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Street Smarts Workshop focuses on teen safety

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Gina Amsellem, along with most other girls, knows what it's like to feel uncomfortable from the stare of a creepy stranger.

She wonders if that stare is more than just a look, and if the man behind the face will become her attacker.

Amsellem, a freshman at Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda, along with more than 200 teens and their parents attended the school's Street Smarts Workshop on March 28.

They heard from a school counselor, self defense expert and police officers, who gave practical information about protecting yourself from physical attacks, bullying and other dangerous situations teenagers could encounter as they become more independent.

“I think you can become a victim by not being aware of what can happen out there and not being able to take care of yourself,” said Walter Johnson PTSA Health and Safety Committee Chairwoman Jody Bleiberg, who organized the workshop. “Any of our kids becoming victims is a tragedy.”

Many of the students at the event worry about being attacked or harassed. But after the workshop, many said they felt more confident. “You never know when someone can pop out from somewhere,” said Aviva Dayanzadeh, a junior at Walter Johnson. “It’s good to come to a class like this to learn about stuff in advance and how to deal with unsuspected attackers.”

Parents, too, worry that Bethesda, long considered a safe community, is becoming increasingly risky as it becomes more urban.

Just across the street from Walter Johnson High School, at the Wildwood Shopping Center on Old Georgetown Road, a 16-year-old girl was sexually assaulted in her car in the parking lot by a serial rapist in February 2005.

One in five high school girls say they have been physically or sexually abused, according to a survey from the Commonwealth Fund Commission on Women’s Health, a private foundation that supports research on health care issues based in New York City.

Amsellem’s mother, Lori, knows the world isn’t as safe as when she was a child. Although she and her two daughters — in fifth and ninth grade — have never been victims of an attack, she has always taught them to be aware of their surroundings.

She taught them to be careful by knowing where to go for help, carrying their keys in hand and screaming if someone grabs them, she said. However, sometimes children just brush off what parents say, so it helps for kids to hear from professionals as well, she said.

“It’s really reinforced some of the things my husband and I have been telling them; life is very different from when I grew up,” Lori Amsellem said. “I wanted them to hear some ways to make themselves feel safe. We want somebody else’s voice in their heads telling them to be aware.” At the workshop last week, Lauren Taylor, a teacher with Defend Yourself, a project of the DC Self Defense Karate Association, gave students more than just a reminder to protect themselves.

Taylor had the entire audience standing to learn the correct stance, facial expression and tone of voice to use if you feel threatened. She even taught everyone a few self-defense moves, such as poking someone in the eyes.

“One of the problems is, kids in our culture are taught it is not OK to say no to an adult,” Taylor said. “Even if you might embarrass someone or hurt someone’s feelings or be wrong, it’s OK.”

Even with all the dangers that teenagers have to watch out for, Gina Amsellem said she takes it in stride.

“You can’t stress about it all the time and you can’t make it control your life,” Gina Amsellem said. “You just have to make sure you’re careful and aware.”