



UNH Center on
Adolescence

A Healthy Body Image

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Body image is “not so much our actual appearance or how we seem to others, but our own internal view of how we look, how we think we appear to others, and how we feel about our looks.”¹ Much of the current research on adolescent body image is aimed at body image disturbance and dissatisfaction, and investigates how youth view their bodies negatively or in comparison to ideals as presented by the media. This research, while informative, can be detrimental. It pays little attention to those youth who are satisfied with their bodies, and it also neglects the possibility of youth being able to use their bodies for empowerment, growth, and change. Moreover, there is a shortage of research on male body image. This lack of information about males reinforces the public’s conception that only females worry about how they look. In a similar vein, many people assume that all youth have the same kinds of concerns when it comes to their bodies, failing to consider differences between individuals related to or associated with ethnicity and cultural affiliation. Consistent with the UNH Center on Adolescence’s goal to support positive youth development, this fact sheet highlights more positive aspects of body image in adolescence, and suggests ways to support *all* adolescents in celebrating and becoming more positive about their bodies.

Fast Facts

- ◆ Those girls who are African-American, Asian, or of high socioeconomic status are more likely to be satisfied with their weight and proud of their bodies.²
- ◆ Black females’ ideals of beauty are more congruent with their current body size than are white girls’.³ Moreover, African-American girls’ definitions of beauty are more likely to be fluid, flexible, and focused on character traits than are white girls’.⁴
- ◆ Boys are prouder of their bodies and more satisfied with their weights than girls are: 73% of boys exhibit body pride, while only 47% of girls do. These statistics may partially explain why males constitute only 5-15% of all cases of anorexia and bulimia.⁵
- ◆ Eighteen percent (18%) of NH girls are overweight or at risk of being overweight. However, 40% think that they are overweight, and 67% are trying to lose weight. The statistics for NH boys are far more consistent: 28% are overweight or at risk of being overweight, 21% think that they are overweight, and 24% of them are trying to lose weight.⁶
- ◆ NH youth are moving their bodies! When surveyed, 72% of males and 56% of females stated that they participated in physical activity that made them sweat for at least 20 minutes on at least 3 of the previous 7 days. Moreover, 60% of male and 54% of female youth participated on at least 1 sports team over the last year.
- ◆ Heterosexual men and lesbians are less likely than gay men and heterosexual women to experience body dissatisfaction and body image concerns.⁷

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How can we help youth feel good about their bodies?

◆ Collaborate with youth to create meaningful coming-of-age rituals

Many body image disturbances come about during puberty, when the body changes rapidly and youth attempt to make sense out of these sudden changes. Oftentimes, youth meet these changes with guilt and shame.⁸ Unfortunately, Western culture has traditionally not instituted meaningful coming-of-age rituals or ceremonies that celebrate and demarcate males' and females' physical and emotional changes.⁹ Youth can be made aware of other cultures' and religions' celebratory rites of passage, and then collaborate with their peers, mentors, and extended family to create their own, so that the experience of puberty is viewed as an *entry* into the possibilities of growing up, rather than as an *exit* from the comforts of childhood. Although the example of gift-giving to commemorate a girls' first period is a good start in establishing these sorts of rituals and celebrations, it may be limiting because it reduces a complex and lengthy developmental period (puberty) to a one-time event (menarche), and it gives the false impression that girls without their periods have yet to enter puberty. Instead, the entire developmental period of "growing up" should be the focus of such rituals. For instance, youth may be encouraged to "create a special book or journal to express [their] feelings through the years. This may include keepsakes, drawing, or poems." Also, as they progress through puberty, youth may be invited to join men's and women's groups in privileged outings so that they begin to feel like a part of the adult world.

◆ Include critical media literacy in the classroom



Most media promote idealized images that encourage thinness for females and muscularity for boys. In Argentina, anorexia is even referred to as "fashion model syndrome". All youth can benefit from critically examining media images for inherent sexist messages, as well as airbrushing and other techniques that make the ideal man and woman unrealistic. Following such an examination, youth can be encouraged to generate *their own* list of alternatives to these ideals, as well as strategies for creating their own media or reforming the existing media into a more realistic enterprise. Girls Inc. (www.girlsinc.org) already includes critical media literacy in its curriculum.

◆ Partner with youth in mobilizing politically

Youth can be active agents in changing media portrayals of both males and females. By advocating for curriculum changes in health and sexual education classes, as well as by fighting discrimination in the local and national press, youth not only attain a sense of self-efficacy, but also learn how to put their energy and concerns to a constructive and meaningful use. Parents, other adults, and mentors can become partners in this process. One website, www.about-face.org, invites readers to send in magazine ads to include in its collection of ads that celebrate women and diversity. Another website, www.femmerevolution.8m.com, includes a list of the addresses of most popular girls' magazines in hopes that girls will write and speak up. To date, there are no such websites for boys, although boys' body image concerns and the media's ideal of exaggerated muscularity are quickly becoming "hot topics" of study.¹⁰



◆ Encourage girls to “model” what their bodies can do

Advertisements and magazines frequently display females in provocative, static positions that highlight their appearance, yet offer no indication of the person behind the appearance. Girls can benefit from taking photographs or having photographs taken of themselves and their friends that are action-oriented, and underscore what their bodies can *do* rather than *what they look like*.¹¹ For example, these photographs may show girls playing sports, coaching children, dancing, or “mouthing off” to the camera. In this way, girls can model situations where they are engaged with their bodies in meaningful ways. Framing these pictures and making them frequently accessible to girls is an effective way of reminding them that their bodies can do more than simply pose.



◆ Focus on how youth decorate their bodies

As mentioned previously, many of the current studies on body image investigate only the body, yet clothing, accessories, hairstyle, and makeup are all adornments to the body that are largely in the control of adolescents. As such, these elements of self-presentation can serve as a creative venue for adolescents, in which they can express themselves and experiment with different “looks,” regardless of their body type and level of satisfaction. Parents and those who work with youth can help by encouraging flexibility in self-presentation, so that youth can step outside of the rigid body expectations that today’s media present. Parents can go shopping with their children, helping to navigate the commercialized world of appearance.

◆ Begin the formation of a mutually-agreed upon “body” vocabulary

Adolescents do not have an updated vocabulary with which they can discuss the ways that they experience their bodies. Especially relevant is the construction of a set of words that youth can use to discuss the sexual nature of their bodies. Because many youth are embarrassed by the pubertal and sexual changes taking place within their bodies, brainstorming with professionals and parents about a set of non-medical and non-intimidating words to use to talk about these changes could de-sensitize youth to the embarrassing effects of these changes, create a forum for more open conversation, and allow youth a voice in determining how their unique culture is spoken about. Words *can* make a difference. For example, some cultures reframe obesity in more positive terms, like the popular Puerto Rican compliment *gordita buena*, which means “pretty little plump one”.¹² Exposing youth to different cultures’ vocabularies and perceptions can aid in the process of constructing an updated vocabulary.

◆ Use intergenerational and intercultural groups

By being exposed to people of other generations and cultures, youth can begin to contextualize the body ideals of their time, and understand that these expectations were not always the ideal. Girls, for example, might benefit from knowing that their grandmothers think a rounder body is more attractive, and White girls might benefit from knowing that their African-American counterparts prize a more curvaceous body. Boys, too, may profit from learning that previous generations did not prize muscularity to the high degree that today’s popular culture does. By using art history lessons and lectures, teachers and community leaders can introduce youth to art and paintings from previous eras, thereby showing them how people’s bodies have been depicted differently at various historical times by those with creative vision. By adding to their repertoire of ideal body types, this kind of information empowers youth to question the common assumption that there is only one rigid idea of what constitutes an attractive body.

◆ Assist youth in paying attention to where their money goes



The media suggests that youth today can be happy and attractive if they buy the right products. By examining what they spend their money on, youth can see how much money they are putting back into the fashion and cosmetic industries. Youth can be encouraged to spend their money on meaningful and significant purchases that reflect the people they are, not the people they are being told to be by society. By asking youth, *If looks didn't matter at all, what would you spend your money on?*, parents and professionals can help youth hone in on their unique strengths and interests.¹³

◆ Promote resistance

Resistance is defined by “that which stands against” dominant norms¹⁴. Studies of resistance grew out of research on African-American women, and the ways in which they celebrated their differences. Those who work with youth can encourage them to identify, celebrate, and embellish their own differences in appearance within an agenda of self-expression and self-differentiation. Youth can be exposed to examples of real-life resisters (for example, women and men who go against popular norms, people of various ethnicity who highlight and celebrate their cultural identities, fat activists, and subcultural participants like punks and Goths).

This Fact Sheet was reviewed by Kristine Baber, Ph.D., and Gretchen Bean, MA.

¹ Thompson, J.K., Heinberg, L.J., Altabe, M., & Tantleff-Dunn, S. (1999). *Exacting beauty: Theory, assessment, and treatment of body image disturbance*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

² Story, M., French, S.A., Resnick, M.D., & Blum, R.W. (1995). Ethnic/ racial and socioeconomic differences in dieting behaviors and body image perceptions in adolescents. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 18, 173-179.

³ Rucker III, C.E. & Cash, T.F. (1992). Body images, body size perceptions, and eating behaviors among african-american and white college women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 12(3), 291-300.

⁴ Parker, S., Nichter, M., Nichter, M., & Vuckovic, N., Sims, C., & Ritenbaugh, C. (1995). Body image and weight concerns among african-american and white adolescent girls: Differences that make a difference. *Human Organization*, 54(2), 103-114.

⁵ The National Institute for Mental Health at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov> Accessed 11/04/04

⁶ 2003 NH Youth Risk Behavior Survey at <http://www.ed.state.nh.us/education/doe/organization/instruction/HealthHIVAIDS/2003YRBSResults.htm> Accessed 10/28/04

⁷ Siever, M.D. (1994). Sexual orientation and gender as factors in socioculturally acquired vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 62(2), 252-260.

⁸ Brumberg, J.J. (1997). *The body project*. New York: Vintage Books.

⁹ “Families are Talking” at http://www.siecus.org/pubs/families/Families_Newsletter4.pdf Accessed 3/8/05

¹⁰ Dotson, E.W. (1990). *Behold the man: The hype and selling of male beauty in media and culture*. New York: The Haworth Press.

¹¹ Lemonick, M.D. (2000, October 30). Teens before their time. *Time*, 67-74.

¹² Hesse-Biber, S. (1996). *Am i thin enough yet?: The cult of thinness and the commercialization of identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹³ About-Face Making Changes at <http://about-face.org/mc/empower/> Accessed 11/02/04

¹⁴ Ward, J.V. (1996). Raising resisters: The role of truth telling in the psychological development of African American girls. In B.J.R. Leadbetter & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls* (pp. 85-99). New York: New York University Press.