



Young Media Australia fact sheet

Keep your children out of the firing line: body image problems, eating disorders and media messages

The *Through Thick or Thin* series of Fact Sheets has been prepared by Young Media Australia (YMA), sponsored by the Telstra Foundation. There are three Fact Sheets in the series:

- *Television food advertising and childhood obesity*
- *Body image problems, eating disorders and media messages*
- *Strategies for parents to counter television food advertising*

This Fact Sheet discusses:

- children's development of body image
- body image problems and eating disorders
- role played by media messages
- *what* children and adolescents watch is important
- *motivations* for watching also important
- Role played by other factors
- what can parents do.

Children's development of body image

A child's body image begins to develop from infancy, when very young babies first become aware of what their bodies feel like and what they can do. Caregivers' reactions to the child's body and appearance are an important factor in shaping how they feel about their bodies through childhood. A gender difference emerges quite early as boys learn to view their bodies as tools to master their environment, whereas girls learn that their bodies should be used to attract others" (Groesz et al, 2002, p2).

As children approach adolescence, they become increasingly aware of what society's standards are for the "ideal body" and social comparison plays more of a role in their self-perception.

In the last ten years, however, there are many alarming reports of children as young as nine expressing dissatisfaction with their bodies, with one survey reporting that 40% of the 9–10 year old girls surveyed have tried to lose weight (National Institute on Media and the Family, 2002, p1).

Body image problems and eating disorders

A child or adolescent is considered to have body image problems if they have negative thoughts and feelings about their body, often only modestly related to their actual appearance. There can be a number of negative consequences of body dissatisfaction, such as lowered self-esteem, anxiety, depression, social anxiety, sexual difficulties, excessive dieting and eating disorders (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2002, p287).

The female ideal has become progressively thinner over years. A typical female model is now often as much as 20% underweight, with 15% underweight a diagnostic criterion for anorexia nervosa.

The National Institute on Media and the Family reports that at age thirteen, 53% of American girls are 'unhappy with their bodies', reaching 78% by the time they are seventeen (US National Institute on Media and the Family, 2002, p1).

Marika Tiggemann, leading Australian researcher in this field states "Most people are perfectly healthy but cannot look like the TV stars without doing something unhealthy. A whole heap of people are unnecessarily miserable about this and waste energy on something that is trumped up" (Mundell, 2005, p1).

Role played by media messages

Research consistently shows that the media may also play a part in the development of body image problems and eating disorders:

- there is a marked link between TV watching, and negative body image and eating disorders. (Becker, A, 2002, p509)
- body image for females is significantly more negative after viewing thin media images (Groesz et al., 2002, p11)
- after viewing commercials depicting women with the unrealistically thin-ideal type of beauty, teenage girls feel less confident, more angry and more dissatisfied with their weight and appearance (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2002, p287).



- although men currently suffer lower levels of body concern, the findings suggest that as muscular male ideas are increasingly promoted in the media, boys and men will also increasingly experience dissatisfaction together with potentially harmful behavioural consequences (Tiggemann, 2005, p206)
- those who read more 'fashion' magazines are also more likely to have body image problems.

What children and adolescents watch is important

Recent research by Dr Marika Tiggemann finds that the total time spent watching television is not related to any of the body image variables assessed (Tiggemann, 2005, p205). *What* young people watch is more problematic:

Soap operas

- watching of soap operas is correlated with the internalization of cultural beauty ideals and drive for thinness in both girls and boys, and for the drive for muscularity in boys
- although soap operas present themselves as being about everyday life, there is an over-representation of conflict, divorce, expensive product, serious illness, crimes and jail
- being attractive and thin is associated with being rich and high status
- repeated exposure to soap operas may contribute to self-objectification, the process by which women and girls in our society are gradually socialized to view themselves in objectified terms and to evaluate themselves primarily on the basis of appearance (Tiggemann, 2005, p207).

Music videos

- some researchers have found a correlation between watching music videos and body image problems
- music videos present images and styles of 'what's cool' that young people want to copy
- the images presented are largely divorced from contemporary reality.

Commercials

- commercials that use attractive, slim models and muscled men to link success and happiness with appearance have been shown to cause body image dissatisfaction with both boys and girls (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2002, p287).

Motivations for watching also important

Tiggemann also finds that the adolescent's *motivations* for watching are important. While watching television for enjoyment appears to be completely benign, problems can occur when television is watched:

- to stave off unhappy feelings,
- as a means of social learning.

Role played by other factors

Several factors will make some girls more susceptible to body image problems and the development of eating disorders:

- age is a factor: under 19s are more at risk than older girls / women, and 13–15 year olds seem particularly vulnerable;
- girls who enter adolescence, having already internalized the slender beauty ideal, with a strong investment in their personal appearance and a high level of body dissatisfaction and shape concerns;
- there is more body dissatisfaction amongst girls who identify with models, boys who identify with athletes, and both boys and girls who identify with TV stars;
- certain personality and family dynamics play a part in the development of eating disorders.

What can parents do

Do reality checks. Occasionally, when you are out shopping or some other public place with your children, ask them how many people they see that look like the people they see on television.

From an early age do whatever you can to **develop self esteem in your child** that is not linked to how they look or what they have. Groesz et al (2002) report that females aged 10–25 who have low self esteem and poor body image are particularly likely to seek out and 'enjoy' advertisements with slender, attractive models (Groesz et al, 2002, p12).

Develop your child's **media literacy** (see box next page).

Help your children understand that **beliefs that link 'beauty' with happiness and success are mistaken**. More than that, they are specifically designed this way in order to manipulate the viewer into buying the advertised products.

Lobby governments and industry bodies for a more responsible attitude to marketing.

For more detail about strategies for parents see related Fact Sheet *Keep your children out of the firing line: strategies for parents to counter television food advertising*

Media literacy for adolescents

Tiggemann suggests that media literacy education for adolescents can help reduce their body concerns and disordered eating. Areas to focus on could include:

- skills in resisting media pressure
- awareness about air-brushing and image distortion technique
- ability to think critically about the complex and subtle, but highly pervasive messages, that link appearance and body type with success and happiness
- awareness of their television viewing habits, including their motivations for watching television
- investigation and pursuit of ways to meet social learning needs, other than from television viewing.

Adapted from Tiggemann (2005)

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