win your Girl World game? Who are the key players? What are the rules of this game? Then they let their imaginations go. The result: a variety of creative games inspired by popular card and board games which satirized stereotypes, encouraged players to consider the consequences of the choices they make, and dared them to set their own standards for success.

In Visual Arts Instructor Teresa Assenzo's Honors Art III, Honors Art Portfolio, and AP Art classes, girls explored Girl World using paint and canvas. Asked to reflect on the themes in the play, each girl created her own unique interpretation of what Girl World means to her. AP Art students Amber Morse '18 and Virginia Laurie '18 created specific pieces that were featured in the play; and a piece by Elizabeth Benton '19 was selected for the program and other promotional materials. The artwork is hanging in Pittman Auditorium. For Compass Explorations Day specifically, girls designed fabric squares related to the idea of Girl World. After discussing themes evident in *Mean Girls*, students designed squares addressing ideas such as relational aggression, pressure to conform, and pressure to be perfect. Ms. Assenzo, together with mathematics instructors Matt Watson and Chris Hoskin, facilitated the project and took the girls on a tour of Spoonflower, a local fabric-making facility, where their images were printed onto fabric squares.

Taking these deep dives into understanding the complexities of Girl World culture not only allow girls to develop and strengthen key competencies, they also reinforce for girls that Saint Mary's is a place where they are known and valued, where their voices are heard and respected, where they can explore who they are and who they want to become – a place where girls learn, grow, and thrive. ■

# The Learning Hub



This fall saw the opening of the new Saint Mary's School Learning Hub on the first floor of Ragland. Designed with flexible learning spaces, the Learning Hub provides a comfortable and welcoming environment in which girls may study, collaborate, innovate, and connect. Director of Learning Services Dr. Kate Reedy has her office in the Learning Hub, making for easy access to her expertise and guidance.

We are grateful to our partners at First Citizens Bank for their support of our new Learning Hub and for their shared vision for providing girls with the spaces and opportunities they need to reflect, innovate, create, and learn. ■

## EVENTS

### DECEMBER 12-15

Assessments

### DECEMBER 16

Dorms close Dec. 16 at 10 a.m. for Christmas Break

### DECEMBER 17-JANUARY 2

Christmas Break  
Dorms re-open Jan. 2 at 2 p.m.

### JANUARY 3

Classes resume

### JANUARY 15

Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Day of Service  
*School in session*

### JANUARY 16

Second semester begins

### JANUARY 27

Winter Dance

### JANUARY 30

Smedes Parlor Concert

### FEBRUARY 16

Dorms close at 5 p.m. for Winter Break

### FEBRUARY 17-20

Winter Break  
Dorms reopen Feb. 20 at 2 p.m.

### FEBRUARY 21

Classes resume

### FEBRUARY 24

Compass Explorations Day

### MARCH 2 AND 3

Spring Musical: *Bring It On!*

### MARCH 17

Compass Explorations Day

### MARCH 24

Dorms close at 10 a.m. for Spring Break

### MARCH 25-APRIL 2

Spring Break  
Dorms reopen Apr. 2 at 2 p.m.

### APRIL 3-6

Compass Week

See online parent calendar for details | [www.sms.edu/parents](http://www.sms.edu/parents)



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