

# RELATIONSHIP OF SELF-ESTEEM AND BODY IMAGE AWARENESS IN ADOLESCENTS

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**Abstract:** Puberty or Age from 12 or 18 years is a period of major transition in forming a positive attitude towards individual's body image and self esteem among adolescents. Self-esteem (self-concept) is defined as self-confidence, sense of personal worth and belief in one's capability. Self-esteem declines substantially during middle adolescence, with changes in body image proposed as a possible explanation. Adolescent's body image that means feelings, appearance and thoughts about their body is central to their health and self-esteem. Adolescent are highly aware of their appearance and invest significant cognitive and emotional resources in their relation with the physical body. This article aims to investigate relationship of self-esteem and body image awareness in adolescents. As we know that adolescents are becoming highly conscious about the newly developed change in their bodies which might affect their sense of self esteem in their life. Self-esteem is the most important predictor of body dissatisfaction, with adolescents having low self-esteem experiencing more body dissatisfaction than those with high self-esteem Griffiths & McCabe, 2000, p. 312.

## Introduction

Body image in adolescence may be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that represents how individuals think, feel, and behave with regards to their own physical attributes (Muth & Cash, 1997). Muth and Cash talk about two facts of body image attitude and they are evaluation (satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's physical attributes) and affect (experience of discrete emotions). Body image is central to adolescent's self-definition, because they have been socialized to believe that appearance is an important basis for self-evaluation and for evaluation by others (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Pubescent girls are becoming intensely anxious and dissatisfied with their naturally developing, fuller bodies (Kater, Rohwer, & Londre, 2002). Yanover and Thompson (2008) write that the body image dissatisfaction might lead to high level of school absenteeism due to social anxiety regarding one's appearance. Kater, et al. and Furnham & Calnan, 1998 found that body image concerns are rapidly increasing among boys too. Athletic abilities are found to define boys' popularity and self-confidence and thus, preadolescent boys report the desire to gain weight by increasing their muscularity (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). The onset of puberty entails bodily changes that, on average, move girls further away from societal standards of female beauty (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005). Young women desire to be perfect when it comes to their physical appearance, and describe their perfect ideal as tall, extremely thin, and slender (Parker, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, & Ritenbauth, 1995 and McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). Unfortunately, this ideal is unattainable to the vast majority of women, contributing to depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders. Worry about body image has become so prevalent among adolescent girls that it has become an expected part of puberty (Kater, et al., 2002). Males, on the other hand, are more likely to increase the size of their body parts and want to have a V-shaped masculine physique with broad shoulders (Furnham & Calnan, 1998 and McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001, 2004). Athletic abilities defined boy's popularity (Coyle, 2009). When the boys achieve their desired physical changes, they are able to move closer to achieving the lean and muscular body as endorsed by western society (McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Finemore, 2002). Research done by (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987 and Furnham & Calnan) has indicated that about 50% of adolescent boys desire to be smaller and 50% want to be larger. Females on the other hand wanted to be smaller (Drewnowski & Yee and Furnham & Calnan). Both adolescents and pre-adolescents are torn between their own actual body image and their perceived body image as a result of messages they get from various sources. The results are often drastic leading to lower self-esteem, dieting behaviours, self-harm, substance abuse, etc.

The term Self-esteem (self-concept) comes from a Greek word meaning "reverence for self." The "self" part of self-esteem pertains to the values, beliefs and attitudes that we hold about ourselves. Simplistically self-esteem is the acceptance of us for whom and what we are at any given time in our lives. Self-esteem is a positive or negative orientation towards oneself, an overall evaluation of one's worth or value. Self-esteem is a widely used concept both in popular language and in psychology.

The concept self-esteem has been a common household word. The word self-esteem cut across all age brackets, starting from infants to late adulthood. Who am I? What is my worth in life? What is my identity? What do I want to achieve? These are common thought processes in humans. Therefore, self-esteem is the totality of one's self evaluation. It is a cognitive process of evaluating one's abilities, values, knowledge and overall capacity. Coles, R. (1970) described identity as the individual attempt to define himself or herself as a unique person. People who are perceived with positive self-esteem demonstrated the following signs: confidence, self-direction, non-blaming others, demonstrates personal strength, optimism, ability to solve problems and ability to control emotions.

## Body Types and Body Image Satisfaction

Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006) say that the desire for thinness is prevalent among women and adolescent girls and has been extended to include young girls also. Girls as young as 5-7 years are dissatisfied with their body size, desire to be smaller, and some have also attempted to diet (Collins, 1991; Kelly, Ricciardelli, & Clarke, 1999; Poudevigne, O'Connor, Laing, Wilson, Modlesky, & Lewis, 2003). Smolak, Levine, and Shermer (1998) write that in the past decade, this problem has affected a growing number of preteen children as well. Dissatisfaction with body shape and size and the desire to be thinner has become the norm for women and girls in American and Western societies (Kater et al., 2002; Tiggemann, 2005). Parkinson, Tove'e & Cohen-Tove'e (1998) found out that girls of all ages want to be leaner than their perceived current shape. Recent research has explained that the most common source of this self-absorbed preoccupation to become thin is the subjective experience of "feeling fat" or fear of "becoming fat", regardless of actual size (Kater et al.). All these studies further confirm that females want to thinner due to cultural and societal pressures. Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore (1986) say that boys as young as 5 years old prefer the mesomorphic body type which is the V-shaped figure with broad shoulders and slim waist

rather than ectomorphic (thin) or endomorphic (fat). Men and adolescents who meet this ideal mesomorphic body type are considered to be more attractive and also receive social acceptance and benefits (Labre, 2002). Folk, Pedersen, & Cullari (1993) found that boys in Grade 6 were more dissatisfied with body weight than boys in Grade 3 and that there was a strong association between body dissatisfaction and a negative self concept, particularly for boys in Grade 6. Another study done by Parkinson, Tove'e & Cohen-Tove'e confirmed that younger boys (Grades 4–5) desired a larger body than their current shape and older boys (Grades 7–8) desired a leaner shape than their perceived current body shape. These studies indicate that as boys get older and move closer to adolescence, they become more aware of the socio-cultural ideal for males and strive for a mesomorphic body type (Furnham & Calnan, 1998; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999 and McCabe & Riccardelli, 2004). McCabe & Riccardelli (2004) and McCabe, Riccardelli, & Finemore (2002) further state that high level of body dissatisfaction among boys lead to even split between wanting to lose weight and wanting to gain weight. This young generation forgets one important concept – just as two people do not have the same finger prints, they are not meant to have the same body types either. Adolescents are too busy pleasing others and constantly worry about what others are thinking about them rather than worry about school. Everyone is unique on their own and they should respect that fact without having to go through extreme turmoil to alter the way they look.

### Age of Physical Development of Adolescent

The age of physical development during adolescents play role in the emotional and social development of an adolescent and has an effect on their body image satisfaction. Girls are usually encouraged to look “pretty” at a very early age to enhance their self-worth and boys on the other hand are encouraged to be “strong”. Petersen and Crockett (1985) believe that adjustment during the adolescent years is affected by the timing of pubertal changes. Girls who mature early, have more academic and behavioural problems than their peers who mature later but they are more popular among the boys during early adolescence (Spencer, Dupree, Swanson, & Cunningham, 2007). On the other hand, boys benefit socially from the increased growth spurt and muscle development at the onset of puberty (Coyle, 2009). During late adolescence, the early maturing girls have lower self-esteem than those who mature later and weigh more and are shorter when their pubertal growth is complete (Spencer et al.). Drewnowski & Yee (1987) write that men's desire to gain weight and increase muscle size is a direct result of the pressures society places on males to be physically fit and athletically successful. According to the deviance hypothesis, early or late maturation places the adolescent in a socially "deviant" category, because of their status to the rest of the peer group and confers either social advantages or disadvantages (Petersen & Crockett, 1985).

### Body Image and Self-esteem

Harter (1999) write the perceptions of physical appearance and self-worth are inextricably linked, such that perceived appearance consistently emerges as the strongest single predictor of self-esteem among both male and female children and adolescents. This link is remarkably strong, with an average correlation of .65 in the US and .62 in other countries such as England, Canada, Italy, Japan, Holland, Ireland, Australia, and Greece (Harter). Physical appearance was found to be having great importance among the popularity and self confidence of girls and athletic abilities was of more importance for the popularity and self confidence of boys (Coyle, 2009). Body satisfaction is positively correlated with self-esteem among boys (Cohane & Pope, 2000). Thus, it comes as no great surprise that adolescent girls, unlike boys, who are not subjected to such unrealistic ideals show a marked decline in perceptions of their physical attractiveness from about 11 years onward (Harter). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008), write that being overweight negatively affects children's psychological and social well-being. Body image dissatisfaction is also associated with negative or low self esteem (Fabian & Thompson, 1989; Lawrence & Thelen, 1995; Clay et al., 2005; and Folk, Pedersen, & Cullari, 1993). Mendelson and White (1982) found that in children, as young as 7, feelings about their body were associated with their self-esteem. McCabe and Ricciardelli (2005) write that physical appearance is critical for adolescent boys and girls development of self-confidence. A study done in UK reported that in girls aged 11-16, experimental exposure to either ultra-thin or average size magazine models lowered body image satisfaction and consequently, self esteem (Clay et al., 2005). Self-esteem is defined as a “positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely, the self” and makes the person feel that he is a person of worth (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 3031). Rosenberg (1965) describes a person of high self-esteem as an individual, who respects himself, considers himself worthy and not better than others, recognizes his limitations, and expects to grow and improve. According to Glasser (1969) the most important aspects of self esteem are a feeling of belonging or of being needed, a sense of being accepted, and a feeling of being a competent person. On the other hand, a person with a low self-esteem shows self rejection, self-dissatisfaction, and self-contempt, lacks self-respect, and paints a disagreeable self-picture (Glasser). When youth reaches adolescence with a negative self-image, they get a feeling of “being stuck” (Morganett, 1990, Pg. 85). Because self-esteem is especially vulnerable during the period from 12 to 14 years, early adolescence is the ideal time for intervention (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). A meta-analysis of self-esteem studies conducted in western nations has confirmed that women's self-esteem is moderately, but significantly, lower than men's and the average gender difference is greatest during middle adolescence peaking at around 16 years of age (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). Clay et al. (2005) says in their research that controlling for family cohesion and stressful life event showed a pronounced and progressive drop in girls' self-esteem from 12 to 17 years of age. Rosenberg (1965) showed that parental involvement and willingness to give adolescents autonomy and freedom are positively correlated to high self-esteem in adolescents.

The perception of appearance and self-worth are linked and perceived appearance is a strong single predictor of self-esteem among both male and female adolescents (Clay et al., 2005). According to Erickson's theory, issues of self worth become prominent in adolescence when the major developmental task is to establish identity and coherent sense of self (Seligman, 2006). Crocker's contingencies of self-worth theory proposes that satisfaction with body impacts on global self-esteem especially among women than for men and has been supported in young adults as well (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette; 2003).

Self-esteem may be another relevant variable with regards to eating disorders, thus leading to body image dissatisfaction (Lawrence & Thelen, 1995). Studies done by (Kelly et al., 1999; Lawrence & Thelen, 1995) found out that pre-adolescent girl who report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and dieting also reported poorer self-esteem. Another recent study done by Tiggemann (2005) and Fabian and Thompson (1989) found that adolescent girls who are heavier, perceive themselves as being overweight, and are dissatisfied with their weight might be vulnerable to developing low self-esteem.

Even though self esteem is something that cannot be touched or seen but it is always there following you like your shadow or the reflection in the mirror. Adolescents with lower self esteem have a lower worth about them and think about themselves as nobody. Once this feeling of worthlessness takes power over their body and self esteem they start falling in this dark hole with few chances of coming out unless intervened at the right time.

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