

# Alabama Child Safety Conference on Tuesday

By Catherine Godbey  
Staff Writer

When Carla Stokes heard the middle school girls reciting lyrics to "Pimps," she knew the teenagers would not connect to the "Pet your dog, not your date" curriculum. Rather than regurgitating the lessons, the then-college freshman developed her own material, using popular songs to engage the students in conversations about dating violence and bullying.

Reaching the girls ignited a passion in Stokes, who spent the past 20 years devoted to the mission of helping females achieve their personal best and thrive during challenging times.

## WAYS TO HELP

"There are a lot of things educators and concerned adults can do to help make that period of adolescence easier. I want to be a part of that solution," the adolescent health researcher and life coach said.

During the Alabama Child Safety Conference on Tuesday, Stokes will share tips on how to empower and connect with girls.

A multi-agency community collaboration, the conference formed to prevent and respond to crimes against children and provide child safety education for teachers, law enforcement officers, mental health workers and interested adults, said Sue Brantley, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Morgan County.

The 12th annual conference will take place from 8 a.m.-4:15 p.m. at Decatur Baptist Church.

## ATMOSPHERE

Stokes will provide a keynote address on creating a positive atmosphere for girls and a workshop on using hip hop and popular culture to engage teenagers.

"A lot of times we shy away from the media teens are listening to because the messages can be offensive and

## ALABAMA CHILD SAFETY CONFERENCE

■ **When:** Tuesday, 8 a.m.-4:15 p.m., registration at 7:30 a.m.

■ **Where:** Decatur Baptist Church, 2527 Danville Road SW

■ **Cost:** \$40. Register online at [www.mhainmc.net](http://www.mhainmc.net).

off-putting for adults," Stokes said.

Rather than ignoring explicit songs and shows, adults can use the media as a catalyst to open up conversations.

"Talk about what they're listening to and share how you feel about it," Stokes said. "These conversations help them think critically about those messages and help them not just take at face value what they are hearing."

For Stokes, music not only represents a conversation tool, it serves as a means of empowerment.

In 2001, Stokes organized the non-profit group Helping Our Teen Girls In Real Life Situations Inc. (HOT-GIRLS). Participants go into studios and create songs with positive messages about issues important to them, including street harassment, healthy relationships and peer pressure.

## PERSONAL STORY

These are issues Stokes experienced firsthand. As a high school student, the now-mentor placed popularity above academics.

"I struggled with self-esteem and body image issues. I felt like a misfit," Stokes said. "I went through a period of underachieving. I had a high school teacher, who saw something special in me. She really took the time to help me realize my potential."

Like her trigonometry teacher did for her, Stokes hopes to help parents and teachers encourage and support girls.

"The societal messages girls receive tell them they have to look perfect, be perfect, act in a certain way and be sexually appealing," Stokes said. "I want to send adults home with concrete ideas about how they can help

girls make positive choices."

Stokes offered tips for parents and teachers:

■ **Monitor the media** teenagers are listening to and provide them with positive alternatives.

■ **Quit the fat talk.** "Be aware of what you're saying about your own body or another woman's body. There's too much fat talk. 'I look so fat in this.' Model self-care and positive self-esteem because the girls are listening," Stokes said.

■ **Just listen.** Make sure the teenagers have someone — a teacher, counselor, family member or pastor — they can talk with and not feel judged.

## OTHER SPEAKER

Along with Stokes, Beth Thomas will provide a keynote address. As a child, Thomas was the subject of the HBO documentary "Child of Rage." The neonatal intensive care nurse will talk about reactive attachment disorder and tools on how to make a difference with challenging children.

Other workshops:

■ **"Adaptive Mindset: Recognizing and Reducing Potential Risk Factors for Violence"** by Lee County Sheriff's Office Deputy Pamela Revels.

■ **"When the Unthinkable Happens"** by Dale County School System Superintendent Donald Bynum. In January 2010, Bynum led the school district during and after the shooting and killing of bus driver Charles Poland, Jr. and the subsequent taking hostage of Ethan, a six-year-old boy with autism.

■ **"Human Trafficking Investigation"** by FBI special agents Donald Cowart and Andrew Stark.

*Catherine Godbey can be reached at 256-340-2441 or [cgodbey@decaturdaily.com](mailto:cgodbey@decaturdaily.com). Follow on Twitter @DecaturLiving.*