

**Final Submission: Stitching Strength – Empowering Self-Compassion and Body Positivity**

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## **Evidence & Experience**

### **Introduction**

Body image issues are something many girls struggle with from a very young age, but the impact of these issues becomes especially evident during adolescence. It's heartbreaking to see how much pressure is placed on girls to fit into a certain mold—whether that's looking like the ideal influencers on Instagram or trying to conform to the unrealistic beauty standards constantly being pushed by society. As a young woman who has experienced firsthand how these pressures can chip away at self-esteem, I deeply understand how crucial it is to address this issue in schools, where young girls are often their most vulnerable.

Growing up in a plus-size body, I felt the weight of these pressures constantly. I vividly remember being called "fat" and "whale" in middle school, and it affected everything—from the clothes I wore to the friendships I formed. I often avoided social gatherings because I was embarrassed about my body. I thought that no one else was experiencing what I was going through, and this made me feel incredibly isolated. It wasn't just a matter of not liking the way I looked; it was feeling like my body was a barrier to belonging. Instead of hearing that my body was strong and beautiful just the way it was, I was constantly reminded that it didn't fit into society's mold.

Research by Hedao and Gavaravarapu (2020) shows that adolescence is a critical time for developing body image, and during this stage, many girls start to internalize harmful ideas about what their bodies should look like. For me, that internalization happened early and persisted throughout. It wasn't just about magazines or TV shows, either. Social media became a constant reminder of what I wasn't. It's this constant stream of unrealistic standards that makes body dissatisfaction so difficult to escape.

Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) explain how social media platforms like Instagram create environments where adolescent girls are constantly exposed to highly edited, filtered images that set impossible standards for beauty. In my own experience, these platforms reinforced the feeling that I wasn't good enough because I didn't fit the ideal. Instead of seeing bodies like mine celebrated or even represented at all, I saw them erased or diminished to the "funny friend" trope—a role I was often pushed into myself. For so long, I wasn't told that my body was perfect just the way it was. Instead, I was taught to be ashamed.

Schools, in my view, have a powerful role to play in addressing these issues. They are where young people spend most of their time, and they have the potential to challenge these harmful beauty standards. Schools can promote self-acceptance and help girls, especially those like me who grew up feeling invisible or lesser, realize that their worth is not determined by their size. Programs focused on body positivity, self-esteem, and media literacy are crucial, especially during middle school when many girls begin to experience these challenges more intensely.

### **Sociocultural Theories of Body Image**

Body image development in adolescence is heavily influenced by sociocultural factors, including media, family, and peer influences. Sociocultural theories, such as social comparison theory, suggest that individuals assess their own body image by comparing themselves to others—especially to socially constructed ideals popular in media. Tiggemann's (2013) study, *NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and Body Image Concern in Adolescent Girls*, explores the impact of internet and social media exposure on body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram foster a culture of comparison, reinforcing the thin ideal and promoting behaviors such as restrictive dieting and excessive exercise.

This idea of comparison resonated with me growing up. I constantly felt like I was measuring myself against everyone else. Whether it was the girls I saw on TV, in movies, or scrolling through Instagram, the message was always the same: You're not enough unless you look a certain way. Tiggemann's findings reflect my own experience. The more time I spent on social media, the more I felt like I needed to change myself. I wanted to fit the mold, but I knew I never could. This left me feeling like my body wasn't just different—it was wrong.

Research has also shown that family dynamics and peer interactions reinforce societal standards, significantly shaping a girl's self-perception. For example, Grabe, Hyde, and Ward (2008) found that casual family comments about weight or appearance, even when unintentional, can have lasting negative effects on a girl's body image. Peer dynamics further amplify this, as comments and behaviors in social circles often reflect societal ideals, making it harder for adolescents to escape feelings of inadequacy. Girls who receive negative feedback about their bodies from family members or face pressure to conform to certain standards within their peer groups are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction. In my own experience, casual comments from family members about weight or appearance often seemed harmless but had a lasting impact on how I viewed myself. This added another layer of complexity to the already overwhelming pressure from media and societal standards. When peer conversations mirrored these ideals, it felt nearly impossible to escape the feeling of inadequacy. Understanding the role of family and peer interactions is crucial for developing comprehensive school-based programs that address not only media literacy but also the personal networks that shape body image.

The sociocultural attitudes toward appearance questionnaire, as used in Tiggemann's study, supports the idea that media consumption fosters these ideals from an early age. This aligns with Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn's (2010) research, which examines how media—

particularly in children's animated films—reinforces beauty standards. In their study *Am I Too Fat to Be a Princess?* they found that even young children internalize the thin ideal, with princess characters often depicted as beautiful and thin, while villainous characters are overweight. This early exposure fosters a connection between attractiveness and worth, teaching unrealistic expectations to young girls', which persist throughout adolescence.

I remember being drawn to these kinds of movies, and while I never consciously thought about it at the time, the underlying messages were clear: Thin is good, fat is bad. It was never about the personality or the strength of the characters; it was always about their appearance. Even as a child, I learned that my body didn't fit that image, and it left me wondering whether I could ever be more than just the "funny friend" or the "sidekick."

### **Research on Media Impact**

The influence of media on body image is well-documented in both theoretical and empirical studies. Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn's (2010) study provides insight into how popular children's media contributes to body image issues by associating beauty with thinness and unattractiveness with overweight characters. This relationship between media exposure and body dissatisfaction continues into adolescence and adulthood. From my own experience, these early influences contributed to a distorted perception of my body that lingered well into my teenage years.

Media serves as a constant reminder of unattainable body standards, and adolescents, in particular, are vulnerable to these messages. Empirical studies like Tiggemann's (2013) and Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn's (2010) emphasize that media exposure fosters body dissatisfaction by presenting idealized images for comparison. This was my reality as a young girl—I was often overwhelmed by the pressure to meet these standards, feeling inadequate and unworthy by

comparison.

### **Mental Health Impacts**

Body dissatisfaction during adolescence not only affects self-esteem but also has long-term implications for mental health. Linardon (2021) explores the mental health sequelae of body image disturbances, finding that adolescents who experience body dissatisfaction are at a higher risk for developing eating disorders, depression, and anxiety in young adulthood. These findings highlight just how important early intervention really is, as body dissatisfaction can lead to more severe mental health issues if left unaddressed. The data from Linardon's longitudinal study reveal that body dissatisfaction remains a stable predictor of mental health problems across young adulthood, indicating that the effects of adolescent body image concerns are far-reaching.

Similarly, Gashtil and HajiAlizadeh's (2022) research highlights the effectiveness of school-based interventions in addressing these concerns. Their study on the *Dove Confident Me* program demonstrates that media literacy and discussions around societal ideals can improve body image and self-esteem in adolescents. Programs like this can help adolescents navigate the pressures of media while building a stronger sense of self-worth. These findings give me hope that schools can be a place where early intervention occurs and students like myself, when I was younger, can be helped before body dissatisfaction becomes a lifelong struggle.

### **Effectiveness of Interventions**

One of the most effective school-based programs that has been evaluated for body image intervention is the *Dove Confident Me* program, which has gained significant attention due to its success in reducing body dissatisfaction among students. The program's emphasis on media literacy and body activism helps address societal appearance ideals and teaches students how to resist harmful body comparisons. According to Diedrichs et al. (2015), their cluster-randomized

controlled trial demonstrated that this program had short-term benefits, particularly for girls, in reducing body dissatisfaction, negative affect, and eating disorder symptoms. Importantly, the study revealed that teachers can effectively deliver this program with minimal training, which opens the door to broader dissemination in schools with fewer resources.

This insight into the *Dove Confident Me* program aligns with findings from Richardson and Paxton (2009), who evaluated the *Happy Being Me* program, which focused on targeting risk factors for body dissatisfaction such as the internalization of the thin ideal, appearance comparisons, and fat-talk among adolescent girls. Both programs demonstrate that schools can be an important space for fostering positive body image and self-esteem among young girls. These kinds of programs offer tools I desperately needed when I was younger tools that could have helped me navigate a world that constantly told me my body wasn't good enough.

### **Gap in Current Interventions**

Despite the strengths of interventions like *Dove Confident Me* and *Happy Being Me*, there remains a significant gap in addressing cultural diversity and inclusivity. A critique by Byers and Williams (2023) highlights how media representations of plus-size characters often fall into narrow, stereotypical roles. Their analysis of television shows such as *Shrill*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *This Is Us* demonstrates that while the visibility of fat women has increased, they are still largely portrayed within restrictive tropes that do not reflect the full spectrum of experiences among fat women. This limited representation reinforces the notion that body positivity and self-esteem are only for those who fit certain aesthetic ideals. Programs must address this gap by celebrating diverse body types and ensuring cultural inclusivity. For example, Byers and Williams (2023) critique how plus-size characters in media, such as those in *Shrill* and *This Is Us*, are often

portrayed in limiting, stereotypical roles. Stitching Strength incorporates discussions about diverse representations, encouraging participants to see beauty and value in all body types.

Growing up, I distinctly remember watching movies like *Grease*, where the character Jan was supposed to represent a fat girl who loves to eat. Jan being a “heavier” girl was so subtle that I didn’t understand she was meant to be viewed that way until much later when my mom explained it to me. Similarly, in *The DUFF*, the main character is labeled as the “Designated Ugly Fat Friend,” yet she doesn’t actually fit the plus-size mold. These representations left me feeling confused about what being fat or plus-size even really meant, especially since these characters didn’t seem to face the same struggles I or other girls like me experienced.

These media portrayals create a limited view of body types and do not offer young girls a full spectrum of experiences or emotions that accompany living in a larger body. When body image programs in schools fail to address this lack of representation, they risk reinforcing the very same ideals they aim to dismantle. For girls who don’t see themselves reflected in media—or worse, see themselves in a narrow, caricatured way—it can be difficult to develop positive self-esteem or feel empowered by body positivity messages.

## **Conclusion**

As I reflect on the research and my own experiences, it’s clear that body image dissatisfaction is not just an isolated issue, but a pervasive challenge that shapes much of how adolescent girls experience the world. The pressure to conform to a specific mold—whether from social media, peers, or societal expectations—is overwhelming, and for many young girls, these pressures become internalized, leading to a cycle of self-doubt, isolation, and ultimately negative mental health outcomes.

One of the most meaningful experiences that shaped my understanding of these issues was my participation in *Girls on the Run*. While this program is not specifically school-based, it had an enormous impact on me as a young woman. Through running, I learned to value my body for what it could do rather than how it looked, and I built a sense of community with other girls who shared the same journey. This program showed me that my worth wasn't tied to appearance—it encouraged me to focus on my strengths while building relationships with others.

Body dissatisfaction, as I've come to understand through both the research and my experience, can be incredibly isolating. I remember feeling deeply embarrassed about my body in my adolescence which made me avoid gatherings or social situations. I felt like I was the only one dealing with these emotions and thought no one would understand. This sense of isolation only deepened my negative self-perception, pushing me further away from people when I needed community the most.

Programs that address these issues need to go beyond surface-level interventions. They must tackle the root causes of body dissatisfaction, particularly the internalized opinions and ideals that have been imposed on girls from a young age. Schools have the power to create spaces where girls feel supported and connected—where they can build self-esteem not only by learning about media literacy but also by forming relationships that reinforce their worth.

Ultimately, addressing body image issues in adolescence is about more than teaching girls to resist harmful media messages—it's about creating spaces where they can feel seen, celebrated, and supported, no matter what they look like. Schools have the power to shape these experiences, and with the right interventions, they can play a crucial role in helping young girls develop a healthier relationship with their bodies, their peers, and themselves

## **Theory of Change: Stitching Strength**

### **Overview**

"*Stitching Strength*" is an after-school program designed to support middle school girls (ages 11-14) in the United States during a critical developmental period, where pressures around body image and self-esteem are heightened by societal standards and media influences. Drawing inspiration from experiential learning programs such as *Girls on the Run*, this intervention seeks to foster self-acceptance, self-compassion, and self-love through creative activities centered on crochet. Each participant will crochet colored squares representing personal themes, which will ultimately form a quilt symbolizing their journey of emotional growth. The program's intent is to establish a supportive environment where participants can explore themes of mental well-being, resilience, and body positivity while engaging in a meaningful craft activity.

### **Problem Statement**

Middle school girls today face increasing pressures from media, peers, and social norms that negatively impact their body image, self-esteem, and mental health. This formative period is often marked by challenges in building self-acceptance and resilience. Research indicates that body image issues and low self-esteem are prevalent among adolescent girls, contributing to mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. There is a need for creative and supportive programs that address these issues directly, provide a sense of community, and encourage self-reflection. *Stitching Strength* is designed to fulfill this need by creating an environment where participants can develop positive coping skills and build confidence in themselves and their bodies.

### **Target Population**

The target population for this intervention is middle school-aged girls (11-14) in the United States who are particularly vulnerable to societal pressures related to body image and self-worth. These girls are at a developmental stage where they are especially susceptible to the influence of social and media messages, making early intervention critical to fostering resilience and self-esteem. This program aims to create a safe, inclusive space where girls can address these challenges collaboratively, surrounded by peers who may be experiencing similar issues.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of *Stitching Strength* is to cultivate self-acceptance, self-compassion, and self-love among middle school girls, enabling them to develop the resilience needed to navigate societal pressures related to body image. Through creative activities such as crocheting, the program provides participants with a tangible representation of their personal growth and offers a supportive community where they can openly discuss topics related to mental well-being. By participating in the program, girls are encouraged to internalize positive values that will help them maintain a healthy self-image and form meaningful peer connections.

### **Assumptions**

Several key assumptions underlie the development of *Stitching Strength*. First, it is assumed that middle school girls will engage positively with hands-on, creative activities that allow for self-expression. Additionally, the program assumes that societal pressures surrounding body image and self-esteem are common challenges for this age group, making early intervention necessary. Another assumption is that facilitators will create a safe, empathetic environment and proactively address potential stigma or peer pressure around participation. For example, the program will use peer ambassadors—past participants of *Stitching Strength*—who can share testimonials and success stories to create a welcoming and appealing image of the

program. These ambassadors will help normalize participation and frame the program as a fun, empowering experience. Furthermore, the program assumes that stakeholders such as schools and parents will value its goals of promoting mental well-being and resilience. Finally, it assumes that girls from diverse cultural backgrounds will feel represented and included in discussions and activities designed to celebrate all body types and experiences.

### **Inputs**

To successfully implement *Stitching Strength*, several resources are required:

- **Facilitators:** Trained after-school staff, volunteers, or mentors with experience in working with adolescents will guide participants through each session. These facilitators will provide emotional support, ensure safety, and foster a positive atmosphere.
- **Materials:** Essential materials include yarn, crochet needles, and journals for crafting and self-reflection. These supplies are provided to ensure that each participant has the necessary tools to engage fully in the activities.
- **Space:** The program requires a safe, comfortable environment within the school, such as an art room or a designated area for after-school activities, where participants can gather for weekly sessions.
- **Partnerships:** Partnerships with local schools, youth organizations, and businesses will ensure resource availability. For example, schools can provide spaces for sessions, while local craft stores may sponsor yarn and supplies
- **Time:** Weekly sessions lasting 60-90 minutes will be conducted after school, providing participants with a consistent, structured environment.

- **Curriculum:** A pre-planned curriculum outlining weekly themes related to self-acceptance, self-compassion, and self-love is essential. The curriculum will include discussion prompts and reflection activities that align with each session's theme.

### **Mechanisms/Active Ingredient**

The primary developmental mechanism in *Stitching Strength* is fostering self-compassion and resilience. This mechanism is embedded in every activity, as the program emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance, positive self-talk, and peer support. By engaging in activities that promote self-compassion, participants are encouraged to shift their focus from societal standards to internal values, cultivating a sense of belonging and empowerment. The group-based format also helps girls build relationships and social support networks, which are vital for emotional well-being during adolescence.

### **Activities**

The core activities of *Stitching Strength* are designed to integrate the program's focal mechanism of fostering self-compassion and resilience into every session:

1. **Weekly Crochet Session:** Each week, participants will gather to crochet a square representing a theme, such as self-love, body positivity, or resilience. The tactile nature of crocheting offers a mindful activity that allows participants to focus on the present moment, and each square's color reflects the theme of that week. For instance, in Week 3 ("Resilience"), participants will reflect on a moment when they overcame a challenge and felt they were resilient. They will discuss their experiences, learn more about resilience, and crochet a square in a color that represents this resilience and strength to them.
2. **Group Reflection Discussions & Themed Activities:** Each session begins with an introduction to that week's theme, followed by a guided discussion where participants can

share their personal experiences. These discussions are essential for promoting self-reflection and helping participants connect with each other over shared challenges.

3. **Personal Journaling:** To support self-awareness, participants will maintain personal journals where they can document their thoughts and reflections each week. Journaling provides a private space for self-expression and helps participants track their emotional growth over time.
4. **Culminating Showcase:** At the program's end, participants will assemble their individual squares into a collective quilt, symbolizing their personal and shared journeys. This quilt will be displayed at a culminating event, where participants can celebrate their accomplishments with family, friends, and peers.

## Outputs

The anticipated outputs of *Stitching Strength* include:

- **Participant Engagement:** Regular attendance and active participation in weekly sessions.
- **Curriculum Completion:** Successful delivery of all planned activities and weekly themes over the program duration.
- **Participant Feedback:** Collection of qualitative data from participants through surveys and group reflections to assess engagement and satisfaction.

## Outcomes

*Stitching Strength* aims to achieve the following outcomes:

1. **Short-Term Outcomes:**
  - Enhanced self-awareness and a more positive body image.
  - Increased understanding and application of self-compassion.
  - Strengthened peer relationships and support systems within the group.

## 2. Intermediate Outcomes:

- Greater resilience against societal pressures through skills like media literacy and self-compassion, enabling participants to counteract harmful beauty standards.
- Increased self-confidence and self-acceptance.
- Sustained use of self-compassion strategies beyond the program.

## Impact

The long-term impact of *Stitching Strength* includes:

1. **Reduced Risk of Mental Health Issues:** By promoting positive body image and self-esteem, the program may reduce the likelihood of participants developing mental health issues related to body dissatisfaction.
2. **Improved Social and Emotional Well-being:** Through strengthened interpersonal skills, participants contribute to a more inclusive and supportive school climate.
3. **Empowered Future Growth:** Participants will carry forward a lasting sense of self-compassion and acceptance, equipping them to face future challenges with resilience.

The program's success will be assessed through follow-up surveys and qualitative interviews with participants to track their self-esteem and resilience six months after completion. These insights will help evaluate the program's lasting impact.

## Rationale Behind the Approach

The experiential and creative nature of *Stitching Strength* allows participants to engage both physically and emotionally, akin to the benefits observed in programs like *Girls on the Run*. Research supports that experiential programs, which combine activities and life skills education, can significantly enhance personal development in adolescent girls. *Girls on the Run* has

demonstrated improvements in competence, confidence, and connection among participants, which are critical building blocks for positive self-esteem and resilience (Weiss et al., 2019).

Crocheting in a group provides a non-competitive, inclusive environment that fosters mindfulness and creativity while promoting social bonds. Each colored square becomes a symbol of personal growth, helping participants internalize values of self-love, acceptance, and resilience in a deeply meaningful way. Weekly sessions and the culminating showcase serve as milestones, celebrating progress and mirroring the impact of the 5K in *Girls on the Run*. Additionally, the after-school setting provides an accessible platform within participants' school environments, bridging educational and personal development. Personal journaling adds a reflective dimension, encouraging participants to monitor their internal growth and see themselves as part of a larger, supportive community.

# STITCHING STRENGTH: A WELLNESS PROGRAM FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS

## OVERVIEW

An after-school program promoting self-compassion, resilience, and positive body image for middle school girls through creative crochet activities and group support.

## PROBLEM

Middle school girls face body image and self-esteem pressures from media and social standards, impacting mental health.

## ASSUMPTIONS

Creative activities, foster engagement and self expression among middle school girls

Participants benefit from a safe supportive environment for open sharing and personal growth

Stakeholders, including schools, and parents recognize the importance of mental well-being and will support the program schools

## POPULATION/PURPOSE

targeting US middle school girls ages 11 to 14 who are vulnerable to body image issues

fostering, self acceptance, resilience, and self-love and supportive community

## The Mechanism

Self compassion and resilience

Weekly crochet sessions: each crochet square represents a theme

Group discussions

Journal reflections

Quilt showcase!

OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES
Participant engagement – consistent attendance, and participation	Short term - Increased self-awareness & body positivity Understanding, and practice of self compassion Strengthened, peer connections
Participant feedback – qualitative data from participants through surveys and group discussions	Intermediate - Increased resilience Enhanced self-confidence & acceptance Ongoing use of self compassion
Completion of curriculum – successful delivery of all planned activities	

IMPACTS	Rationale
Improved social and emotional well-being	Based on girls on the run model
Reduced risk of mental health issues	Combines physical and emotional engagement
Empowered future growth	Creates a mindful noncompetitive space for self expression

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