
**Body Image during Adolescence**

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This entry reviews current research addressing adolescents’ body image. The correlates and consequences of body image are described as is the significance of body image to other areas of development including puberty, identity, media consumption, family, peer, and romantic relationships. The historical context of body image research is reviewed in addition to the contemporary importance of understanding body image given rising concerns about adolescents’ vulnerability to both obesity and eating disorders.

There are many reasons why it is important to understand adolescents’ body image. One only needs to pick up a newspaper, turn on the television, or glance at the magazines in the check-out line at the grocery store to be reminded of our cultural obsession with the appearance of our bodies. Advice on how to improve one’s physical appearances abounds – from how to lose weight to how to surgically alter one’s appearance. It is no wonder that young people today are concerned with how they look, seemingly more so than any past generation.
An attempt to understand physical appearance concerns, especially in regards to body-related concerns, is often the work of body image researchers. Body image is the self-evaluative component of self-image that focuses on physical attributes and appearance. It functions as a dynamic force and does not merely denote a static image of the self as “something attractive” or “something fit,” but rather, body image represents the power, confidence, and sense of agency that is derived from one’s physical being (D. Newman, personal communication, July 12, 2005). Interest in body image has come to researchers’ attention most often under conditions of extreme distortion or dissatisfaction. Body dysmorphic disorder, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa represent psychiatric disorders hallmarked by negative body image. However, the range of normal and pathological body image experiences is broad and has psychological, behavioral, and developmental consequences all along its spectrum (D. Newman, personal communication, July 12, 2005). In this entry, we briefly review the history of body image research, current trends and statistics regarding adolescents’ body image, the contemporary importance of body image research, the developmental significance of body image in terms of adolescents’ pubertal, identity, social and psychological development, as well as future directions for the study of adolescents’ body image.

**Historical Understanding of Body Image**

A recent (June, 2009) literature search in PsycInfo for the key words “body image” produced 6,968 articles, books, chapters, and dissertations addressing this topic. Dating back to 1903, “body image” research originally focused on self-image or self-concept and usually examined samples of mentally retarded or otherwise psychologically ill or impaired individuals’ sense of self (not necessarily their physical body). This early
research differs from contemporary body image research in its relatively general approach, psychoanalytic undertones, and scarcity (<1% of body image research was published before 1970). The majority (90%) of body image research has been published since 1980, paralleling an increase in research addressing eating disorders in the last three decades. What may be most striking is not the relatively recent proliferation of research addressing body image, but the predominantly clinical nature of this research. Of all the body image publications, the vast majority can be found in abnormal, clinical, health/medical, or social/personality journals. Only a minority (<1% by our calculations) can be found in developmental psychology journals and even fewer are longitudinal studies in peer reviewed journals. And yet, presumably, everyone has a “body image” and understanding what this means – particularly during adolescence – is significant not only because of the clinical ramifications associated with body dissatisfaction, but because of the relevance of body image to so many other areas of adolescents’ lives.

Adolescents’ body image: Recent trends and statistics

When adolescents are asked about their thoughts and feelings about their bodies the result is often discouraging. Generally, adolescents are quick to point out flaws with their bodies, are not happy with the appearance of their bodies, and report body-related concerns and dissatisfaction (Rolland, Farnhill, & Griffiths, 1996, 1997; Shapiro, Newcomb, & Loeb, 1997; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009). However, concerns regarding body image clearly develop prior to adolescence, particularly among girls. Some research suggests that girls as young as five years old begin to express dissatisfaction with their bodies (Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000; Smolak, 2004).
These early signs of body dissatisfaction are, predictably, associated with weight status such that girls who weigh more (even taking height into account) are more dissatisfied with their appearance (Davison et al., 2000). Further, personality (e.g., self-esteem) and sociocultural influences (e.g., media exposure) are demonstrated predictors of the development of body dissatisfaction (Clark & Tiggemann, 2008; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009). Girls’ concerns about body and weight issues do not subside from childhood to early adulthood, but instead appear to intensify with age (Cash & Henry, 1995; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986; Smolak & Levine, 2001). Measures assessing body image and statistics determining body satisfaction versus dissatisfaction vary from study to study (with findings ranging from 24% to 90% of girls dissatisfied with their bodies; D. C. Jones, personal communication, July 16, 2009; Keel, Fulkerson, & Leon, 1997; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, Perry, & Irving, 2002; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004; see Yanover & Thompson, 2009 for a review of assessment issues), however reports seem to indicate that at least half of girls report dissatisfaction with their bodies by mid-adolescence (Casper & Offer, 1990; D. C. Jones, personal communication, July 16, 2009; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003a; Paxton, et al., 1991). Further, Paxton and colleagues (1991) report that adolescent girls believe that improving the appearance of their bodies would make them happier, healthier, and better looking.

The majority of research on body image has focused on girls and women; fewer studies have addressed these issues among boys and men. However, Smolak (2004) has suggested that during adolescence boys become concerned with both their body size and musculature, which causes them to experience levels of body dissatisfaction that are comparable to adolescent girls’ body dissatisfaction. Further, McCabe and Ricciardelli
(2004) have suggested that boys may develop greater body image concerns during adolescence due to an increased interest in emulating male body ideals. Consistent with this notion, some estimates indicate that 10-75% of preadolescent and adolescent boys are dissatisfied with their bodies (Collins, 1991; Ericksen, Markey, & Tinsley, 2003; D. C. Jones, personal communication, July 16, 2009; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Similar to research addressing girls, different measurement tools and standards used to calculate body satisfaction versus dissatisfaction likely account for a portion of the variability in body dissatisfaction across studies. Regardless, boys are clearly not immune to concern about their bodies. However, with limited research addressing the developmental trajectory of boys’ body image through adulthood, it remains somewhat unclear whether or not boys’ body image concerns intensify into adulthood or as one study suggests, may actually decrease by the end of adolescence (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006).

Contemporary Importance of Understanding Adolescents’ Body Image: Obesity

The striking statistics concerning adolescents’ susceptibility to body dissatisfaction in combination with recent secular trends regarding obesity makes understanding adolescents’ body image particularly important. It is unlikely a coincidence that the current “era of appearances” is also the “era of obesity.” These days, it is difficult not to be aware of the growing obesity “epidemic” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Veerman, Barendregt, van Beeck, Seidell, Mackenbach, 2007; World Health Organization, 2009) affecting American adults and an increasing number of children and adolescents. As Americans grow heavier, they also appear to grow increasingly afraid of food and more worried about their appearance. As noted by
others (see Irving & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002), there seems to be an association between our march towards obesity and our love of an emaciated female body and a fit male physique. Indeed, research seems to clearly suggest that body dissatisfaction and weight concerns are forerunners to dieting and other body-change strategies (Lowe et al., 2006; Markey & Markey, 2005; Stice et al., 1999; Tomiyama & Mann, 2008; Veerman et al., 2007). However, the efficacy of most weight-loss approaches is highly questionable, with weight gain being a likely outcome of most attempts to lose weight (Polivy & Herman, 2002; Stice et al., 1999). Consistent with these findings is additional research indicating that self-restriction and external attempts to control food intake tend to result in increased food consumption, binge eating, and higher weight status (see Polivy & Herman, 2002, for a review). Thus, it appears that the cultural focus on being thin and fit may indirectly fuel the obesity crisis. In order to ameliorate adolescents’ health, and help them to maintain a healthy weight status, it is important to help them redirect their energy away from efforts to maintain an unrealistic, idealistically thin and/or muscular physique and towards feeling positive about their bodies and making healthy long-term choices about food and physical activity.

Contemporary Importance of Understanding Adolescents’ Body Image: Disordered Eating

In addition to links between body image and obesity, research has established links between body image concerns and disordered eating. Body dissatisfaction has been found to consistently predict disordered and maladaptive eating behaviors as well as other psychological problems (e.g., clinical eating disorders, depression) among girls (Smolak, 2004, Stice & Bearman, 2001; Stice & Shaw, 2002). In fact, Stice’s meta-analysis (2002)
suggests that body dissatisfaction is one of the most significant predictors of disordered eating. Different elements of body dissatisfaction (e.g., general appearance concerns versus weight and shape concerns) appear to have different predictive power in determining girls at risk for disordered eating. Usually, more specific body concerns are more predictive of disordered eating (e.g., Shaw, Stice, & Springer, 2004; Stice, 2001; Wertheim, Koerner, & Paxton, 2001). Among boys, body image concerns appear to be concurrently associated with dieting, weight loss strategies, low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, and the adoption of maladaptive body change strategies (e.g., steroid use; see Cafri et al., 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). However, the dearth of studies examining the consequences of body dissatisfaction longitudinally contributes little to our understanding of boys’ and men’s body dissatisfaction and even suggests that longitudinal relations between body dissatisfaction and consequences such as disordered eating may not exist among boys (Ricciardelli et al., 2006).

As mentioned above, weight status plays a role in the development of body image; it has also been found to be associated with eating disorder risk. In one recent study (Babio, Arija, Sancho & Canals, 2008), girls determined to be “at risk” for the development of disordered eating were not only dissatisfied with their bodies but more likely to be relatively heavy (assessed using body mass index), more calorie-restrictive, and more vulnerable to sociocultural influences of the model of thinness. Thus, contemporary models of the etiology of eating disorders should include not only body image, but biological (e.g., weight and pubertal status) as well as sociocultural influences (e.g., parent and peer influences; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Body dissatisfaction is clearly a primary predictor but not the only
factor contributing to disordered eating; body dissatisfaction in combination with other risk factors heightens the likelihood of adolescents’ vulnerability to disordered eating.

Developmental Significance of Body Image

Although research examining body image has increased in recent years due to concerns regarding the developmental consequences of body dissatisfaction (Smolak, 2004), it is not just the consequences of body dissatisfaction that warrant developmental researchers’ contributions to body image research. Psychologists who study adolescents are uniquely suited to understand body image in the context of other physical, psychological, and social experiences that accompany the adolescent years.

Puberty. The physical development that accompanies the adolescent years is more extensive than that experienced at any other time of life (aside from infancy). As children grow into adults, they must adjust to a new physical form that may seem desirable, strange, and awkward to them all at the same time. Developmental research (see Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990) elucidates the significance of puberty as a physical change and as a socially-embedded experience with implications for body image.

Girls’ physical changes that accompany puberty often bring them further from the cultural ideal of beauty (which is, essentially, prepubertal in appearance; Brumberg, 1997). Girls’ typically gain a significant amount of weight (~ 25 lbs) during puberty (Warren, 1983), and weight status is often viewed as the most reliable correlate of body dissatisfaction (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003a). Although different studies suggest the effects of these physical changes vary in severity and importance relative to other factors (e.g., sociocultural influences) in predicting girls’ body image, most reveal puberty as a
risk factor for girls’ body dissatisfaction (Compian, Gowen, & Hayward, 2004; Hermes & Keel, 2003; O’Dea & Abraham, 1999). The timing of girls’ pubertal development relative to their peers also appears to be significant, with earlier developers more inclined to gain more weight and most likely to report greater body dissatisfaction (Ackard & Peterson, 2001; Archibald et al., 2003; Ge, Elder, Regnerus, & Cox, 2001). Further, some research supports mediation models indicating that puberty predicts body dissatisfaction, which in turn predicts depression and/or lowered self-esteem (Siegel, Yancey, Aneshensel, & Schuler, 1999; Williams & Currie, 2000). One exception to these findings concerns girls’ breast development, which appears to be positively associated with girls’ body image (Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1988).

Research focusing on links between boys’ pubertal experience and body image is not abundant and presents less conclusive findings. In contrast to research addressing girls, some body image research suggests that puberty may present a risk factor for boys’ body image because during the transition to puberty, boys tend to desire to be larger (i.e., more muscular) and more developed than they perceive themselves to be (Yuan, 2007). Related, boys’ attempts to change their bodies (i.e, through weight lifting, food supplement use, or even steroid use) have been linked with their pubertal status (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2003; McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Finemore, 2002). However, post-pubertal boys tend to have higher body satisfaction than do boys who are pre-pubertal or currently experiencing puberty (O’Dea & Abraham, 1999). Thus, although puberty may present a body image challenge for many boys, the ultimate result of puberty appears to be favorable for most boys.
Identity. Identity development has long been viewed (see Erikson, 1950; 1968) as a central task of adolescent development. Body image is an aspect of identity and as such, its development is particularly salient to adolescents. Researchers such as Harter (see 1988; 2003) have described different constructs that contribute to adolescents’ sense of self including academic competence, popularity and social acceptance, romantic appeal, and physical appearance. Relevant to researchers’ understanding of body image development, Harter’s work (e.g., 2001; 2003) suggests that adolescents’ perceptions of their physical appearance contributes most significantly to their overall sense of self. With changing bodies to make sense of, adolescents’ views of their bodies no doubt contribute to their physical appearance self-concepts and, in turn, to their identity development (Frost & McKelvie, 2004; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999).

Identity exploration can be a confusing process for adolescents and seems to parallel, especially for girls, a decrease in self-esteem during this developmental period. As mentioned earlier, pubertal development may contribute to this decrease in both body satisfaction and self-esteem (Siegel et al., 1999; Williams & Currie, 2000). However, some research suggests that relatively high self-esteem may protect girls from experiencing body dissatisfaction and adolescents who have positive feelings about their appearance tend to have relatively high global self-worth (Mendelson, Mendelson, & Andrews, 2000; Paxton, Eisenber, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006).

Identity development does not take place in a vacuum but is believed to be heavily influenced by cultural context (Shweder, et al.,1998). Further, research suggests the importance of considering adolescents’ cultural and ethnic background in efforts to understand their body image (Markey, 2004). Unfortunately, research addressing links
among body image, ethnic identity and general identity development remains limited (in part, by relatively homogenous samples and samples too small to allow for cross-ethnic comparisons) and somewhat inconclusive. Cultural constructs have been viewed as both protective and harmful in the development of both identity and body image. Researchers (see Altabe, 1998; Wildes, Emergy, & Simons, 2001) have suggested that African American girls are protected from body dissatisfaction and disordered eating because African American cultural ideals have historically been more robust and voluptuous than “main stream, white” ideals. However, some research (see Poran, 2006) suggests that African American girls are at increasing risk of body and appearance-related concerns. Further, the process of acculturation and loss of ethnic identification have been discussed as risk factors for body dissatisfaction among Asian American and Latina girls (Iyer & Haslam, 2003; Miller & Pumariega, 2001). Similar to much of the body image literature, research addressing issues of body image and identity development is biased in its focus on girls and women and leaves questions about associations among adolescent boys. However, some research (e.g., Hebl, King, & Lin., 2004; Miller & Pumariega, 2001; Shaw, Ramirez, Trost, Randal, & Stice, 2004) suggests body image concerns are central to identity development, regardless of gender or ethnic background.

**Family Relationships.** Adolescents’ relationships with their family members, particularly their parents, change during this developmental period. Research suggests that adolescents and their parents share less physical intimacy and communication patterns shift to include both increasing emotional connectedness and increasing conflict (Larson & Richards, 1994). These relationship changes are speculated to be linked with physical changes accompanying puberty (see Steinberg, 1987) and have the potential to
impact parents’ influence on their adolescents’ developing body image (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003b). Specifically, certain elements of family functioning have been linked to adolescents’ body image and disordered eating behaviors. Low levels of family expressiveness have been found to predict body dissatisfaction (Babio, Arija, Sancho & Canals, 2008), most likely indicating that families relatively low in qualities including warmth and emotional support are more apt to raise adolescents who are insecure in general and worried about their appearance more than are other adolescents. Longitudinal research examining both adolescent girls and boys further shows a link between parental support deficits and future increases in body dissatisfaction (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006).

Some research addressing family influences on body image highlights the gendered-nature of these associations. In particular, mothers’ influences appear more consequential for girls’ body image development and fathers’ influences appear more consequential for boys’ body image development (Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000; Ericksen, Markey, & Tinsley, 2003; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). This influence begins prior to adolescence, but may become more salient to adolescents as their bodies take their adult form. Parents’ influences may be most significant when they are explicit, such as actively encouraging their adolescent to try to lose weight or participate in particular dieting techniques (Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998; Wertheim et al., 1999). Some research suggests that adolescents who report receiving messages from their parents regarding food restriction or exercise behaviors were are likely to participate in the prescribed behaviors (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000). Further, this research suggests that messages from fathers are predictive
of both strategies to lose weight and increase muscles among boys, with girls’ mothers being primary influences on their body change strategies.

Some research suggests that parents may indirectly teach their adolescents to be dissatisfied with their bodies. Parents’ behavioral correlates of their own body dissatisfaction (e.g., dieting, complaining about their appearance) are associated with similar attitudes and behaviors among their children (Fisher, Sinton, & Birch, 2009; Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Robinson-O’Brien, 2008; Keery, Eisenberg, Boutelle, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006). Further, parents’ dominant role in food socialization is relevant to our understanding of adolescents’ body image development given findings linking children’s weight status, parental regulation of children’s food intake, and both parent and child weight concerns (e.g., Davison, et al., 2000; Fisher, et al., 2009). Although the majority of this research seems to indicate that parents are not necessarily positive influences on body image development, it is important to note that when parents convey positive body image messages, their adolescents are found to report feeling more positively about their bodies (Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000).

Peer Relationships. The adolescent years are an important developmental period for the establishment and alteration of relationships with peers. Recent research (e.g., Jones and Crawford, 2006) suggests the important role peers may play in shaping adolescents’ feelings about their bodies. This research indicates that both adolescent girls and boys talk with their friends about their appearances and changing their appearances (e.g., dieting, muscle building) and peers’ feedback is associated with adolescents’ behavioral attempts to alter their bodies (see also Clark & Tiggemann 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003b). Girls appear somewhat more likely than boys to compare
themselves to both their same-sex peers and other models in appraising their appearance
(Jones, 2004), but social comparison has negative body image consequences for both
boys and girls (Jones, 2001). Some research (e.g., Jones et al., 2006) suggests that boys
may experience more pressure from peers to change their bodies than girls do. Other
research highlights girls’ friends as among the most consequential influences on
adolescents’ body image and attempts to change their bodies, with peers being more
influential than parents (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005;
Shroff, & Thompson, 2006). Additional research that examines the ways in which both
boys and girls deflect and/or internalize the messages they receive from their peers about
their bodies will extend current findings and help clarify discrepancies across studies.

Explicit negative feedback from peers in the form of appearance-related teasing
has been found to be particularly detrimental to the development of body image (e.g.,
Cash, 1995; Davison & Birch, 2002). A large portion of adolescents (approximately 33%
of boys and 50% of girls; Eisenberg et al., 2006) report being teased about their bodies.
Teasing often begins prior to adolescence and has been shown to be associated with
weight status at both extremes (Kostanski & Gullone, 2007). Girls are more likely to be
teased about their appearance when they are overweight, but boys who are either
overweight or underweight are vulnerable to peer teasing (Kostanski & Gullone, 2007).
Regardless of the focus of peers’ teasing, correlates of adolescents’ experiences of
.teasing include low body esteem, body dissatisfaction, and an interest in changing their
physical appearance (Cash, 1995; Davison & Birch, 2002; Eisenberg et al., 2006; Lunde,
Frisen, & Hwang, 2006; Markey & Markey, 2009). Of course, peers are not the only
source of appearance teasing; family members are often implicated in this research as
well (e.g., Keery, Boutelle, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2005). The extent to which peer influences are significant predictors of adolescents’ body images relative to other influences (e.g., family) or in combination with other influences requires additional exploration.

**Romantic Relationships.** The development of romantic relationships typically begins during the adolescent years. However, little research addresses potential links between romantic relationship experiences and the development of adolescents’ body image. As might be expected, adolescent girls with higher weight statuses have been found to be less likely to report romantic relationship experiences and a sense of romantic competence than are those with lower weight statuses (Halpern, King, Oslak, & Udry, 2005; Mendelson, Mendelson, & Andrews, 2000). Further, some research suggests that adolescent girls who are in romantic relationships may be more likely to try to change their bodies via dieting than are their peers who are not in relationships (Halpern et al., 2005) and perceived pressure to be thin from romantic partners has been associated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating across time (L. Shoemaker, personal communication, August 5, 2009).

The mating literature (which, typically focuses on adults) suggests the importance of physical appearance (including body shape; see Singh, 1993; Markey et al., 2004) in mate selection and relies heavily on evolutionary theory to explain men’s greater concern than women’s about partners’ physical appearance. Once in romantic relationships, young men’s and women’s own body satisfaction has been found to be correlated with their perceptions of their romantic partners’ satisfaction with their bodies (Goins & Markey, 2009; Markey & Markey, 2006). Tantleff-Dunn and Thompson (1995) go as far
as to suggest that romantic partners may not only shape women’s feelings about their bodies, but may influence their vulnerability to disordered eating and their general psychological health. One study addressing romantic partners’ influence on young men’s body image suggests positive associations between body image and sexual intimacy in romantic relationships (Goins & Markey, 2009). Thus, although current research in this area focuses mostly on adults and requires speculation about the parallel experiences of romantic relationship development and body image development during adolescence, it appears that this may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

**Media Influences.** Adolescent development is unquestionably influenced by media culture, especially as the 21st century presents an ever-increasing number of options for engaging with various forms of the media ranging from the internet to cell phones (Levesque, 2007). Although it has long been suggested that idealized media images may negatively influence impressionable youths, research now provides evidence to support the negative effects of the media on body image (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2006; Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Markey & Markey, 2009). Not surprisingly, this research is limited by its almost exclusive focus on adolescent girls, but it does utilize creative methodologies that are both correlational and experimental in nature (e.g., Harrison, 2003; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003).

Research examining links between adolescents’ media exposure and their body image suggests that exposure to idealized media images leads to decreased body satisfaction (e.g, Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002). Some research (e.g., Mooney, Farley, & Strugnell, 2009) suggests that media celebrities are particularly influential on girls’ feelings about their bodies and their
attempts to alter the appearance of their bodies through dieting. As girls proceed through adolescence, they appear to become increasingly aware of sociocultural messages regarding thinness presented in the media, internalize these messages, and compare themselves to beauty ideals presented in the media, which may contribute to body dissatisfaction, decreases in self-esteem, and increases in depression (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2006; Durkin & Paxton, 2002). Although the majority of this research examines culturally homogeneous samples, research examining ethnic samples (e.g., Latina girls) presents similar findings: media exposure is associated with the development of body dissatisfaction during adolescence (Schooler, 2008). One recent study suggests that the messages about physical attractiveness that youths derive from the media are similar, regardless of their ethnic background (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2009). Further, boys (although understudied) do not appear to be immune to the effects of the media. In one study, preadolescent boys’ concerns about their muscularity were linked to their exposure to video gaming magazines (Harrison & Bond, 2007).

Body dissatisfaction among adolescents could be expected to be even higher than it is if all adolescents were equally vulnerable to the media messages they receive about what constitutes an attractive physique in most western cultures. However, some research suggests that adolescents who are more concerned about their appearance or value their appearance relatively more than their peers may be especially vulnerable to media influences (Durkin, Paxton, & Sorbello, 2007). Research addressing both boys and girls suggests that adolescents’ media exposure triggers perceptions of their own bodies as discrepant from the ideal, which may increase susceptibility to disordered eating (Harrison, 2001; Harrison & Hefner, 2006). Adolescents’ internalization of media
messages begins prior to adolescence and may be encouraged by other socialization agents, particularly peers. For example, some research suggests that even young girls are susceptible to media influences on body dissatisfaction, but that media influences may not be direct, and are instead mediated by peer appearance conversations (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). In other words, peers may play an integral role in deciphering media messages and valuing them in terms of their importance and relevance (Krayer, Ingledew & Iphofen, 2008). Consistent with research suggesting the potential interactive and cumulative effects of the media and other socializing agents, Levesque (2007) has cautioned that simple interpretations of media influences may be incomplete and that future research is needed to understand how the media interacts with other sociocultural and personality influences in shaping adolescent development.

Research has yet to clearly determine how adverse effects of the media may be avoided or ameliorated to support positive body image development among adolescents. Schooler and colleagues (2006) suggest the potentially important role of parents in restricting access to some media. Further, parents who use media (e.g., television coviewing) with their adolescents may be able to improve adolescents’ healthy attitudes and behaviors (Schooler, Kim, & Sorsoli, 2006). Research assessing the efficacy of educational interventions focusing on media literacy among children and adolescents will further contribute to our understanding of the development of healthy body images among adolescents (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2006).

Conclusions and Future Directions
Research consistently suggests that adolescents are at risk for body dissatisfaction and that this dissatisfaction has the potential to negatively impact their social relationships, health, and well-being. As this entry indicates, body image is an important construct for researchers (as well as health care providers and laypersons) to consider even if they are not necessarily concerned with the clinical ramifications of body dissatisfaction. It is critically important that future research helps to clarify factors that could help improve adolescent girls’ and boys’ body image so that they can grow up to become happy and well-adjusted men and women.

The current trend in body image research is towards a contextual understanding of body image among both girls and boys. Specifically, longitudinal research that follows children and adolescents into adulthood is needed to discern the long-term correlates and consequences of body dissatisfaction. Further, although a great deal of progress has been made (e.g., Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2009; Hermes & Keel, 2003) towards understanding how cultural and ethnic background contributes to the development of body image, additional work remains. Finally, experimental designs, interventions, and creative methodologies that move beyond the survey-based designs that have been so popular in this area of research should enhance our understanding of the development of body image and improve our ability to positively impact adolescents’ body image.

For additional reading:


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