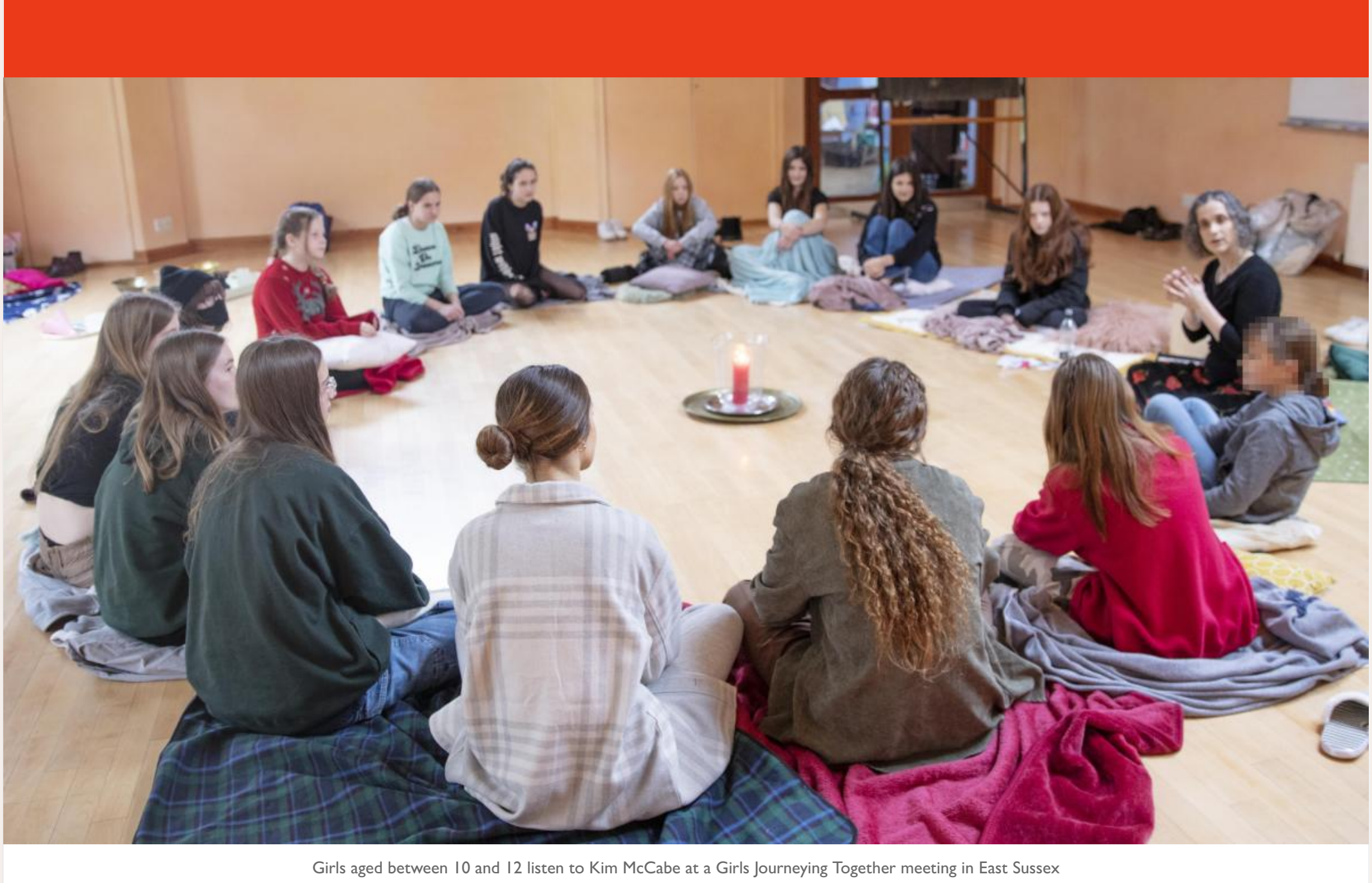
PARENTING

How to raise girls with self-belief

The pandemic has exacerbated feelings of depression in many teenage girls. Can a programme that helps pre-teens to open up break the cycle?



Girls aged between 10 and 12 listen to Kim McCabe at a Girls Journeying Together meeting in East Sussex
LAURA PANNACK FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Fleur Britten | Sunday March 06 2022, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

Around a large lit candle, a dozen pre-teen girls are sitting in a circle inside a community hall in East Sussex, each in their own "nest" of cushions and blankets. The woman who has assembled the circle poses a question: "What do you do when you have those big feelings?"

"I read a book," one says.

"Great," the woman responds. "A good story helps you escape the thing you're feeling sad about."

Another girl volunteers: "I cuddle my dog — I feel like she really gets me."

The facilitator smiles. "Who else has animals here?"

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"My cat is so intuitive," another pipes up. "She always comes into my room when I'm sad."

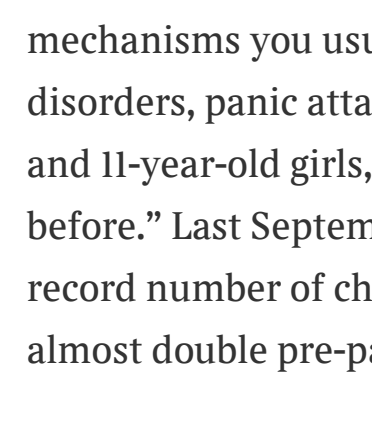
"Animals relax you, don't they?" the facilitator replies. "Research shows that the vibrations of a cat's purr relaxes us."

If you've ever tried talking to a teen or pre-teen girl about their "big feelings", the chances are they weren't so candid. These girls, aged between 10 and 12, are halfway through a year-long programme, Girls Journeying Together (GJT), designed to take the turbulence out of the teen years. There are currently 21 such groups across England — in locations including London, York and Merseyside — as well as in Scotland, Ireland, France, Russia, Bali and Hong Kong. The groups are run by Rites for Girls, an organisation that has been supporting teen and pre-teen girls and their parents since 2011. Its founder and director is the parenting expert and author Kim McCabe, 55, who continues to run the original group here in Forest Row. McCabe studied child psychology at Cambridge, then taught sex education in schools and worked as a counsellor to distressed teenagers including girls who were self-harming. She set up GJT as a response to the problems she encountered. The above discussion, she explains later, was an "aha moment" for the girls, where they suddenly realise that they're not alone in feeling overwhelming emotions. The exercise also demonstrates, she adds, "that the girls have the answers inside themselves".

The girls meet monthly for three-hour sessions — "to get to know what monthly feels like", McCabe says — and discuss "all the things you need to know as a girl going into womanhood". Some of it is practical, she explains: "What do you do with the blood from periods? What happens on a first date? What to do if you're crushing on someone? It's all age-appropriate." Far more important, though, she says, is helping them learn to cope with those big feelings, which spike in the teen years. If we don't, they can "self-initiate", adopting "adult" behaviours such as drinking, taking drugs, having sex — or changing "the way they dress or speak", as they desperately try to prove they are no longer a child. "That's when it can all go very wrong."

Perhaps more concerning is girls' propensity to internalise their worries: a government-funded study in 2017 found that 24 per cent of 14-year-old girls (compared with 9 per cent of boys) have symptoms of depression, including feeling miserable, tired and lonely, and hating themselves. Meanwhile, in 2018, a survey of 11,000 14-year-olds carried out by University College London was analysed by the Children's Society, which found one in four of the girls had self-harmed in that year (compared with one in ten boys).

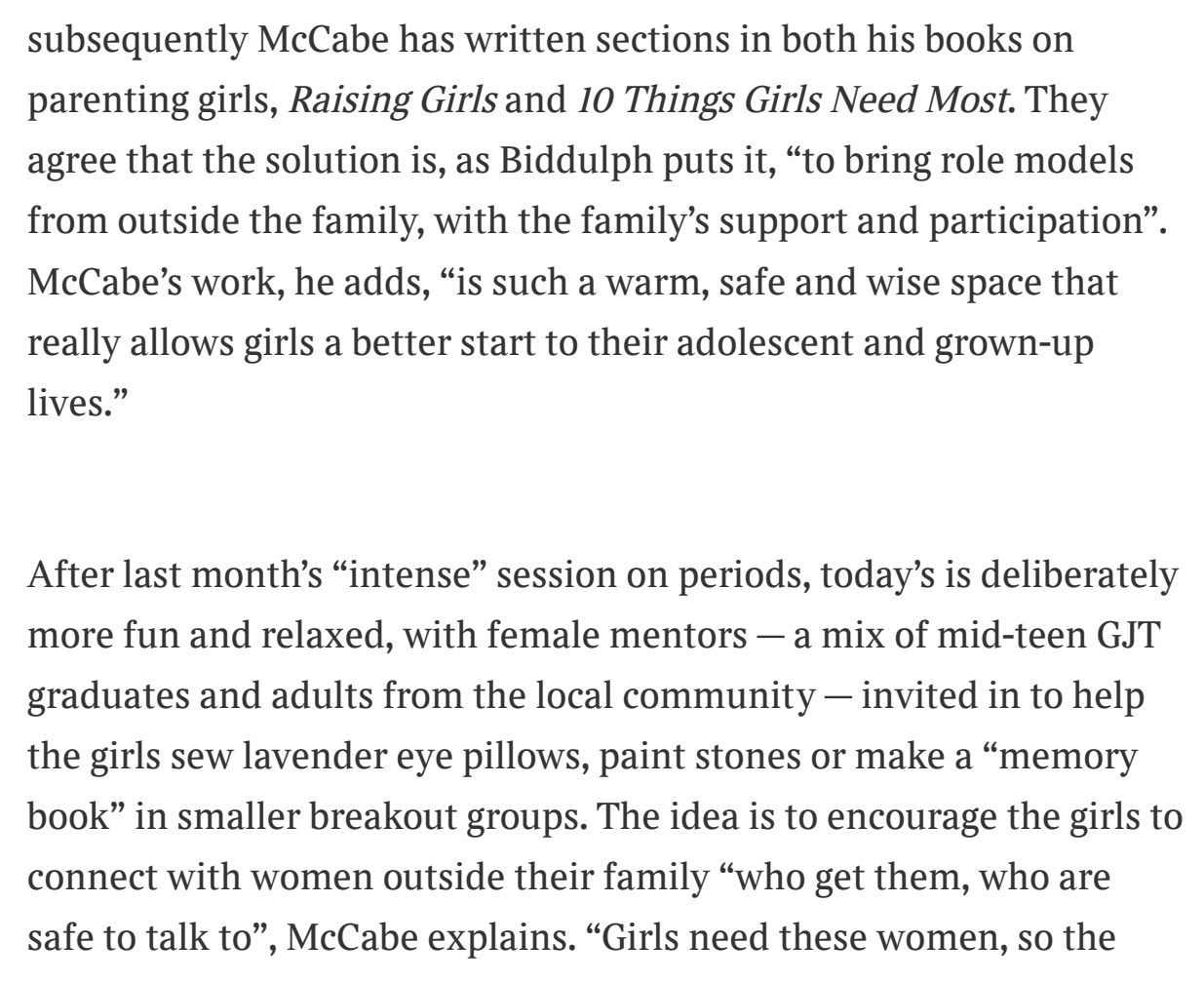
Matters only worsened when Covid took hold. "The coping mechanisms you usually see in mid-teen girls — self-harming, eating disorders, panic attacks, school-refusing — started showing up in 10 and 11-year-old girls," McCabe says. "We'd never seen it like this before." Last September the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported a record number of children being referred to mental health services — almost double pre-pandemic levels, with nearly 200,000 cases.



Kim McCabe
JADE TINKLER

What can parents do, though, when our voices come to sound like nails on a blackboard to our disaffected children? It's tempting, says Steve Biddulph, the Australian parenting guru and author of bestselling books such as *Raising Boys* and *Raising Girls*, "to leave teens to lurch along in a 'between' state", and then find ourselves wondering "why we have girls full of self-doubt or anxiety". Biddulph and McCabe first met two decades ago at one of his talks in Brighton, and subsequently McCabe has written sections in both his books on parenting girls, *Raising Girls* and *10 Things Girls Need Most*. They agree that the solution is, as Biddulph puts it, "to bring role models from outside the family, with the family's support and participation". McCabe's work, he adds, "is such a warm, safe and wise space that really allows girls a better start to their adolescent and grown-up lives."

After last month's "intense" session on periods, today's is deliberately more fun and relaxed, with female mentors — a mix of mid-teen GJT graduates and adults from the local community — invited in to help the girls sew lavender eye pillows, paint stones or make a "memory book" in smaller breakout groups. The idea is to encourage the girls to connect with women outside their family "who get them, who are safe to talk to", McCabe explains. "Girls need these women, so the incidental chatting is actually very important."



Using props to explain the female anatomy
LAURA PANNACK

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As the girls arrive, McCabe bends to greet each one at their eye level with a smile. The ground rules are stated, as with every session, that whatever happens in the room stays in the room, that no one is talked over, that everyone deserves respect. The girls are also reminded that none of them needs to change anything about herself to fit in: "Everyone belongs already," McCabe says. Throughout the session she invites everyone to share ("Anyone else feel that?") and every idea is welcomed as the girls are encouraged to test out their thoughts here.

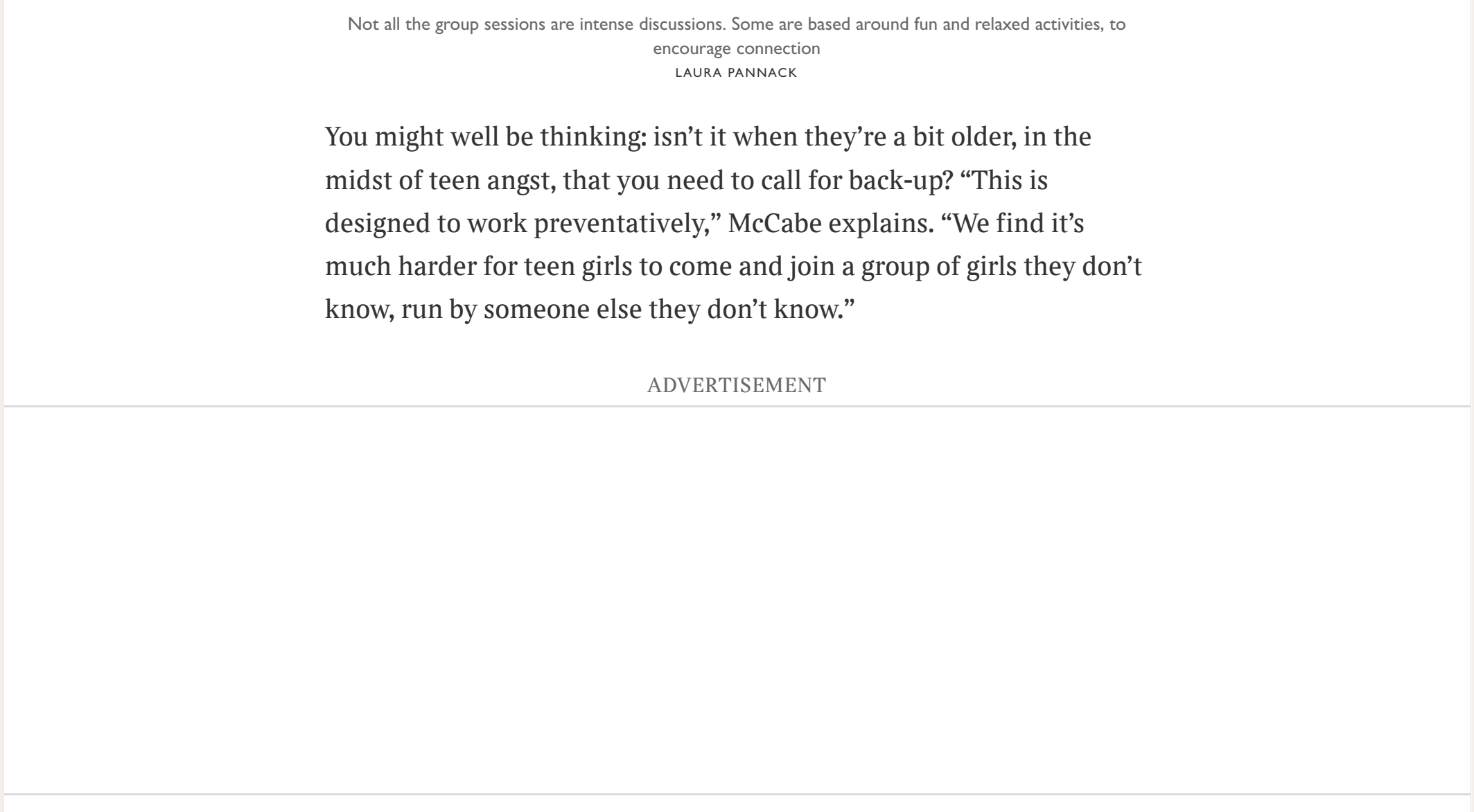
Meanwhile, the girls' mothers are in their own circle in another room, chatting about who they can turn to for support. (The focus is on the mothers and not fathers, McCabe explains, because the mothers have "a lived experience" of what their daughters go through in puberty. "It's a very important relationship to help to have in a healthy place.") Each month the mothers are given two or three questions to consider, variously on friendships, peer pressure, body image, managing moods or body image, which dovetail with what the girls discuss. "It reminds you what your daughter is going through," says one of the mothers, Sophie. "And it reconnects you with her — you're much more respectful."

The parallel conversations also help back at home, McCabe explains: "Even if the girl chooses not to discuss an issue, her mum will be more sensitive to passing comments." The mothers also form their own strong bond. "It's a bit like an NCT group for mums of teens," says another mum, Juliet. "When someone shares something, I'll often think, 'Oh my God, that's exactly how I feel.' "

It's especially useful given that the opportunity for mums to chat at the school gates is generally lost at this age to solo bus journeys. Even though the fathers are not directly involved, many of the girls I spoke to reported that GJT helped them communicate better with them. "I can talk to my dad about anything now," says Jemima, 14, who did the course two years ago.

Back in the main room, the girls chat, giggle and hug unselfconsciously — no one seems at all hesitant to ask "embarrassing" questions. And the girls say it themselves: those ground rules foster a very different kind of friendship. "Because you're not allowed to repeat what other people say outside the group, we feel really comfortable talking to each other," says Amber, 12. "And because you talk about quite personal things you get to know people on a deeper level."

It has taken half a year for the girls to reach this stage, McCabe says. Most are "dragged" to their first meeting by their mums, then it's up to the girls if they return. The drop-out rate after that taster session is about 20 per cent — for reasons including failing to click with the facilitator or the other girls, or rebelling against their mothers. But for those who do return, only 2 per cent drop out later. "I knew I wanted to come back almost straight away," says Annie, 16, who completed the course aged 12. "I really enjoyed it."



Not all the group sessions are intense discussions. Some are based around fun and relaxed activities, to encourage connection
LAURA PANNACK

You might well be thinking: isn't it when they're a bit older, in the midst of teen angst, that you need to call for back-up? "This is designed to work preventatively," McCabe explains. "We find it's much harder for teen girls to come and join a group of girls they don't know, run by someone else they don't know."

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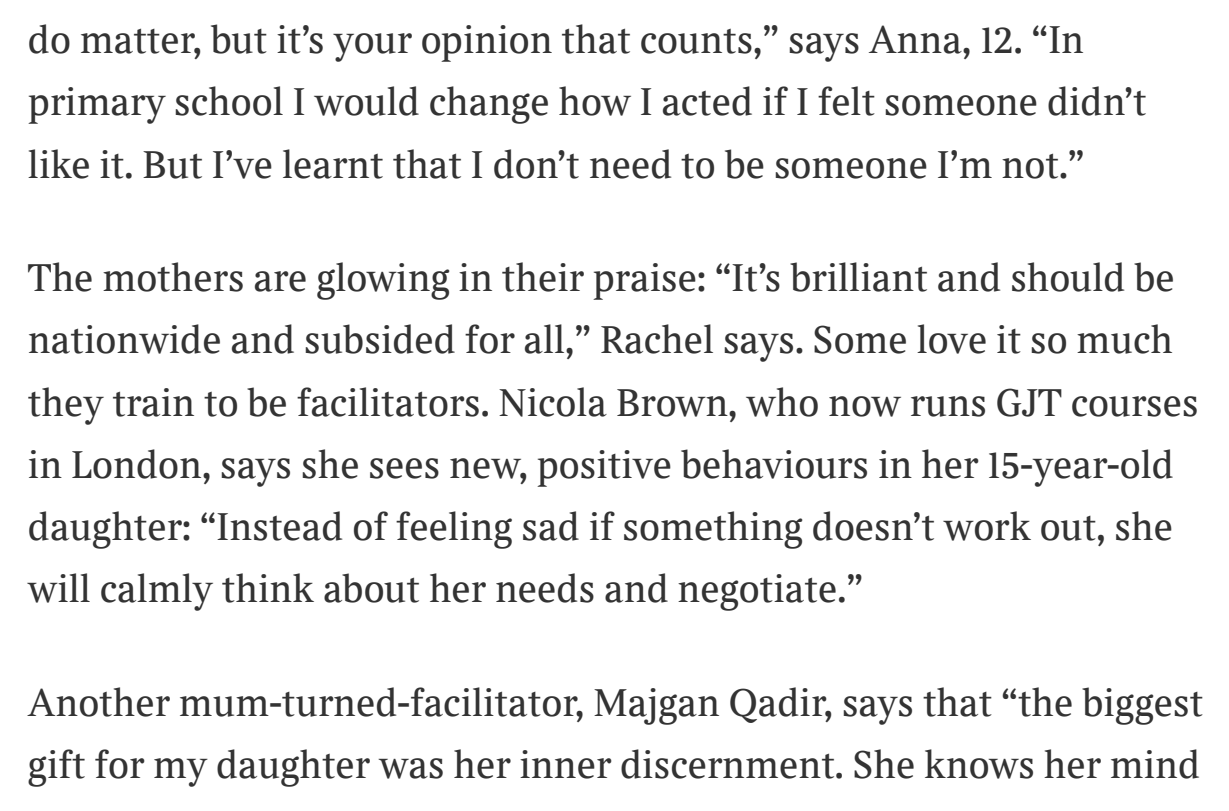
GJT leaves no pre-teen issue uncovered: the girls discover what they like about themselves, how to trust their instincts and speak up when something doesn't feel right, how to be a good friend, how to listen properly, how to reach out when they need support. If one-on-one counselling is needed, facilitators will suggest how they can get additional help. The course features many thoughtful touches. Birthdays are always celebrated, each child taking turns to highlight the birthday girl's strengths. And at the end they receive a memory book of the programme, which they're making, writing and photographing in this session.

So does it actually work? If the measure of success is how long a girl holds off from "self-initiating", there is anecdotal evidence that it does. "You realise you can be your own person," says Milly, 16, who also completed the course aged 12. While her friends are "drinking, vaping and doing everything else that happens around secondary school", Milly says she "genuinely" hasn't felt the need. "Sometimes they'll say, 'Come on!' but I know I don't need to do that to be close to them." If the measure of success is their willingness to discuss periods, it's a triumph. All my interviewees volunteer the topic — one girl, Husna, tells me the story of a girl who took her own life because she was so horrified when her period started.



Kim McCabe suggests girls keep essentials for their periods in a pencil case for school
LAURA PANNACK

They seem comfortable in their own skin, and have a confidence that feels authentic and grounded. "I learnt that other people's opinions do matter, but it's your opinion that counts," says Anna, 12. "In primary school I would change how I acted if I felt someone didn't like it. But I've learnt that I don't need to be someone I'm not."

The mothers are glowing in their praise: "It's brilliant and should be nationwide and subsidised for all," Rachel says. Some love it so much they train to be facilitators. Nicola Brown, who now runs GJT courses in London, says she sees new, positive behaviours in her 15-year-old daughter: "Instead of feeling sad if something doesn't work out, she will calmly think about her needs and negotiate."

Another mum-turned-facilitator, Majgan Qadir, says that "the biggest gift for my daughter was her inner discernment. She knows her mind now." Majgan benefited from the personal growth too: as an Afghan woman living in London she was "always trying to belong", but now feels she can let go of that. "The programme says, 'Everyone is different; don't change yourself to fit in.' For the first time I enjoyed being deeply me."

Training to be a facilitator takes two years part-time, including 27 residential days. "There's a lot of deep inner work," McCabe says. "You're not just reading scripts to the girls, you're a role model."

When the pandemic hit the facilitators realised families needed more. "There was lots of fear, anger and isolation, with many girls feeling despondent and disconnected from everyone and everything," Brown says. McCabe designed a three-week live online course for parents called Parenting Through Difficult Times (£289, or £89 for a prerecorded version), as well as Girls' Net, a live online course for girls aged 8-18 that runs for six weeks and costs about £75. They all operate under Rites for Girls. Since the online courses began seven months ago, more than 400 girls have taken part in Girls' Net, and more than 250 parents — mothers and fathers — have done the parenting course.

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For some these digital courses proved transformational. Before doing the Girls' Net course, Ella, 13, "really struggled not to answer back", according to her mother, Louise. "It became quite an issue."

The pandemic, Ella says, made her feel trapped and stressed: "I think I took my frustration out on my parents." But after each one-hour session, she'd feel "really calm and relaxed". "The woman explained that it's helpful to share how you feel, and the group work helped me not to react. It made me feel a lot better, and the [good] behaviour just came naturally."

For families whose daughters refuse to join in, even from their bedroom, the parenting course is especially useful. "After lockdown my daughter couldn't leave the house," Anna says. "She felt that everyone was looking at her. I'd tell her she was beautiful, and she'd just reply, 'Ugh, you're just saying that because you're my mum.' I was completely stuck." Through the course Anna learnt to avoid offering solutions and to look after herself better so that she had more resilience for parenting. "You learn how to support them instead."

Anna's daughter is far from unique — the true impact of lockdown on long-term mental health has yet to be gauged but it has caused a huge rise in so-called "ghost children" — kids who have dropped out of the school system. According to the Lost But Not Forgotten report published by the Centre for Social Justice last year, almost 100,000 children "have almost entirely disappeared from education since schools returned". Many of them will be in need of mental health services.

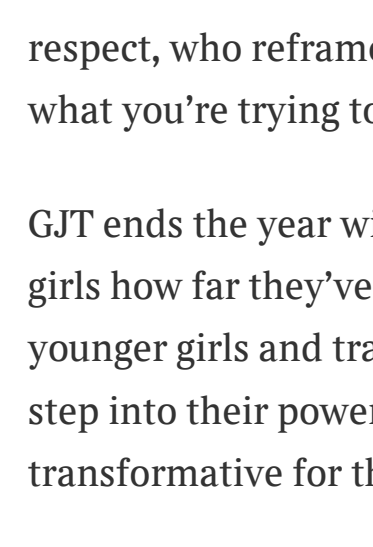
After at least four children took their own lives in the county last year, West Sussex county council offered full funding for 24 Girls' Net groups and 12 parenting groups — it is now looking at extending this — while McCabe secured lottery funding to run ten free parenting groups. Unlike GJT, which usually costs between £20 and £45 a month, these funded places have reached a different demographic (usually via school newsletters), including some families that might be less open about puberty. She makes no apology, however, for the fact that, currently, GJT groups predominantly feature white middle-class girls.

"Don't think for a moment that those girls aren't in need," she says. "With two full-time working parents, going from school to club to club, with less time for extended family, it's a different type of need."

McCabe started her first GJT group in 2011 with her "hands full with three young children" (two boys and a girl, now aged 16, 19 and 23). Although her own parenting experience was "not all plain sailing", McCabe says there were no significant issues, having been able to apply her learnings to the task. Her own youth, however, was plagued by "difficulties" including an eating disorder in her teens and a physically abusive boyfriend in her twenties. In her 2018 book, *From Daughter to Woman: Parenting Girls Safely Through Their Teens*, she writes: "I spent the best part of my twenties and into my thirties recovering from being a teenager."

After university McCabe trained as a counsellor, working at a free walk-in service in Cambridge for distressed 14 to 25-year-olds. "I remember thinking, 'This is wrong — how do we let our children get to this state where they are cutting themselves, starving themselves and having sex they don't want to have?' I made a promise to myself to try and find a way to work with girls before they got to this place."

Her goal now, she says, is to establish GJT groups in every town or city around the world: "Like Brownies or yoga, we want it to appeal to everyone."



Steve Biddulph, the author of Raising Girls
HARPER COLLINS

The science behind the programme is built on McCabe's decades-long research into rites of passage. She dismisses some coming-of-age tropes, such as the American-style high-school prom, where "it's all about what limo you arrive in" and playing at being adults. "Having sex, driving and drugs don't make you a grown-up." Instead, she points to some indigenous societies where, as well as parents playing a large role, the communities "take a cohort of same-sex children to be taught by the elders". This is the essence of the GJT groups. As Biddulph puts it, McCabe "brings the village back to girlhood at a time when it is biologically necessary".

Parents are also delighted by the opportunity to outsource: "There's only so much your daughter can hear from you," Juliet says. " Pick up your knickers, eat your greens ..." The other mums in her group have become like "substitute parents" to her daughters: "Someone they respect, who reframes it for them in the nicest way and underpins what you're trying to say."

GJT ends the year with a closing ceremony and McCabe shows the girls how far they've come by inviting them to return as mentors for younger girls and trainee facilitators. "It's an opportunity for them to step into their power and expertise," she says. "It's quite transformative for them."

Giving all this agency to children spells the end of "because I said so" parenting, McCabe says. It's a "collaborative work between child and parent. A parent's job is a series of age-appropriate letting-gos. You're slowly handing over responsibility, and they have to show they're trustworthy." What you don't want, she adds, is a child leaving home at 18 who doesn't know how to say "no", or "I don't like it", or "stop!"

At the end of the session the candle is extinguished and the chatting continues. I ask a few girls why they like it. "It's really relaxing," says Billie, ten. "You can get everything off your chest." Twelve-year-old Amber adds: "It should be [everybody's] right to learn about stuff this way." "Yeah," Billie agrees. "Like school ... but also not like school at all."

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Kim McCabe

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