

The Importance of Establishing Primary School Programs to form Positive Body Image

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Abstract

This paper examines the literature on body image at the primary school level and the need for specific programs to exist in order to perpetuate a positive body image in students. The reasons for the importance of programs which promote a positive body image are explored in depth. Potential benefits of a positive body image are discussed. Media influences and body dissatisfaction which may be developed in childhood being responsible for a wide array of mental illnesses in adolescence are touched upon. Moreover, specific programs which involved research studies are looked at on the primary school level with their correlations to positive body image. Lastly, future directions for research are explored intended to build on the importance and need for increased awareness at the primary level in educators and parents alike.

Keywords: Body image, body dissatisfaction, primary school, children

1. Introduction and Rationale

The messages we receive and internalize about ourselves in childhood set the stage for well-being as adults. Body image is an increasingly important issue of child well-being around the world. Most children spend the majority of their day (from September until June) in school. School culture and teachers form an integral part of learning and influence (Sylva, 1994, p 135).

Given these two facts, that well-being is an important part of childhood development and school culture forms a bulk of a child's influence, it is reasonable to deduce there is an importance for establishing specific Primary School programs to help form positive body image in children (Humberstone & Stan, 2011, p. 196; Norwood, 2011, p. 276). Another reason for the importance is the peer relationship dynamic in primary school. During primary school, for most children, relationships are important and can have an effect on how individual children view their own body (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005, p. 103).

This paper will examine the research and focus on why there is an importance to include body image programs in primary schools. Moreover, it will examine the importance of intervention at the age of primary school. Finally, there will be an examination of the types of programs that have occurred in developing this connection with positive body image.

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2. The Importance of Establishing Programs Which Target Body Image in School

It is important to include programs which target body image in children for four reasons: the life-long benefits of positive body image, reducing negative body image (or body dissatisfaction), supporting the resilience against negative messages among a media-laden culture, and preventing mental illness which may result from negative body image. Examples of mental illnesses that may arise can include depression, body dysmorphic disorders or eating disorders (Stice, Hayward, Cameron, Killen, & Taylor 2000, p. 438).

2.1 The Life-Long Benefits of Positive Body Image

Two of the life-long benefits of a positive body image are the reduction of social anxiety and the promotion of well-being. Another benefit is a greater success in interpersonal relationships which in turn affects cohesion in society. When speaking of social anxiety, promotion of well-being and then in-turn social cohesion, programs in primary schools are of utmost importance in encouraging all three of these topics. The reduction of social anxiety will in turn promote positive relationships which will aid in promotion of well-being in adults, children and society alike. The inter-relationships of these three points in school culture address the need for specific school programs to increase positive body image.

Primary schools should have a critical role in helping children to develop a healthy body image through positive intervention (Hutchinson and Calland, 2011, p. 17).

Some examples of situations which exist in schools and promote negative body image or body dissatisfaction are the Teasing factor: If teased about flaws in appearance (particularly size or weight) as a child, one's body image may have become permanently disturbed, the existence of reduced awareness in social inclusion (Di Santo & Wei, 2011, p. 19).

2.2 The Media Influences

Children need support in encouraging a positive body image despite the bombardment of media images and messages that exist. Today's media places a lot of stock in physical attractiveness and is not a good reflection of the diverse body types that exist in society. For a child to understand that all body types should be included and valued, an education system which adopts this same value should be examined. In Fiji, it was examined in 2002 that after a three year period after the introduction of TV (mainly US programs) 15 percent of teenage girls developed bulimia (Wykes & Gunter, 2005, p. 13-14). This information suggests that from the introduction of television alone girls were exposed to images and messages that affected their psyche. From a young age, children need to be introduced to critique the media, pull apart hidden messages and learn to love their own bodies by accepting and being exposed to various body types in a positive light. Children need to also recognize their own strengths and qualities to become resilient members in their own society (Hutchinson and Calland, 2011, p.138).

2.3 Addressing Prevention

The third point to address regarding the need for school programs is one of prevention in early childhood. To prevent a mental illness that can develop in adolescence from a negative body image or body dissatisfaction. Adolescents with negative body image concerns are more likely to be depressed, anxious, and suicidal than those without intense dissatisfaction over their appearance (Dyl, 2006). Therefore promoting positive body image in childhood and pre-adolescence may help to reduce these negative thoughts and feelings that may occur in adolescence.

3. The Significance of Primary School Age

For purpose of this paper, the age range of primary school is roughly five to eleven years of age (between grades one and six). A unique component of self-awareness emerges in the toddler age period (Brownwell, Zerwas and Ramani, 2007, p. 1426). One study involving American girls, as many as 65 percent of participants had formed ideas about dieting by age 5. Girls were especially likely to be in this group if their mothers said they had dieted recently themselves (Abramovitz & Birch 2000, p. 1157).

A Swedish study found that 25% of 7 year old girls had dieted to lose weight – they were already suffering from 'body-image distortion', estimating them selves to be larger than they really were (Oberg & Tornstam 1999, p. 629).

4. Specific Research Programs and Their Findings

The aim of one study in Canada was to evaluate the implementation of a school-based program that existed to increase self-esteem and body image in grade five and six students. Findings supported a new approach for improving body image (Norwood, 2011, p. 273). The same program was also effective in making participants significantly more aware but less accepting of the distorted and unrealistic body ideals perpetuated by the media.

Another program in the United States examined the connection with well-being and outdoor pedagogies (Humberstone and Stan, 2011, p. 173). The program took place at an outdoor education centre. Data was collected through interviews with parents and teachers of the 8 and 9 year olds who attended the program. The data suggests that the notions of healthy life-style and healthy eating were embedded in the primary school's curriculum and in teachers' teaching views and also parents are inspired with body discourses conveyed by the popular media.

A longitudinal study which occurred in 2013 involved a post-program assessment, six month follow up and a one year follow up. This study implemented a classroom-based Happy Being Me program in Australia with young adolescent girls who were showing some depressive symptoms. There was a control group who did not receive the program. The preliminary findings from this study showed that the Happy Being Me program is a valuable prevention intervention that achieved positive sustained outcomes at the one-year follow up in reducing risk factors for body dissatisfaction, depressive symptoms and improving psychological well-being/self-esteem (McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2013, p. 23).

Although this displays a program at the young adolescent level, it also shows the impact of such a program on girls who show a risk-factor and can be adapted and applied to a younger age group.

4.1 Correlations and Conclusion

All three of these research studies show that by weaving positive body image into a curriculum produces positive results for students as in some way they are affected positively. Students were either affected directly or through parents or educators. It is of high importance to establish programs to promote positive body image within children of primary school age. The World Health Organization has stated body image and eating disorders are priorities for global mental health among children and adolescents given the prevalence, increase, and severity of the disorders.

5. Future Considerations

Future directions of research should be aimed at: (1) continuing to understand the role and development of positive body image; (2) the global trend in body image among children and youth; (3) the mental health state of primary age children with regards to body image; (4) body image dissatisfaction with more detail among children such as dissatisfaction regarding colour, features, height, etc.; (5) more types of programs that will benefit children (6) more detail into the benefits of specific programs which will benefit primary school age children in younger grades (grades one through 3); (6) the details of specific strategies that can be used to benefit primary age children with regards to body image. The majority of programs with regards to body image that were found exist in the United States, Canada and Australia. Future consideration can be included to encompass programs on a world-wide scale. Such programs and research may be limited due to resources however they can benefit children and youth by preventing life-long mental illness and promote well being as stated earlier in this paper.

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