

Research and Practice Innovations

Evaluation of an Individualized Counseling Approach as Part of a Multicomponent School-Based Program to Prevent Weight-Related Problems among Adolescent Girls

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ABSTRACT

School-based interventions show inconsistent results in reducing weight-related problems. One limitation of school programs is that they do not easily allow for individualization of targeted messages. An important question regards the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing individual sessions within broader school-based programs. This article evaluates the feasibility and effectiveness of the individual counseling component of New Moves, a school-based program designed to prevent weight-related problems in adolescent girls, which was evaluated in a randomized controlled study. A total of 356 girls from six intervention and six control high schools in the St Paul/Minneapolis, MN, metropolitan area participated in the New Moves study in 2007-2009. This analysis includes the 182 girls from the intervention schools, all of whom were offered individual counseling as part of the program. The intervention girls had a mean age of 15.7 years (standard deviation 1.13) and were racially/ethnically diverse (73.1% non-white). During the individual sessions, which incorporated motivational interviewing strategies, girls set targeted behavioral goals aimed at preventing a spectrum of weight-related problems. More than 80% of the girls participated in five or more individual sessions. Girls chose goals for behavioral change based on individual needs. For example, girls with low levels of breakfast intake at baseline were most likely to set a goal to increase breakfast frequency. Satisfaction with the individual sessions was high, with 95%

of the girls reporting being satisfied or very satisfied with the sessions. The addition of an individual counseling component to school-based interventions is feasible and has the potential to enhance behavior change.

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Weight-related problems are common among adolescents (1-3). Although the prevalence of obesity is similar across the sexes, other types of weight-related problems, including inadequate physical activity, poor eating behaviors such as skipping breakfast, use of unhealthy weight control practices, and body dissatisfaction, are generally higher in girls than boys (1,4-6). Programs to prevent weight-related problems are needed for adolescents, with consideration given to developmental stage, sex, and cultural factors.

School-based programs provide an excellent venue for prevention programming because schools reach >95% of all US children (7). Schools also provide a structure into which health education can be incorporated easily (3,8). In spite of these seemingly favorable conditions, school-based interventions have shown inconsistent success regarding their effectiveness to reduce weight-related outcomes (9-13). One reason for this lack of success is that the classroom environment may not be conducive to discussing students' individual concerns and barriers to behavior change (14). For example, adolescent girls may not feel comfortable discussing personal and sensitive issues related to weight among their classmates. Another limitation is that a classroom style of delivery assumes that most students are similar in terms of their motivation and readiness to make behavioral changes, which is not always the case (15-17). In contrast, a one-on-one setting can provide a private environment in which to discuss sensitive topics and incorporate a counseling style that aims to help individuals explore their own behaviors and ultimately commit to change (18-20).

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, directive, individual-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change (15). Motivational interviewing has been shown to be effective in promoting physical activity and improving eating behaviors (21). This counseling approach provides useful tools to promote behavior change, including reflective listening, expressing acceptance and affirmation, and reinforcing the individual's own self-motivational statements. A school-based obesity-prevention intervention incorporating individualized motivational interviewing ses-

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sions has the potential to address some of the limitations of previous school-based efforts and help students overcome personal barriers to behavior change.

New Moves is a school-based intervention that was designed to prevent weight-related problems in adolescent girls (22,23). New Moves included both classroom components and individual counseling sessions that utilized motivational interviewing strategies. There is limited literature describing interventions that combine group and individual sessions and, to the authors' knowledge, none of these programs have been conducted in schools (23-25). The feasibility of implementing individual sessions from a small New Moves pilot study with adolescent girls ($n=20$) has been reported previously (26). These findings resulted in further development, refinement, and implementation of individualized counseling sessions into the New Moves randomized controlled school trial with more schools and a larger and more diverse study sample. The aims of this article are to provide a description of the individual sessions, which incorporated motivational interviewing strategies and were a component of the New Moves intervention program; examine the feasibility of implementing individualized sessions within a school-based intervention; assess participant satisfaction with the individualized approach; and examine the goal-setting behaviors of girls to assess what behavioral goals were selected and if the goals were associated with behavioral changes over time. It was hypothesized that girls would report high satisfaction with the individual sessions, select appropriate goals based on their baseline behaviors, and that setting behavioral goals would promote behavior change over time.

METHODS

Overview of New Moves

New Moves was implemented in schools as an all-girls physical education class with supplementary group and individual counseling sessions. The program strived to provide an environment in which all girls were comfortable being physically active and discussing weight-related issue regardless of their size, shape, or level of physical activity. Program components included the New Moves physical education class (4 days/week for one semester), which incorporated nutrition and social support sessions (1 day/week); individual counseling sessions that incorporated motivational interviewing strategies; weekly lunch get-togethers after the physical education class ended; and minimal parent outreach (27,28).

Study Design

New Moves was evaluated with a group-randomized controlled design with six intervention and six control high schools in the St Paul/Minneapolis metropolitan area of Minnesota during 2007 to 2009 (22). High schools were randomized into intervention or control conditions after baseline data collection. The goal was to recruit approximately 30 girls from each school. A total of 356 girls participated in the New Moves study (182 intervention, 174 control). The current analysis includes the girls from the intervention high schools, all of whom were offered individual counseling sessions as part of the program.

The study was approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board and by each school district. Both child assent and parental consent were obtained.

Recruitment

Girls were invited to register for an all-girls physical education class as an alternative to the regular coeducational class and receive physical education credit. Recruitment materials such as posters and course descriptions were designed to appeal to girls who were inactive, felt uncomfortable in regular physical education classes, and were interested in healthy weight management.

Individual Counseling Sessions

All girls enrolled in the intervention were encouraged to participate in individual sessions. The individual session component allowed for one-on-one attention that was not provided within the group physical education class. Seven individual sessions were offered throughout the school year. Two of the sessions were completed during the New Moves physical education class (first semester), and five were conducted after the class had ended (second semester) so that motivation and support could continue beyond the class. Sessions lasted about 20 to 25 minutes and were held every 2 to 3 weeks to allow girls time to work on achieving their goal(s). A time (during a study hall or before/after school), day of the week, and specific school location was established for each session. Reminder notes were given to each participant the day before the session in order to maintain a regular and consistent meeting schedule.

To promote consistency and maintain continuity of study staff, each of the intervention schools was assigned a team of two New Moves staff members to deliver the classroom sessions and serve as individual coaches. The staff included a registered dietitian who conducted the classroom-based nutrition sessions and a health educator who conducted the classroom-based social support sessions. A total of four staff members implemented the intervention at three schools during each of the 2 school years of the study. Each study participant in the intervention schools was randomly paired with one of the New Moves staff who worked in the school and the coach/participant pairs were maintained throughout the program so that relationships could be fostered and maintained.

Individual counseling sessions utilized motivational interviewing strategies to guide the discussions. This counseling strategy was chosen because it has been highly effective in promoting behavior change and is minimally prescriptive, which works well for adolescents who value their independence (16,18,24). The focus is to help people individually work through their ambivalence and enhance their commitment to behavior change, as well as facilitate that behavior change and maintain long-term adherence (15,29). During the individual sessions, the coach established a nonconfrontational and supportive climate in which the girls felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings. The sessions were designed to put the girls in the active role of choosing and attaining their physical activity and eating goal(s). For example, the

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