

A Qualitative Investigation of Preteen Girls' Experiences in a Mindfulness-Based Eating Disorder Prevention Program

Samantha Klassen-Bolding

To cite this article: Samantha Klassen-Bolding (2018) A Qualitative Investigation of Preteen Girls' Experiences in a Mindfulness-Based Eating Disorder Prevention Program, Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation, 9:1, 42-54, DOI: [10.1080/21501378.2018.1424533](https://doi.org/10.1080/21501378.2018.1424533)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21501378.2018.1424533>



Published online: 02 Feb 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 687



View related articles [↗](#)




View Crossmark data [↗](#)

OUTCOME-BASED PROGRAM EVALUATION



A Qualitative Investigation of Preteen Girls' Experiences in a Mindfulness-Based Eating Disorder Prevention Program

Samantha Klassen-Bolding 

University of Texas of the Permian Basin, Odessa, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Concerns with body image and disordered eating behaviors are pervasive in today's society, with recent cohorts of preteen girls experiencing an increased risk of developing an eating disorder. This article describes a phenomenological qualitative investigation into girls' experiences with a mindfulness-based eating disorder prevention program called Free to Be. Results indicated that participants perceived the program to be enjoyable, engaging, supportive, and influential in developing healthier relationships with their bodies, food, and exercise, and that they viewed mindfulness as beneficial for regulating emotions and supporting future development. Implications for counselors and recommendations for future research are provided.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 August 2017

Accepted 3 January 2018

KEYWORDS

Disordered eating;
mindfulness;
phenomenology;
preadolescence; prevention;
qualitative research

Approximately 20 million women and 10 million men in the United States will experience a clinically significant disturbance in eating during their lifetimes (National Eating Disorder Association, 2011). Eating disorders (EDs) are costly to individuals, families, and society, and many who are diagnosed never make a full recovery (Loth, Neumark-Sztainer, & Croll, 2009). Puberty has frequently been discussed as a risk factor for the development of disordered eating in girls, with some pubertal girls experiencing intense body dissatisfaction and decreases in self-esteem related to rapid changes in appearance and shape (Esnaola, Rodriguez, & Goni, 2010; Galvao et al., 2014). Klump (2013) postulated that girls who experience early puberty are at increased risk of developing disordered eating behaviors to compensate for bodily changes that many of their peers are not yet experiencing. Because of the high societal cost of EDs, the vulnerability associated with preadolescence, and earlier pubertal development in 21st-century girls, it is valuable to consider widespread ED prevention programs for preteens. Moreover, because wellness-based practices such as mindfulness and yoga have led to successful treatment outcomes for individuals diagnosed with EDs, it makes sense to incorporate these practices into ED prevention programs for preteens (Klein & Cook-Cottone, 2013).

Although there are numerous studies discussing the treatment of EDs in preadolescent and adolescent girls, relatively few describe prevention programs purported to build self-esteem and foster acceptance of one's body as it currently exists. A handful of studies have

CONTACT Samantha Klassen-Bolding  klassen_s@utpb.edu  College of Education, University of Texas of the Permian Basin, 4901 E. University, Odessa, TX 79762, USA.

© 2018 Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling (AARC)

examined the efficacy of mindfulness meditation and mindfulness-based intuitive eating programs for binge eating, emotional eating, and weight loss, but the extant literature has limited relevance to preadolescent girls, as the target populations studied were adult men and women with clinically significant ED symptoms (Atkinson & Wade, 2016; Bush, Rossy, Mintz, & Schopp, 2014; Katterman, Kleinman, Hood, Nackers, & Corsica, 2014). ED prevention programs focused on media literacy have helped young men and women increase acceptance of self and others (Gonzalez, Penelo, Gutierrez, & Raich, 2011). These programs are referred to as dissonance-based prevention efforts and focus on helping individuals become aware of societal messages associated with weight, shape, and appearance, with the goal of helping them critically evaluate messages and reject the thin ideal. Existing studies describing adolescent experiences with ED prevention programs have focused on developing media literacy and critical thinking skills to evaluate messages sent by the media (Gonzalez et al., 2012).

To date, research concerning the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions versus dissonance-based interventions for reducing disordered eating symptoms in adolescents is very limited. Although both types of interventions have been found to successfully reduce disordered eating symptoms, a scarcity of research related to the potential efficacy of combining these approaches to form a holistic ED prevention program exists (Atkinson & Wade, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of preteen girls who participated in a group mindfulness-based intervention focused on developing healthier attitudes toward their bodies, food, and exercise after learning about the thin ideal and societal expectations around weight and shape.

This study addressed three qualitative research questions:

1. How do preadolescent girls perceive their bodies, food, and exercise while engaged in a mindfulness-based ED prevention program?
2. How do girls describe the process of participating in mindfulness-based activities?
3. What changes, if any, do girls experience in their relationships with their bodies, food, and exercise after participating in mindfulness exercises?

Method

This study used Moustakas's (1994) approach to qualitative phenomenological research to understand the lived experiences of preadolescent girls with practices such as mindful breathing, eating, and exercise in the context of ED prevention.

Participant Characteristics

Twelve girls completed a group-based administration of the Free to Be program; eight girls (67%) returned consent and assent forms to participate in evaluation activities. All participants were enrolled in sixth grade at a university-based elementary school in south Texas and self-reported racial and ethnic identities as multiracial (six; 75%) and White (two; 25%), with six participants (75%) identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latina. The mean age of participants was 11.5 years of age. Each of the evaluation participants chose a pseudonym

before the program began, identifying themselves as Penelope, Miss Rose, Mrs. Awesome, That Random Person, Totoro, Uma, Savage Soccer Gurl, and Fifi.

Setting and Context of the Study

This study was conducted at an elementary school in south Texas located on a university campus operated by the local independent school district. The campus presented the entire curriculum via dual-language instruction, with half of the instructional time in English and half in Spanish. Students were admitted to the school by application and selected to represent the region's socioeconomic and language demographics. Sessions were conducted in a large group meeting room on the school's campus and held on Thursday afternoons from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. during the girls' weekly guidance period to avoid disrupting instruction time. The room was equipped with a computer and large projector screen, and I projected PowerPoint slides with session content to help guide and structure the conversations.

Program Description

Free to Be (Klassen, 2017) is a psychoeducational and experiential program that encompasses five 50-min sessions. The first session started by educating participants about the influence of the media on society's perceptions of an ideal body shape and size for women. Sessions 2 and 3 taught participants how to identify feelings, manage strong negative emotions using mindful breathing, and increase mind-body awareness by engaging in noncompetitive exercises such as mindful walking. In Session 4, participants learned about nutrition, healthy eating, and moderation, and participated in a mindful eating exercise to learn how to savor and appreciate foods using their five senses. The fifth session was a photo elicitation group wherein the girls brought six to eight images that somehow reflected their experiences with different aspects of the program.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews, journaling, and photo elicitation activities were used to gain an understanding of participants' experiences. Journals were completed at the end of each session using prompts to guide reflection. The photo elicitation activity was completed during the final group session, and individual interviews were conducted at the conclusion of the program using a semistructured interview guide. Both the photo elicitation group and the individual interviews were audiotaped with participant and parent consent. Statements made by participants who did not provide consent and assent were redacted from the photo elicitation transcript and excluded from data analysis, as were journal entries from nonconsenting participants.

Photo elicitation was incorporated to allow the girls to tell a story about their participation in the program, their understanding of their bodies, and the process of learning about and using mindfulness using images. During the photo elicitation group, participants were encouraged to reflect on the process of being in the program using images they chose, creating a dialogue about body image, weight, appearance, exercise, food, and mindful practice. This group provided the opportunity to notice patterns and assist each participant in exploring the meaning associated with her images, emphasizing and encouraging open, honest, and reflexive communication (Shea, Poudrier, Chad, & Atchevnum, 2011).

The process of data analysis was ongoing, as I reviewed information from each journal entry after each session using open, line-by-line coding to identify units of meaning. The identified units of meaning were clustered into common categories or themes, and overlapping or repetitive information was removed. The same coding and organizational strategy was used after recording and transcribing the individual interviews and photo elicitation group to create a textural description of the girls' experience throughout the program (Moustakas, 1994).

Lens of the Researcher

Personal and professional experiences contributed to the ways in which I think about the concepts of disordered eating, body image, and mindfulness. Personal experiences with disordered eating in adolescence led to my interest in treating and preventing EDs and in working with young people. As a clinician who has worked with girls throughout childhood and adolescence, I am aware of the impact that concerns with body image and self-esteem can have on their social and emotional adjustment. Both within and outside the context of disordered eating, I have used mindfulness as a strategy for helping young people develop a kinder way of responding to themselves and others. These experiences were both a strength and something I had to keep bracketed throughout the study.

Trustworthiness

Prolonged and persistent engagement, data triangulation, and communalization were used as strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of the data and the researcher. Prolonged and persistent engagement necessitated treating each aspect of the data as equally important and repeatedly reviewing the original data to ensure nothing was missed. Data triangulation was achieved via use of multiple sources of data, including journals, individual interviews, and the photo elicitation group, thus providing a richer, thicker description of each participant's experience throughout the program. Communalization was accomplished by exploring the participants' perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about body image, mindfulness, eating, and exercise using the multiple data sources described earlier. Throughout data analysis, I kept a research journal and consulted with a peer reviewer to assist with bracketing my experiences.

Results

Data analysis revealed seven overarching themes: body talk; food, exercise, and healthy choices; societal expectations; mindfulness; being in the group; changes experienced as a result of group participation; and what I learned and want others to know. Several themes had one or more subthemes, discussed next.

Body Talk

The participants talked about their bodies over the course of the program and this theme included data related to mixed to negative body talk, positive body talk, and body ownership.

Mixed to negative body talk. Toward the beginning of the group, most participants described themselves as having negative or “mixed emotions” when it came to their bodies. Participants expressed confusion about their bodies, noting that they were “not sure how [they felt],” were “insecure,” or “not completely confident.” Mrs. Awesome vacillated between “feeling good no matter what people say” and feeling “trapped inside this body that has lots of stuff I don’t like.” Uma believed her body was “ugly sometimes,” but hesitated to talk about these negative perceptions, noting, “I feel bad when I talk about myself in a negative way.”

Positive body talk. As the group continued, most of the participants began to describe their bodies using more positive language, often using the word confident in later journal entries, during the photo elicitation group, and during their individual interviews. During her final entry, Mrs. Awesome noted that her body was “good in every single way,” which appeared to be a noteworthy change from the feelings of being “trapped” that she described during her first journal entry. Uma later described her body as being “alright” and “the way I want it to be.” Penelope’s perceptions about her body were mostly positive throughout the program; she noted that she loved her body and “[didn’t] want to ruin it,” as she was “the only me in this world, so I need to show everybody what I am.”

Body ownership. Regardless of whether they discussed their bodies in positive or negative terms, many participants described experiencing a sense of independence and ownership over their bodies. For example, That Random Person described her body as being “mine ... I can decorate it my way because it’s my body ... no one can tell me different because I don’t care.” Penelope described her body as being “mine and no one else’s,” writing that “all the different lines and shapes of [her] body are unique.” She also recognized her ability to make choices about her body, noting that she needed “to make good choices about [her] decisions.” Totoro described her body as being “forever mine,” noting that “everybody’s unique and different.” Miss Rose indicated she achieved a sense of confidence by “getting things I like and doing things I like, not what someone else says.” Savage Soccer Gurl described her body as being “mine and I get to do whatever I want with it. Nobody else can control my body.”

Food, Exercise, and Healthy Choices

This theme reflected participants’ perceptions and revelations about eating and exercising as well as their awareness of food and exercise being components of living a healthy lifestyle. The participants talked about the reasons they ate and exercised, the importance of making healthy, balanced choices, and the struggles they sometimes experienced with this.

Reasons for eating and exercising. The girls talked about the process of making decisions about what, when, and why to eat and cited a variety of reasons for their decisions. For example, Penelope noted the functions eating serves (i.e., “getting way from life,” “staying alive,” “calming down,” and “staying focused”). The girls also talked about reasons for exercising and discussed a variety of functions exercise served in their lives. A few girls described exercise as being an integral part of their identities, with Savage Soccer Gurl noting that “exercise is life” and describing herself as “always doing something active,” and Penelope describing sports as a way to “get me out of my body and help me feel like myself” and find “relief.” Fifi wrote that “without exercise, I feel like my life would fall apart.”

Making healthy choices. The participants wrote about and discussed the process of maintaining balance and making healthy choices, including some of the difficulties they faced. Uma acknowledged that her experiences with eating varied, writing, “Eating is fun for me sometimes, but bad for me sometimes.” She also talked about the impact of others’ comments about her body on her eating habits, writing that “sometimes people will call me names (like maybe fat) and that makes me change my mind about eating healthy.” Similarly, Savage Soccer Gurl wrote, “I love eating but I can’t eat a lot or I’ll get fat,” and described eating as being “amazing when and if eating your fair share and enough for you.” Several participants, in discussing their decisions about food, talked about knowing the importance of eating well. For instance, Fifi acknowledged that she “crave(s) junk” but also noted that she train(s) herself “to eat healthy because growing up means making right decisions.” She also noticed a connection between healthy eating and other health-promoting behaviors, writing, “When I exercise, I want something healthy.”

In terms of making healthy choices related to exercise, data revealed much variability in the participants’ beliefs and the extent to which they incorporated physical activity into their lives. Totoro and Fifi discussed the importance of exercise in maintaining physical fitness and health, describing it as being “important for your body,” and a way to stay “healthy and in shape.” That Random Person and Miss Rose discussed the struggles they had with making the choice to exercise, lamenting its “boring” and “basic” nature and describing it as “challenging, difficult, and stressful.” Despite these mixed reactions, several girls described exercise as being more “inspiring,” “motivating,” and “enjoyable” when done with others.

Societal Expectations

This theme included participants’ feelings of insecurity due to social comparisons. Throughout the program, the girls discussed the thin ideal; the messages they received from the media regarding what girls and women are supposed to look like; the impact these societal messages had on the appearance-related conversations, norms, and expectations they perceived; and how they felt when confronted with these societal expectations.

Insecurity due to societal comparisons. Several of the girls discussed feelings of insecurity that arose as a result of social comparisons and perceiving themselves as not living up to expectations related to weight, shape, and appearance. Savage Soccer Gurl was especially aware of the impact of media on her beliefs about herself, writing, “A pic of a skinny girl can come on, and I’ll be like, ‘I wish I had that body.’” She also questioned her weight in relationship to her peers, writing, “I know a lot of girls who are so skinny, and then I look at me. Why can’t I be skinny?” Uma echoed these sentiments, writing that she didn’t “look like other girls that are pretty or skinny” and describing her body as “ugly to other people.” A few participants discussed how comparing themselves to other girls their age led to feelings of insecurity and frustration around puberty, with Totoro and Miss Rose noting that they experienced the impending changes to their bodies as frustrating and scary.

Examining girls and women in the media. This subtheme was related to the ways the participants perceived the media as communicating standards for weight, appearance, and shape. During the photo elicitation group, many girls brought images of young women who they believed were succumbing to societal pressures by dressing in minimal clothing, wearing what they deemed to be excessive makeup, and posing themselves in ways that made their bodies appear smaller. They noted that the women in these images were “trying to

show that [they] are really skinny,” “weren’t being true to [themselves] ... because [they] have a lot of make up on,” were trying to “cover it up and fix [their faces],” and did not like the “natural” parts of their bodies. However, several of the girls also selected pictures that they believed represented images of confident young women who were operating outside of societal expectations, such as women whose posture, athleticism, and unconventional choices in hairstyle and makeup application demonstrated their confidence.

Rejecting societal expectations. The participants talked about the process of rejecting societal expectations related to their weight and appearance and noted the importance of refraining from judging other girls and women, expressing a desire for others to experience a sense of freedom from societal expectations. Savage Soccer Gurl wrote about rejecting societal expectations related to weight, writing, “If someone tells me I’m fat, I’ll ignore the haters, take it as a compliment.” Mrs. Awesome noted that she perceived society as saying “girls are always supposed to be one way and not the other,” but that “none of us really look like that.” Penelope stated she realized “I don’t want to look like them. I just want to be myself.” Mrs. Awesome, who initially described herself as “a big girl who has big fat legs and a big stomach,” demonstrated a shift in thinking, saying, “I don’t care what other people say about my body,” and writing that “we should all respect each of ourselves and our bodies.”

Several participants discussed developing less judgmental attitudes toward other girls and women and their desire for others to experience a sense of freedom from societal pressures. Totoro noted that girls and women “don’t have to eat certain things to look, like, skinny.” Penelope said girls should “just be who [they] want to be” and “not care what other people think.” Miss Rose wrote that girls and women “should be free, not controlled by what [society] think(s),” noting that this realization also led her to understand that “I don’t care what other people think about my body.” That Random Person discussed the importance of “not judging people about how they look or what disease they have, or anything that’s going on,” and Fifi recommended “approaching things with kindness and peace.”

Mindfulness

The girls talked about what it was like to be mindful during the group exercises, within their journals, during their individual interviews, and during the photo elicitation group. Some participants discussed ways in which they remembered being mindful, whereas others listed benefits they had experienced from engaging in the exercises throughout the program and continuing to use the exercises in daily life.

Being mindful. The data provided information about the girls’ perceptions of the experience of being mindful, including the exercises they found especially enjoyable and those they had a difficult time completing. Totoro described being mindful as “just like, closing your eyes and breathing,” whereas Uma related being mindful to “thinking about the way we breathe.” Mrs. Awesome described the process of being mindful as “trying to calm ourselves” and “taking our time.” Miss Rose described being mindful as “actually thinking really close of what we’re doing and not thinking of other stuff,” whereas Fifi discussed mindfulness as being “more aware of your surroundings” and “enjoying what we have around us” by “focusing on one exact thing.”

Data regarding mindfulness exercises indicated that some participants enjoyed being mindful of their breathing and walking, describing these exercises as “peaceful” (Miss Rose), “really quiet” (Uma), and “nice and relaxing” (Mrs. Awesome). Uma found these exercises

particularly helpful because “it was just easy to concentrate,” and Penelope described them as “really calming.” All but two of the girls found the mindful eating exercise aversive because they found eating the raisin to be unpleasant.

Effects of mindfulness. Analysis of the data revealed information about how participants perceived the effect of mindfulness practice. A number of participants described how mindfulness positively affected their ability to **regulate their emotions and distress**. Fifi indicated mindfulness helped her to relax, and Totoro, Penelope, Mrs. Awesome, Miss Rose, and Savage Soccer Gurl discussed the benefits of mindful breathing in regulating their emotions and **“calming down.”** Four participants talked about an increased sense of awareness that resulted from being mindful, which extended to being “able to enjoy the food you’re eating,” “noticing what [their] feet were doing and what [their] muscles were doing to work all together to move [their bodies],” and recognizing that “life is actually better than [they] thought.”

Being in the Group

This theme reflects participants’ experiences with group participation. Several subthemes were identified that are encapsulated by this overarching theme, including novelty and enjoyment, openness, and togetherness.

Novelty and enjoyment. I began each individual interview by asking the girls what it was like for them to be in the program and, without fail, all eight girls immediately responded by saying, “It was fun.” That Random Person discussed having fun “answering the questions and doing the journal entries” and having the opportunity to “get up and move and try new things.” Totoro noted she enjoyed “talking about stuff that sometimes people don’t talk about,” and Miss Rose stated it was fun to “do a lot of new things and experience them.” Savage Soccer Gurl and Mrs. Awesome noted they enjoyed the program as it allowed them to have a new experience, as they had “never been in a group like this before” and it was “kind of different.”

Openness. Several participants discussed being able to be open in the group and described the benefits they experienced from talking about how they felt and what they thought. Mrs. Awesome noted that “letting everything out” helped her to increase her self-confidence, and Uma noted that “just getting it off about what I think” positively influenced her ability to talk about her body. That Random Person noted that she had become less judgmental of herself and others because “everyone was okay with sharing their feelings.” Savage Soccer Gurl noted she appreciated the ability to “talk about any problems we had” and “being able to express and open up,” and Miss Rose noted she believed the group members “were all sharing our feelings and being true” throughout the process.

Togetherness. The data reflected that being with peers helped the participants experience growth. Miss Rose and Uma noted that “all of us, we’re all friends,” and “we were all together” in the process. Fifi described the “encouragement” she got from her peers as helping to increase her self-confidence. That Random Person connected “getting to know one another better” with a reduction in her tendency to judge herself and others as “we did a lot of bonding,” which led to feeling “closer with [her] friends.” Mrs. Awesome and That Random Person discussed how “seeing everyone’s reactions” and “hearing their inputs on it and their opinions” helped broaden their perspectives. This sense of togetherness seemed to extend to me as the group facilitator, as the girls described enjoying being with me throughout this process.

Changes Experienced as a Result of Group Participation

Data revealed that the girls experienced changes as a result of group participation. These changes are represented by four subthemes: increased sense of confidence and capability, changes in relationship with body, changes in relationship with food, and changes in relationship with exercise.

Increased sense of confidence and capability. Data from all participants revealed that they felt more confident as a result of participating in the group. Fifi noted the group “helped [her] in so many ways” and “was exactly what [she] needed,” as she “wanted help at times but [she] just didn’t know how to ask.” Savage Soccer Gurl indicated she felt “more confident in [her] gender” and talked about the impact the group had on her sense of empowerment as a girl: “I’ve noticed how people are always, like underestimating girls and women and stuff like that. So, I’m like trying to prove to them that we can be just as good as boys.” Beyond experiencing an increase in confidence, two of the participants described feeling more capable in their lives as a whole. Fifi stated she doubted herself less and felt more confident about her future, and Penelope noted she now thought more about what she did daily.

Changes in relationship with body. The majority of girls experienced positive changes in their relationships with their bodies, including developing kinder attitudes toward themselves and feeling more confident about their appearance. For example, Fifi wrote in her final journal entry, “I’ve had doubts but now I know we are all different and that’s what makes us beautiful.” That Random Person stated she had “left behind a little bit of insecurity” and was “less judgmental” about her body now. Mrs. Awesome stated that the group “did make a big change,” as she was “more confident than how I used to be before.”

Uma noted that before the group, she “didn’t really like [her] body” and “what other people thought about my body, I really cared because it hurt feelings.” She noted she still experienced some insecurity about her body, but that her thoughts changed and she felt “different after talking about it.” Savage Soccer Gurl discussed similar feelings, stating, “I still weigh a lot, so I need to like, lose weight,” but that her desire to lose significant amounts of weight had reduced: “Back then I was like, ‘I have to lose like 10 pounds, or like 5 pounds.’ Right now, I’m just like, ‘One pound would be fine.’”

Changes in relationship with food. Several participants noted changes in their relationships with food, particularly as related to making healthier choices and engaging mindfully when they were eating. Savage Soccer Gurl described herself as being more mindful about the types of foods she chose, noting that she now paid attention to “the calories and all that stuff” when selecting what to eat. Fifi discussed how her decisions about food and her ability to “listen to her body” had changed. Totoro noticed herself taking more time to engage with her food, stating, “I take eating slowly now,” as did Miss Rose, who indicated the group “changed how I eat because now I actually pay attention.” Penelope noticed that she now “smelled food a lot more,” and Fifi described “savoring the food more” when eating.

Changes in relationship with exercise. A few participants indicated changes in their relationships with exercise, although the majority did not perceive any differences. Penelope stated she noticed herself paying “more attention to [her] body when moving.” Miss Rose believed that exercise was “boring and tiring” before the group, but noticed a shift in her

attitude, stating, “I think I should do more, because it’s good for your health and your body.” Mrs. Awesome noticed that she had started intentionally exercising more and also recognizing the informal exercise she got throughout the day. Finally, Mrs. Awesome discussed feeling more confident in her ability to exercise after discussing physical activity with her peers, stating, “If they can do it, I mean, why can’t I!”

What I Learned and Want Others to Know

This theme is characterized by learning, both in terms of knowledge the participants believed they had gained and knowledge they believed could be useful to share with others. Many of the girls talked about things they had learned throughout the program and how this knowledge might benefit them in the future, whereas others had specific information they wanted to share with younger children, their parents, and with me as the group facilitator.

What I learned. Data revealed the participants experienced learning throughout the program. For example, Penelope indicated the group “proved to [her] that [she] didn’t have to look like everybody else, because then [she] wouldn’t be unique.” Totoro noted that the group “taught [her] to relax and not take everything so seriously” and “not to let people judge you and just to be yourself.” Fifi stated that she “got to learn about [her body] and how to like it more.” Mrs. Awesome noted she learned “a lot about eating healthy,” and Uma stated she appreciated learning “to be mindful about how I eat.” Miss Rose discussed learning “about how we should be more mindful of what we’re doing,” and Mrs. Awesome described taking away strategies for “calming down when you’re really stressed.”

What I want younger kids to know. When asked what they might want younger kids to know that they had learned, the girls had a variety of ideas, ranging from thoughts about confidence, strategies for being healthier, how to use mindfulness to regulate their emotions, and encouragement to engage in activities that they found personally fulfilling. In relationship to increasing self-confidence, the participants wanted younger children to know to “just be yourself” (Penelope), “don’t let nobody judge you” (Totoro), “you’re fine the way you are” (Savage Soccer Gurl), “don’t let people bring you down” (Uma), “don’t care about what other people are doing” (Penelope), and “understand that it’s okay to be you” (Fifi). Savage Soccer Gurl had a particularly empowering message for younger girls: “A girl doesn’t have to be pretty, or skinny, or anything. You can be your own type of person.”

What I want my parents to know. Participants noted that they wanted to share what they had learned and the changes they had made throughout the program, as well as specific things they might want to teach their parents to improve their lives. Uma and Totoro wanted their parents to know about the positive impact of mindful eating, whereas Penelope, Fifi, and Savage Soccer Gurl talked about wanting their parents to know they had become more confident and self-assured. Miss Rose and Mrs. Awesome noted they wanted to teach their parents about mindfulness to help them “pay attention” and feel less “frustrated” in their daily lives.

What I want the group facilitator to know. The participants made recommendations for improving the group in the future. Six of the girls recommended modifying the mindful eating exercise to include a food other than raisins. Several participants noted they wanted more time to complete journal exercises, with four girls providing recommendations for modifying the group to include extended conversations about topics related to self-esteem, mindfulness, and exercise.

Discussion

The results of this study reflect the lived experiences of preteen girls participating in Free to Be. Based on the data gathered, units of meaning analyzed, and themes observed, the girls perceived the program as being enjoyable, engaging, supportive, and influential in developing healthier relationships with their bodies, food, and exercise. They also perceived mindfulness exercises as beneficial for regulating emotions and supporting future development. Monshat et al. (2013) found similar results when investigating how youth engage in and with mindfulness practice. These participants indicated that mindfulness practices taught them how to relax, gain control over their internal experiences, and develop insight about themselves and others that led to increased feelings of confidence and competence (Monshat et al., 2013).

School and community-based counselors who perceive a need for a disordered eating prevention program in their settings might find these results encouraging and view the program as a viable method for working with groups of young girls to support healthy body image and attitudes around food and exercise. This study used a younger group of participants than previous studies on ED prevention. The results were encouraging in terms of the girls' ability to make meaning of the topics discussed and apply them in a manner that led to increased self-confidence and improved relationships with their bodies, food, and exercise. Atkinson and Wade (2015) found similar results in their study applying general mindfulness techniques to foster self-compassion, noting that the high school girls who participated in the program displayed decreased concerns about their bodies, engaged in less caloric restriction, and were less susceptible to the thin ideal. These results might help counselors begin to understand how targeted ED prevention efforts can be useful for ages younger than previously considered.

These results might also have implications for prevention programs in general. For example, the participants in this study talked about the sense of community they developed along with the fun they had sharing with one another and completing the planned activities. This could be encouraging for those who intend to implement group prevention programs in their settings, as they suggest ways of making the experience more meaningful and enjoyable for those involved. Moreover, the results reflected that mindfulness exercises were useful in helping participants develop emotion regulation abilities in the context of targeted prevention efforts, similar to those previously found by Monshat et al. (2013), as just discussed. Practitioners running other prevention programs might want to consider incorporating mindfulness components to support participant outcomes.

The participants also provided recommendations for improving the program for future cohorts of girls, noting a desire to spend more time on journaling and to modify the mindful eating exercise to be more enjoyable. This feedback could be used to modify Free to Be and other prevention programs to adjust content delivery to improve participant engagement and support program goals. Overall, the Free to Be program could provide counselors with a mindfulness-based prevention program to address the needs of young girls with regard to improving attitudes toward weight, appearance, exercise, and eating through psychoeducation, discussion, and active mindful practice (Klassen, 2017).

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations associated with this study. The participants came from an intact classroom of sixth-grade girls, many of whom had attended school together for several years. The group might have functioned differently if the participants had been a randomly selected group of girls with no preexisting relationships. The school the participants attended was also different than other educational systems, as it was housed within a university, smaller than other schools, and considered sixth grade to be part of elementary school. Results might have been different with students who attended a larger educational institution or a junior high school.

Another limitation might be associated with the types of questions asked. Participants might not have talked about certain aspects of the program organically, and it could be that different kinds of questions would have yielded different responses or outcomes. Other limitations have to do with the structure of the program itself. Boys were intentionally excluded from the program to provide the girls with the opportunity to express themselves without the pressure of a mixed-gender environment potentially influencing their responses. Although girls are significantly more likely to experience disordered eating behaviors and to develop a clinically significant eating disturbance, boys also struggle with many of these same concerns. Results might have been much different if both boys and girls attended the program, or if boys were targeted rather than girls.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research relate to conducting additional qualitative research to understand the experiences of individuals who participate in ED prevention programs, understanding the impact of mindfulness on disordered eating, and exploring the efficacy of Free to Be. This information is valuable for understanding what it is like for participants to learn to relate to their bodies, food, and exercise in healthier, more adaptive ways; planning effective prevention and intervention efforts that honor participant perspectives; and empowering girls and women to tell their stories, which might reduce stigma and encourage others to seek needed treatment. The potential of these findings, when synthesized with other qualitative findings, could have far-reaching implications.

Additional research on the impact of mindfulness on the relationship with one's body, food, and exercise is needed to determine how and to what degree mindfulness interventions affect disordered eating behaviors. This research could help in planning how to use specific mindfulness exercises to affect positive change in the context of both ED treatment and prevention. Moreover, quantitative research assessing the program's impact on eating attitudes, body image, and mindfulness could provide important evidence about the program's ability to affect measurable change.

Research regarding the lived experiences of boys who participate in Free to Be and other ED prevention programs would also be valuable. Additionally, it could be valuable to conduct research using a mixed-gender environment, as having both genders participate in the program could potentially build empathy and understanding between peers as they become aware of the particular appearance-related pressures faced by both men and women in today's society.

Notes on Contributor

Dr. Samantha Klassen-Bolding is a professor of counseling at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin. Her research focuses on child and adolescent mental health, mindfulness, body image, and eating disorders.

ORCID

Samantha Klassen-Bolding  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4040-2245>

References

- Atkinson, M. J., & Wade, T. D. (2015). Mindfulness-based prevention for eating disorders: A school-based cluster randomized controlled study. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 48*, 1024–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22416>
- Atkinson, M. J., & Wade, T. D. (2016). Does mindfulness have potential in eating disorders prevention? A preliminary controlled trial with young adult women. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry, 10*, 234–245. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eip.12160>
- Bush, H. E., Rossy, L., Mintz, L. B., & Schopp, L. (2014). Eat for life: A work site feasibility study of a novel mindfulness-based intuitive eating intervention. *American Journal of Health Promotion, 28*, 381–388. <https://doi.org/10.4278/ajhp.120404-QUAN-186>
- Esnaola, I., Rodriguez, A., & Goni, A. (2010). Body dissatisfaction and perceived sociocultural pressures: Gender and age differences. *Salud Mental, 33*, 21–29.
- Galvao, T. F., Silva, M. T., Zimmermann, I. R., Souza, K. M., Martins, S. S., & Pereira, M. G. (2014). Pubertal timing in girls and depression: A systematic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 155*, 13–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2013.10.034>
- Gonzalez, M. L., Mora, M., Penelo, E., Goddard, E., Treasures, J., & Raich, R. M. (2012). Qualitative findings in a long-term eating disorder prevention programme follow-up with school-going girls. *Journal of Health Psychology, 18*, 587–598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105312437433>
- Gonzalez, M., Penelo, E., Gutierrez, T., & Raich, R. M. (2011). Disordered eating prevention programme in schools: A 30-month follow-up. *European Eating Disorders Review, 19*, 349–356. <https://doi.org/10.1002/erv.1102>
- Katterman, S. N., Kleinman, B. M., Hood, M. M., Nackers, L. M., & Corsica, J. A. (2014). Mindfulness meditation as an intervention for binge eating, emotional eating, and weight loss: A systematic review. *Eating Behaviors, 15*, 197–204. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2014.01.005>
- Klassen, S. (2017). Free to Be: Developing a mindfulness-based eating disorder prevention program for preteens. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling, 3*(2), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2017.1294918>
- Klein, J., & Cook-Cottone, C. (2013). The effects of yoga on eating disorder symptoms and correlates: A review. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy, 23*, 41–50.
- Klump, K. L. (2013). Puberty as a critical risk period for eating disorders: A review of human and animal studies. *Puberty and Adolescence, 64*, 399–410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yhbeh.2013.02.019>
- Loth, K. A., Neumark-Sztainer, D., & Croll, J. K. (2009). Informing family approaches to eating disorder prevention: Perspectives of those who have been there. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 42*, 146–152. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.20586>
- Monshat, K., Khong, B., Hassed, C., Vella-Brodrick, D., Norrish, J., & Burns, J. (2013). “A conscious control over life and my emotions”: Mindfulness practice and healthy young people. A qualitative study. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 52*, 572–577. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.09.008>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Eating Disorder Association. (2011). Get the facts on eating disorders. Retrieved from <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-facts-eating-disorders>
- Shea, J. M., Poudrier, J., Chad, K., & Atcheynum, R. J. (2011). Understanding the healthy body from the perspective of First Nations girls in the Battlefords Tribal Council Region: A photovoice project. *Native Studies Review, 1*, 27–57.