

Self-Esteem and its Impact on Young People in Primary-School in Ireland

EVERYBODY'S DIFFERENT



A Report for Schools, Parents & Pupils (2009)

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the 5th class students and their teachers for taking part in this research. Thank you also to the parents, principals and school administrative staff who facilitated this research. Your co-operation has provided valuable information that will answer many questions about the importance of self-esteem in this age group and about the value of self-esteem enhancing programmes.

Background to this study

The aim of this project is to implement and evaluate the school-based, self-esteem enhancing programme called Everybody's Different. Self-esteem refers to our overall feelings about ourselves. This programme was designed by Dr Jenny O'Dea and Professor Suzanne Abraham from the University of Sydney, both of whom have worked and carried out research in the area of body image and weight issues among young people. The programme activities that make up the nine weekly lessons promote themes of self-acceptance, respect, tolerance and reduced self-expectations of perfection. The aim of the programme is to improve body image and prevent disordered eating by enhancing general self-esteem. Disordered eating is a term used to describe unhealthy attitudes and behaviours to food. This can range from meal-skipping, dieting and bingeing to the extreme behaviours that characterize eating disorders like Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder.

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This study is the first to evaluate this programme in an Irish primary-school setting, so the input and support of teachers and young people here is invaluable. The research aims to take into account the views of teachers and young people regarding the suitability and effectiveness of the programme. We are interested in this topic because research suggests that self-esteem protects persons against depression, eating disorders, suicide, drug and alcohol use, risky behaviours and

teenage pregnancy. This research is particularly focused on the relationship between self-esteem and eating disorders. The bullet-points below briefly outline some of the existing research on eating disorders and explain why the focus of the current research is on eating disorder prevention and on self-esteem programmes in particular.

What we know about disordered eating

- Up to 200,000 people in Ireland have an eating disorder (Bodywhys, 2006). This number is higher if we take into account those engaged in unhealthy, but not necessarily extreme, weight-control behaviours, such as meal skipping, fasting, and smoking.
- Eating disorders lead to severe and potentially long-lasting physical and mental health consequences.
- Reports of dieting, fear of fatness, body image concerns and weight loss attempts, as well as cases of more serious eating disorders have been documented in children as young as seven years old (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001).
- The early onset of disordered eating and the difficulty in treating eating disorders provide clear justification for increased attention to developing effective primary prevention measures.

Preventing disordered eating

- The goals of prevention programmes are to decrease the risk factors that lead to, and increase the factors that protect against an individual experiencing body dissatisfaction, unhealthy weight control behaviours, and disordered eating symptoms (Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues, 2006).
- In recent years there has been a move towards understanding factors that build resilience and protect youth from risk behaviours in general.
- One such protective factor is self-esteem. Self-esteem enhancement offers a promising approach to disordered eating prevention.



Study Design

In total, eight schools took part in this stage of the research. These were divided into two groups. Half of the schools took part in the Everybody's Different programme and half of the schools took part in their normal Social Personal and Health Education Classes. Only the pupils that had the consent of their parent/guardian and agreed themselves to take part were asked to complete the questionnaire. Other pupils were allowed to read or draw during this time.

I visited all the classes twice and asked everyone who had agreed to take part in the research to fill out a questionnaire. The young people filled out the same questionnaire on both occasions. This allowed us to explore if there was a difference between the young people's questionnaire scores before and after taking part in the programme and if there was a difference between the scores of the young people who took part in the programme and those who did not. This was important in helping us to determine if the programme was having an influence.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire pack was used and included questions on a number of areas relating to the programme. The areas are described in Table 1 below. Young people were not asked to write their names on the questionnaires. Instead they were assigned an ID number and it was explained to them that their answers were confidential and would only be seen by the research team. The young people were also told that they could leave any question blank if they did not want to answer it and that they could decide not to take part in the study at any time.

Table 1: Sample questions

	Number of Questions	Sample Items
Self-esteem	10	'At times I think I am no good at all'. 'I feel that I have a number of good qualities'.
Body image	11	'Most of the time I am happy with the way I look'. 'In the past year I have been very worried about my health'.
Physical Appearance	5	'Please rate how you think you look'. 'Please rate how you think other people think you look'.
Eating Attitudes	26	'I think about food a lot of the time'. 'I feel uncomfortable after eating sweets'.
Attitudes to overweight in others	22	Young people rate a number of figures with different physical attributes in order of preference. They then answer questions about overweight male and female figures including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">'Does this boy/girl have control over the way he/she appears?''How much would you yourself like to be like this boy/girl?'

What We Learned

- Firstly we examined the scores of the young people at Time 1 (before the programme or SPHE started) and Time 2 (after the programme or SPHE ended) and found that the average scores for areas of the questionnaire improved across time.
- This suggests that the whole group were showing improvements in self-esteem, body image, eating attitudes and attitudes to being overweight at Time 2.
- However, when we compared the average scores for the young people who took part in the programme (the intervention group) and those who had normal SPHE classes (the control group) we did not see any immediate difference in the scores.
- While this could mean that there is no difference between normal SPHE classes and the Everybody's Different classes, it could also mean that the programme has not had time to have a definite effect. This is not unusual with these types of programmes.
- Further investigation is needed to determine if children who take part in a self-esteem enhancing programme like Everybody's Different are less likely to have negative body image, disordered attitudes to eating and negative attitudes to overweight.

What Happens Next

Stage 2 of the research will take place in the 09/10 school year. This study will continue to address the self-esteem approach in primary schools and will address some of the challenges that arose in the first study. For example, this study will explore longer-term effects of the programme by collecting more information 3 and 6 months after the programme has finished. In addition, Study 2 will explore teacher's attitudes to the programmes and the importance of including 'booster' sessions.

Finally, Thanks to You

Since completing Stage 1 of the project, the research project has been recognized and rewarded in two important ways. Firstly, the project is now funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences and secondly, the research was selected to be presented at a number of international conferences. Without the support and co-operation of schools, teachers and students these opportunities would not exist.



Find Out More

For more information on disordered eating contact Bodywhys

- Locall helpline: 1890 200 444
- Website: www.bodywhys.ie

For more information on the Everybody's Different programme see:

- O'Dea, J. (2007) Everybody's Different: A positive approach to teaching about health, puberty, body image, nutrition, self-esteem and obesity prevention. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Available for purchase at <http://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/product/A1060BK>

For more information on self-esteem in the classroom see:

- Lawrence, D. (2006) Enhancing self-esteem in the classroom. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Plummer, D. (2007) Self-esteem games for children. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Both available for purchase at www.amazon.co.uk

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