Does a group-based self-esteem enhancement program improve students' self-esteem as they transition into middle school?

Dalgas-Pelish, P. (2006). Effects of a self-esteem intervention program on school-age children. *Pediatric Nursing*, *8,* 341-349.

Self-esteem can be an important contributor to academic success, productive behavior, and mental and physical health in children (Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995). Research has shown that students often experience a decrease in self-esteem when they move from elementary to middle school (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). This study examines if participation in a self-esteem enhancement program can reduce or reverse that trend.

METHOD

Participants:
A total of 135 students took part in the enhancement program; 98 students completed the entire program. Participants were fifth and sixth grade students from six different elementary schools in the Midwest. The gender breakdown of students completing the study was 59 girls and 39 boys. The ethnic makeup of students was 66% Caucasian, 9% African American, 9% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 2% Native American, and 9% other.

Research Design:
Dalgas-Pelish (2006) used a pre/post-test design to investigate whether the Self-Esteem Enhancement Program (SEEP) intervention can improve students' self-esteem. The treatment group for this study completed Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) (1981), participated in four lessons related to self-esteem, and then completed another SEI at the end of the fourth lesson. There was no control group for this study. Pre- and post-test scores from the SEI were compared and analyzed for variance. Dalgas-Pelish also gathered data on pre-existing variables that have been found to be linked to self-esteem in children, which included gender, ethnicity, physical size (i.e., height and weight), home makeup (i.e., whether a child lived in a traditional two parent household or a non-traditional household), involvement in extra-curricular activities, socioeconomic status, whether the student had assigned household chores, and friendships (i.e., whether the student had many friends and also if a student had a best friend). This data was collected through a demographic instrument that parents of participating students completed. The relationship between these pre-existing variables and pre-intervention self-esteem scores and change in self-esteem scores post-intervention were then examined.

Instruments:
Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory (1981) was used to measure students' self-esteem. The SEI form used in this study is for use in schools and includes 58 items. Fifty of these items correspond to self-esteem measurement; the remaining 8 items were constructed to determine if a participant is taking the measure seriously (the "Lie scale"). The SEI is a self-reporting instrument with a test-retest reliability of 0.88 and a high degree of internal consistency. Scores in the categories of *general*, *social*, *home*, *school* and *total self-esteem* were used as the dependent measures.

Information regarding pre-existing variables was collected via a parent report survey which asked questions about the home environment and the child. This survey was developed by the study author and had not been previously evaluated. The research article does not indicate whether a survey was completed and collected for each participant.

Interventions:

Nurse researchers (the study author and graduate students) facilitated four interactive classroom lessons; each lesson was 40-60 minutes long and the lessons were spaced three to four weeks apart. The content of the four lessons was (1) overview of self-esteem, (2) the influence of the media on self-esteem, (3) hiding behind emotions, and (4) self-ability to raise self-esteem. The overall goal of the program was to help children become aware of what influences self-esteem and ways they can improve it. The curriculum was adapted from a previously existing set of materials by Zevin and McPherson (1989). Lessons were administered during the school day in groups of about 25 students. There was no effort to create demographically diverse groups.

RESULTS

A one-tailed dependent t-test for pre-test and post-test scores showed a significant positive change in the subscales of *general* ($p = .021$) and *social* ($p = .016$) self-esteem. Comparisons of scores by pre-existing variables using ANOVA's and t-tests revealed that the intervention had the strongest impact for girls ($p = .049$), students with lower socioeconomic status ($p = .007$), and students who already had friends ($p = .000$). The intervention showed no significant change for boys on any of the SEI subscales or the total score.

Implications:

Results from this study indicate that girls, students of low socioeconomic status, and those with friends benefit most from this group-based, self-esteem enhancement intervention. However, since post-test scores were collected immediately following the fourth lesson of the intervention, it is unknown whether these positive changes were lasting. The pre-intervention SEI scores contradict previous research that identifies boys in this age range as having higher self-esteem than same-aged girls. Girls were found to have higher scores than boys at all times of the study and their scores increased on all domains from pre-test to post-test.

The results of this enhancement program are encouraging. They indicate that incorporating group-based, self-esteem curriculum in schools may be an effective method of helping many students improve their self-esteem. However, further research is needed to address the design limitations, internal and external validity issues, and to evaluate the lasting impact of the program.

COMMENTARY

Self-esteem is an important aspect of the academic, social and emotional development of children. This research suggests that offering self-esteem enhancement programs before transitional periods in school (i.e., elementary to middle school or middle school to high school) may help some children to develop and/or retain a positive, healthy self-image. The benefits appear to be particularly encouraging among girls and students of low socioeconomic status. A group-based intervention with standardized lessons can easily be incorporated into established curricula or adapted to fit the needs of a particular school, youth organization, or community program. For the purposes of this study, the intervention was delivered by nurses in elementary school classrooms, however the lessons could also be taught by teachers, tutors, counselors, youth leaders or parents in a variety of settings in which children feel comfortable reflecting on their feelings and attitudes about themselves.

Although the results of this study are encouraging, weaknesses in research design threaten the validity of the findings. The lack of a control group does not allow for comparison with peers who did not receive the intervention. A true or quasi-experimental design with larger treatment and control groups could strengthen the design and improve the validity of the findings. There is a good sample size of 98 students, but when the data was broken down by pre-existing variables and by sub-categories sometimes the numbers were too small to effectively analyze. A larger study with a more diversified population of participants would also improve the external validity of these results. The pre-existing variables could be expanded to include students with physical disabilities, ESL, or learning disabilities. It may be useful to expand the number of

lessons in this intervention to incorporate more information and strategies about enhancing one's self-esteem, as three out of the four lessons do not focus on enhancement.

Because data on the home environment and the child were only collected from parents, researchers were not able to check for bias by comparing results with children's perception of themselves and their environment. Collecting surveys from both parents and student participants would help eliminate inconsistencies, improve the validity of the data and provide a more thorough picture of how students see themselves. Additional research could include a follow up SEI administered months after the intervention to track long-term changes in student behavior and perception.

Children with high self-esteem often show increased school performance, improved health, and more productive behaviors; on the other hand, low-self esteem in children has been linked to poor academic achievement, depression, smoking and other deleterious social behaviors. The positive findings of the Dalgas-Pelish study demonstrate that teaching children about self-esteem can improve the way they view themselves which in turn may help them to make better choices, achieve more, and be better equipped to face life's challenges. Schools and educators are in a unique position to be able to teach children strategies to raise self-esteem, provide guidance and follow up activities, and monitor the impact of self-esteem enhancement education over time.

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The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory is available at http://www.mindgarden.com/products/cseis.htm