



Feel Your Best Self Goes to Camp: Facilitator and Family Caregiver Perspectives

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Particularly over the past two years of substantial uncertainty and disruption to routines, children and adults have experienced increased challenges to emotional well-being. Opportunities to develop critical skills in self-regulation have been missed or delayed, leaving caregivers challenged to fill gaps in learning emotion-focused coping skills.

Based on evidence of simple strategies that can improve emotional well-being (Iovino et al., 2021), [Feel Your Best Self \(FYBS\)](#) was created to include educational materials for 12 simple emotion-focused coping strategies to strengthen emotional regulation and day-to-day experiences of positive emotions. FYBS uniquely packages learning these strategies by incorporating puppetry to model and teach each strategy. The FYBS toolkit offers fun and engaging educational materials that can be used in various ways – there is no need to implement a fully manualized program. The FYBS toolkit includes four components: strategy videos and tip sheets, strategy cards, a reflection journal, and options for incorporating puppet building.

The purpose of this evaluation was to evaluate camp facilitator and family caregiver perspectives of the usability of the FYBS toolkit as delivered to grade 1 and 2 students in a camp setting.

The Intervention

The FYBS toolkit was piloted with approximately 100 campers and 6 facilitators in a summer camp setting. Campers were entering grades 1 or 2. Facilitators were graduate-level occupational therapy (OT) students completing practicum hours at the summer camp under the supervision of a certified OT supervisor. A structured scope and sequence was provided to the facilitators in advance to assist with implementation. The OT supervisor reviewed all FYBS materials, including facilitator steps, strategy videos, strategy cards, and reflection sheets, with facilitators in advance. Facilitators also practiced FYBS implementation with a group of 25 kindergarten-aged campers prior to implementation with the grades 1 and 2 group included in this evaluation. Campers engaged in five FYBS lessons:

- Lesson 1: FYBS Intro Video and Feelings Forecast
- Lesson 2: Make Your Own Puppet Activity
- Lesson 3: Belly Breathing Strategy
- Lesson 4: Shake Out the Yuck Strategy
- Lesson 5: Be a Kind Helper Strategy

Each lesson lasted approximately 20 minutes and was implemented during a period in the camp day typically focused on fine motor or social emotional skills. In lesson 2, campers created a sock puppet using craft materials. This puppet stayed at camp for the duration of the unit, and was used during Lessons 3-5 to reinforce strategy instruction. The unit was implemented over the course of a 2-week camp session.

Data Collection

The family caregivers of the approximately 100 campers were invited to participate in a survey asking about their child(ren)'s use of any FYBS strategies at home. A recruitment flyer with a QR code linking to the survey was sent home in camper's backpacks. A study team member also visited camp bus stops to describe the study to caregivers. Facilitators were invited to participate in a survey about the usability of the FYBS toolkit.

Fourteen family caregivers and six facilitators completed the survey. Approximately two-thirds ($n = 9$; 64.3%) of the caregivers had first grade campers; the remaining caregivers ($n = 5$; 35.7%) had second grade campers. The average camper age was 6 ($SD = 0.6$). The majority of respondents' children identified as female ($n = 11$; 78.6%); the remaining children identified as male ($n = 3$; 21.4%). The respondents' campers identified as White ($n = 10$; 71.4%), Black ($n = 2$; 14.3%), Mixed Race ($n = 1$; 7.1%), or other/not listed ($n = 1$; 7.1%). More than one-fourth ($n = 4$; 28.6%) of respondents' children identified as Hispanic/ Latino. The remaining respondents' children ($n = 10$; 71.4%) identified as non-Hispanic/Latino.

Key Findings

Family Caregivers

Children told their caregivers about FYBS strategies. Close to 60% of caregivers reported that their child told them about one or more FYBS strategies. Caregivers reported hearing about Belly Breathing ($n = 5$), Shake Out the Yuck ($n = 5$), and Be a Kind Helper ($n = 5$). Although five caregivers reported hearing about each strategy from their child, it was not always the same caregivers. One caregiver reported that her daughter shared: "she had to breathe into her belly button." Another said their child reported that you "do [belly breathing] when you're mad." Two caregivers reported their children sharing that they learned to be kind to others.

Some caregivers reported seeing their child use FYBS strategies. Three caregivers reported seeing their child use Belly Breathing. One caregiver elaborated, "when frustrated with a situation, he would do belly breathing." Another caregiver reported seeing their child use Shake Out the Yuck and two reported seeing their children use Be A Kind Helper. A caregiver stated, "A student fell when he got off the bus by the playground and she extended her hand and asked, 'are you ok?'"

Facilitators

Facilitators reported that the strategies were simple to teach. All six facilitators agreed or strongly agreed that FYBS was easy to use. One facilitator shared, “The strategies in the toolbox were simple and easy to teach.” Another described, “The puppet kits were helpful and surprisingly easy for the kids to use.” All facilitators felt they could continue to implement without additional assistance, and the majority felt they were able to implement without much advance learning.

The camp setting presented challenges to implementation. Facilitators reported that the camp setting presented some barriers to implementation: limited computer and internet access to play the FYBS videos and campers’ expectations for more active activities (e.g., camp games, physical activity). Facilitators recommended that a more structured setting, such as a school classroom, would facilitate easier implementation. One facilitator described, “[The videos] were not good to implement in this setting, not a calm environment for learning, kids want to be up playing games in this setting.” They continued, “I would be open to using it in a school setting but would not use it again in a camp/non-traditional setting.” Another shared, “I think that in a school or preschool setting this program would flourish.”

Facilitators suggested PreK-Grade 2 as the optimal age range for FYBS materials. Facilitators felt that the materials, especially puppet making, may be most effective with younger children. One facilitator described, “I really liked the puppet making and how much the children opened up with the use of it [but] the age range for the effectiveness of the puppets needs to be reevaluated given the maturity and developmental level of even 3rd and 4th graders.” Another shared that it served as “an aid for younger kids to open up about their feelings. I would only use it for children younger than 2nd grade.”

Implications

In summary, facilitators identified the FYBS toolkit as easy to implement overall, despite concerns about using parts of the toolkit (e.g. videos) in a camp setting. Some generalization of skills learned through FYBS teaching to the home setting was noted. In particular, kids talked about strategies learned with their families, and some even demonstrated use of strategies. Based on the findings of this evaluation, future directions include developing additional materials to enable adaptations for non-school settings, such as camps and outdoor after-school programs. In addition, it is important to evaluate child perspectives to gain further understanding of fit for different ages and developmental levels.

To learn more about Feel Your Best Self, explore the website at

<https://feelyourbestself.collaboration.uconn.edu/>.