Body Image Satisfaction, Dieting Beliefs, and Weight Loss Behaviors in Adolescent Girls and Boys

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Body image and weight loss beliefs and behaviors were assessed in 341 female and 221 male high school students. Estimates of body dissatisfaction varied depending on the measurement strategy used. Despite having similar weight distributions around the expected norm, girls were significantly more dissatisfied with their bodies than boys. Body Mass Index was positively related to body dissatisfaction in girls and boys, while higher exercise levels were related to higher body satisfaction in boys. Nearly two-thirds of girls and boys believed being thinner would have an impact on their lives, but the majority of girls

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believed this would be positive while the majority of boys believed this would be negative. Thirteen percent of female subjects reported using one or more extreme weight loss behavior at least weekly. Beliefs regarding the effectiveness of different weight loss measures were assessed. Weight loss behaviors in this Australian sample appear similar to comparable U.S. samples.

INTRODUCTION

Research in the past decade has pointed to a high prevalence of body dissatisfaction and weight loss behaviors among adolescents, especially girls (e.g., Crowther et al., 1985; Desmond et al., 1986; Eisele et al., 1986; Rosen and Gross, 1987). These findings are a cause for concern since poor body image and weight loss behaviors have been associated with disordered eating in female adolescent samples (Attie and Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Crowther et al., 1985; Grant and Fodor, 1986; Gross and Rosen, 1988; Johnson et al., 1984).

In reviewing the literature, however, it becomes clear that not all studies find similar proportions of subjects reporting body dissatisfaction. Eisele et al. (1986) found that 78% of 12–14-year-old girls would prefer to weigh less and only 14% reported they were satisfied with their current weight. A similar level (83%) of dissatisfaction was found by Storz and Greene (1983) in 14–18-year-old girls, while Desmond et al. (1986) reported that 43% of females and 9% of males classified as a normal weight described themselves as heavy. In contrast, Cohn et al. (1987) found no significant difference between actual and ideal figure in 10.5–15-year-old girls, although 38% had a thinner ideal than their current figure. The variation between the studies may reflect different subject characteristics, or alternatively, different methods of assessing body satisfaction. A first aim of the present study, therefore, is to examine body satisfaction using a variety of methods of measurement to examine whether different methods yield different results. In addition, since two studies (Cohn et al., 1987; Eisele et al., 1986) indicate that body dissatisfaction may increase after puberty in girls (though not in boys), a variety of age levels will be examined to assess whether variations in results may be attributed to age differences.

Although previous studies indicate considerable body weight dissatisfaction, especially in girls, they do not provide information regarding why adolescents want a different body size. Therefore, this study examined the perceived impact of being thinner. Further, since it appears that boys place greater value on physical effectiveness than appearance (Grant and Fodor, 1986), satisfaction with physical fitness and beliefs regarding the benefits of physical fitness were also examined.