

**Full of Ourselves  
Advancing Girl Power, Health & Leadership**

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, it has become increasingly clear that America's children struggle far too often and far too early with disordered eating and eating disorders. Anorexia, bulimia and obesity are all on the increase. Eating disorders rank as one of the most common chronic psychiatric illnesses among young women and their prevalence among teenage and preteen girls is growing. On the other end of the spectrum, childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions.

This serious scenario makes evident the need for large-scale health education and eating disorders prevention efforts. It is imperative that we invest in effective ways to equip children—and the adults who can potentially make a significant difference in their lives—with tools to resist cultural directives toward body preoccupation, overeating and disordered eating behaviors.

Welcome to Full of Ourselves, our clear-cut response to this need! FOO is an upbeat educational program that aims to sustain girls in their mental, physical and social health and to decrease their vulnerability to the development of body preoccupation and eating disorders. As a primary prevention program, FOO targets a general (healthy) population of girls; no one need be at risk for an eating disorder to participate. FOO has been successfully implemented by schools, after-school programs, town libraries, summer camps, churches and synagogues. All that's needed

is a supportive community and one or two committed women to facilitate weekly program sessions.

The program has been piloted with more than 800 girls in five states and been proven feasible and effective. This is the first prevention program of its kind to effect sustained positive changes in girls' body image, body satisfaction and body esteem, important risk factors in the development of eating disorders. The program also results in sustained positive changes in girls' knowledge about health, nutrition, weightism and puberty. It is most effective when administered grade-wide rather than to a select subset of girls within a given grade. When all girls are on the same page, they can reinforce newly-gained ideas and skills outside of program sessions; the resulting "environmental" effect may make it easier for girls to sustain long-lasting positive behavioral change.

While FOO was not initially designed as an obesity prevention program, it implements many of the recent recommendations from the Institute of Medicine on how to stem the growing obesity problem. For starters, girls learn how to eat healthfully and exercise more. They learn how to identify media messages and advertisements that are harmful to their physical or psychological well-being. They discuss the pitfalls of eating in an attempt to fill purely emotional hungers, and then learn healthier ways to deal with emotions and stress. The program also encourages overweight girls not to turn to fad diets, but to reach out for healthy guidance and support.

Our program title, *Full of Ourselves*, invariably generates lots of questions. Just what do you mean by “full of ourselves,” people ask, when the term is commonly used pejoratively? We knew the research. When you ask boys to identify their strengths and things about themselves that make them proud, without pause they launch into a list of things they can do in the world: “I’m great at math... I’m a team captain... I throw a killer fastball... I design computer programs.” Ask girls the same question and often you are met with a pause. Or giggles. Or silence. Some girls, like their male counterparts, answer without hesitation. But many don’t. Many flat out refuse to answer or avoid answering directly: “Ask Mia, she’s my best friend.” Girls frequently offer up a list of physical attributes: “I have great hair... I like my eyes... I have long legs.” Others talk easily about relational skills—“I’m a good friend... I’m a good listener”—but are less comfortable talking about intellectual prowess and skill-based activities at which they excel.

Why is it, we asked ourselves, that at the turn into the 21<sup>st</sup> century so many girls struggle to claim their strengths? Why do so many girls, unlike many boys, hesitate to take up their rightful space in the world?

Girls are growing up in a popular culture and economy that continues to send them the message that what they look like is more important than who they are. In some communities, being the “prettiest” girl means being the thinnest; in others, being the

curviest; and in others, being the most “buff”. While the ideal image may vary, what remains sadly consistent is just how many girls refer to their bodies as the ultimate measure of their worth: just how many girls literally weigh their self-esteem. This focus on bodies as a primary source of identity predisposes girls to disordered thinking and to disordered eating which can escalate into a full-blown eating disorder and serious health problems. Disordered eating also disrupts learning; when a girl diets, skips meals or subsists mainly on junk food, she’s not getting the nourishment she needs to think and to perform at her best.

This curriculum aims to give girls an entirely different lens through which to see, know and value themselves. The focus remains throughout, as indicated in the subtitle, on power, health and leadership.

Power. Girls learn how to tune into their bodies as sources of strength and practice the radical act of body acceptance. They learn how to powerfully state their own opinions. They learn about the power that comes from creating and sustaining healthy connections with others. They learn the basics of assertiveness training, conflict resolution, and strategies to stand up in the face of mean teasing or bullying. They also learn to practice positive self-talk which has been shown to boost self-esteem.

Health. Girls gain tools to build and sustain the well-being of body, mind and spirit.

Girls learn how to eat more nutritiously. They come to understand the difference between “dieting” and having a healthy diet, and how to replace the rigid notion of

“good” vs. “bad” foods with the idea of more or less “powerful” foods. Equally important, girls learn how not to use food as a coping mechanism; they learn a variety of stress reduction techniques—meditation, journaling, yoga—to help them stay balanced in any situation. Girls also examine the dynamics of relationships, and learn how ‘relational health’ affects their overall well-being.

Leadership. Throughout the program, girls have the chance to experience themselves as leaders and agents of change. Every unit concludes with a “Call to Action,” asking girls to “walk the talk” and put ideas into action out in the world of family and peers. For example, girls learn effective ways to intervene when they hear anyone being excluded or put down for the way they look; they write letters (of protest or praise) to advertisers and editors of fashion magazines; they assess the cafeteria menu and submit findings and recommendations to school administrators. In the second program phase, girls become mentors and lead activities with younger girls. Research on primary prevention makes clear that when students have the opportunity to teach what they’ve learned, they are more likely actually to practice what they preach.

It is our hope that, by the end of this two-phase program, girls will not only be less vulnerable to the development of an eating disorder, but that they will be “full of themselves” in the very best sense of the phrase. In the first unit, girls discuss and declare a “Full of Ourselves” proclamation; here is what a girl or woman who is full of herself, in the best sense of the phrase, might say:

- ☞ I know who I am.
- ☞ I know that I matter.
- ☞ I know what matters to me.
- ☞ I pay attention to what I feel and what I need.
- ☞ I make choices and decisions that are good for me.
- ☞ I take good care of my body.
- ☞ I stand up for what I believe in.
- ☞ I let people know what I think, even when I'm angry or confused or in disagreement with everyone else.
- ☞ I am a valuable friend.
- ☞ I know I can make a positive difference in the world in my own unique way.

We have spent five years developing, evaluating and fine-tuning this curriculum. It is written with great attention to detail to make the units accessible and easy for you to teach. We invite you to read on, have fun and, along with your group of girls, to throw your weight around in healthy ways!

## **PROGRAM OBJECTIVES**

At the end of the program, girls ideally will demonstrate the following:

1. Increased self and body acceptance
2. Higher levels of self esteem and confidence
3. A greater sense of agency and efficacy
4. Advanced leadership skills

5. A recognition of “weightism” as a form of prejudice and the courage to speak up in face of weightist teasing and bullying
6. A wider range of coping skills to use in response to stressful or emotional situations
7. The ability to discern the difference between physiological and emotional hungers
8. Healthier eating and exercise habits
9. A proficiency with basic media literacy skills
10. A decreased vulnerability to developing an eating disorder