New Moves: a school-based obesity prevention program for adolescent girls

Obesity among adolescent girls is of particular concern given the strong effect of social norms surrounding females’ bodies. Studies have found that “overweight girls were at increased risk for engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviours and binge eating compared to their nonoverweight peers.” One possible explanation is that levels of physical activity seem to decrease during adolescence and girls tend to become more sedentary than boys. One of the possible reasons was that girls have commonly expressed discomfort in attending regular physical education classes in school. Consequently, this study aimed to “test the feasibility of an innovative school-based programme for obesity prevention among adolescent girls.”

The New Moves programme was developed as “an alternative physical education class for high school girls who were overweight or at risk for becoming overweight due to low levels of physical activity.” A key component of the programme was its attempt to develop a supportive environment in which girls would feel comfortable being physically active. The overall aim of New Moves was “to bring about positive changes in physical activity and eating behaviours for weight loss/maintenance; to help girls avoid unhealthy weight control behaviours, and to help girls function in a thin oriented society and feel good about themselves.” The programme evaluation included five key components:

1. Individual interviews with physical education teachers and principals from intervention schools regarding programme satisfaction and sustainability
2. Mailed surveys to parents of the intervention girls toward the end of the programme
3. Process evaluation surveys completed by intervention girls at the end of the programme
4. Individual in-depth interventions conducted with a sample of 30 intervention girls following programme completion
5. Baseline postintervention and 8-month follow-up from girls to assess programme impact on physical measures and a range of behavioural, personal and socioenvironmental variables

Overall, the participants and their families were very satisfied with the programme, and parents reported noticeable positive impact on their daughters’ habits and behaviours as a consequence of participating in New Moves. While “no differences in BMI between the intervention and control girls was observed,” girls were more likely to progress in their stage of physical activity if they participated in the New Moves programme. It therefore seems like “New Moves makes it more feasible for girls to discuss some of the barriers girls face to being physically active and to feel comfortable engaging in different activities.”