

# Preferences for being muscular and thin in 6-year-old boys

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 22 February 2018

Received in revised form 10 July 2018

Accepted 10 July 2018

Available online 24 July 2018

### Keywords:

Boys  
Body dissatisfaction  
Muscularity  
Thinness  
Figure rating scales

## ABSTRACT

Body dissatisfaction emerges at an early age in childhood. However, the unique experiences of young boys regarding muscularity have not been examined. Interview responses were collected from 101 6-year-old boys to examine muscularity- and thinness-oriented body dissatisfaction. Both muscularity- and thinness-oriented body dissatisfaction were evident; boys on average selected ideal figure sizes significantly more muscular and significantly thinner than current figures. In addition, a significantly greater proportion of boys wanted to be more muscular (32.6%) than less muscular (16.8%), and thinner (20.8%) rather than larger-fatter (8.9%). Further, boys perceived significantly greater rewards from muscularity than from thinness. Findings demonstrate that muscularity and thinness-oriented body dissatisfaction is present in a substantial proportion of young boys, although a greater proportion are dissatisfied with muscularity than with thinness, suggesting that examination of body image in young boys needs to focus on muscularity dimensions as well as thinness-fatness dimensions.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary discourse suggests that males' body concerns are characterised more by drive for muscularity than for thinness (Murray, Griffiths, & Mond, 2016). Research with adolescent boys and young men has revealed high prevalence of muscularity concerns (Raevuori, Keski-Rahkonen, Rose, Rissanen, & Kaprio, 2006) and adverse effects including use of unhealthy muscle enhancing behaviours (Eisenberg, Wall, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012). Thus, research is needed to examine muscularity-related body image, as an adjunct to examining desire for thinness. Although previous research has examined body image concerns in middle primary-school-aged boys and girls and early primary-school-aged girls (e.g., Ricciardelli, McCabe, Holt, & Finemore, 2003), little research has investigated body image in pre- or early primary-school-aged boys.

The few studies of boys aged 4 to 7 have used thinness-fatness figure rating scales to assess boys' perceptions of their current versus ideal body size, as an indicator of body dissatisfaction, with mixed outcomes. Data from the present sample when aged four years showed that, of the few boys who desired a figure different from current figure (27.8%), a greater proportion selected a larger-

fatter ideal size than current size (77.1%), than selected a thinner ideal size (22.9%; Damiano et al., 2015). Possibly those findings did not reflect body dissatisfaction per se, but that larger-fatter bodies represent being older or having greater physical capability (Birbeck & Drummond, 2006). In older boys, aged 5–8 years, Lowes and Tiggemann (2003) found that the same proportion of boys wanted an ideal figure thinner than current figure (35%), as wanted an ideal figure larger-fatter than current figure (35%). These findings highlight the need to examine multiple dimensions of boys' body image, particularly muscularity.

Qualitative research with young boys provides insight into boys' muscularity-related experiences. Many boys aged 5–7 report that muscle-building activities or demonstrating a muscular physique, reflect the ideal man (Drummond, 2012). Similarly, boys aged 8–10 often report a preference for a muscular, rather than thinner, body size; although they dislike fatness (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2013). These findings align with sociocultural appearance ideals for males, characterised by muscularity and low body fat (Murray et al., 2016).

Sociocultural theory, which posits that body dissatisfaction results from the transmission of sociocultural pressures and expectations about appearance ideals from media, peers, and family, via internalised appearance ideals (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), may inform the examination of body concerns. Indeed, adolescent boys who report internalising appearance ideals (Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2007) and expect benefits from meeting appearance ideals (Simmons, Smith, & Hill, 2002), also report greater body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, adolescent boys'

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internalised ideals mediate relationships between expectations of benefits from meeting appearance ideals and body image-related outcomes (Trekels & Eggermont, 2017). In addition, in adolescent boys, lower appearance-ideal internalisation is associated with greater satisfaction with muscularity (Petrie, Greenleaf, & Martin, 2010). The examination of these relationships in young boys is limited and in need of investigation (Tatangelo, McCabe, Mellor, & Mealey, 2016). Thus, the present study explored relationships between both muscularity- and thinness-related body dissatisfaction and potential correlates: internalisation of appearance ideals and rewards from muscularity and thinness in 6-year-old boys.

We investigated body dissatisfaction (preferences for a muscular- or thin-ideal appearance), and correlates of body dissatisfaction in 6-year-old boys. Guided by previous research, we predicted that on average, 6-year-old boys would select an ideal figure more muscular than, but not thinner than, their current figure. We also predicted that internalisation of both media and athletic appearance ideals and expectancies of rewards of muscularity, but not thinness, would be associated with greater muscularity dissatisfaction and that internalisation would mediate the relationship between expected rewards and body dissatisfaction.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 101 6-year-old boys from a larger longitudinal study in Melbourne, Australia, examining body image in young children (Damiano et al., 2015; Spiel et al., 2016). Participants were recruited at childcare centres and family events when children were 3 years old. The present sample comprised only boys from Wave 4 of data collection, as muscularity assessments were conducted for the first time (only with boys) at this wave. Mothers ( $n=90$ ) and fathers ( $n=57$ ) were highly educated, with 77.8% and 70.2%, respectively, having a university degree. Parent-reported postcode data ( $n=94$ ) suggested 70.2% of families lived in high, 24.5% in average, and 5.3% in disadvantaged socio-economic areas.

### 2.2. Measures

**Demographics.** Parents reported children's date of birth. Interviewers measured children's height and weight. Standardised body mass index (BMI- $z$ ) adjusting for age and gender was calculated (Blössner, Siyam, Borghi, Onyango, & de Onis, 2009).

**Body dissatisfaction.** A 9-figure rating scale (Tiggemann & Pennington, 1990) assessed thinness-fatness body dissatisfaction. Figures looked like young boys and ranged from 1 (*very thin*) to 9 (*very fat*). Boys selected the figure most like themselves (current) and which they would most like to be (ideal) and a discrepancy score (current minus ideal) was calculated. Positive scores reflect desire to be thinner, negative to be larger-fatter. Figure scales have adequate test-retest reliability (Damiano et al., 2015) and construct validity (Truby & Paxton, 2002) in young boys.

Muscularity dissatisfaction was assessed with a 5-figure rating scale (see Fig. 1) adapted from the above scale. The average figure (5) from the thinness-fatness scale was Figure 1 for the muscularity scale and figures increased incrementally in muscularity to Figure 5 (*very muscular*). Boys selected their perceived current and ideal figures, and a discrepancy score (current minus ideal) was calculated. Negative scores reflect desire for greater muscularity, positive scores less muscularity.

**Internalisation of appearance ideals.** Three items (to manage burden) adapted from the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-3 (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004) assessed appearance ideal internalisation: "Would

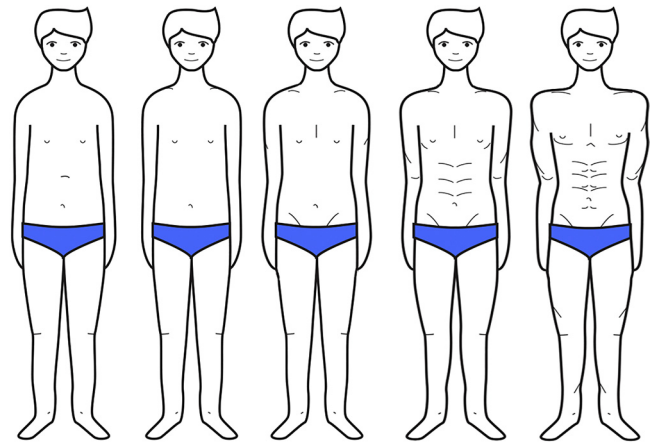


Fig. 1. Muscularity figure rating scale.

you like your body to look like the bodies of people in the movies/on television/of sports people?" Responses were coded as 0 (*no*) or 1 (*yes*); unsure responses as missing. The first two items were summed to reflect media appearance ideals internalisation (inter-item  $\rho = .72$ ). The last item reflected athletic appearance ideals.

**Rewards of appearance ideals.** Rewards of muscularity and thinness were each assessed with three items (e.g., "Do you think having muscles [. . . being thin. . .] helps you make more friends?") adapted from the Media Attitudes Questionnaire (Irving, DuPen, & Berel, 1998). Responses were coded as 0 (*no*) or 1 (*yes*); unsure responses as missing. Items for each scale were summed separately (score of 0–3). Internal consistency was adequate: rewards of muscularity  $\alpha = .74$ , thinness  $\alpha = .75$ .

### 2.3. Procedure

La Trobe University Ethics Committee, the Department of Education (Victoria), and Catholic Education Melbourne provided approvals. Parents provided written consent and children verbally assented. Individual face-to-face interviews, approximately 30 min duration, were conducted by trained interviewers. If boys did not respond to questions, a prompt was used. If no response was forthcoming, the interviewer said it was okay to be unsure and moved on. Interviews took place in children's homes or schools in private areas. Following data collection, families received a shopping voucher and were entered into a prize draw.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Body dissatisfaction

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations between variables. For muscularity, the mean ideal figure selected was significantly more muscular than current figure,  $t(94) = -2.05$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . For thinness-fatness, the mean ideal figure selected was significantly thinner than current figure,  $t(100) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . Effect sizes of differences were small ( $\eta^2 .02 - .59$ ).

McNemar's test of dependent proportions for body size preferences showed that a significantly greater proportion of boys wanted an ideal muscularity-related body size different from their current size (49.5%; 32.6% more and 16.8% less muscular) than wanted an ideal thinness-fatness related body size different from their current size (29.7%; 20.8% more and 8.9% less thin),  $p = .003$ , OR = 3.25 (95% CI: 1.47, 7.18). For muscularity, a significantly greater proportion of boys chose a more muscular ideal than current figure (32.6%) than chose a less muscular ideal figure (16.8%),  $p = .040$ , OR = 1.94 (95% CI: 1.06, 3.54). Significantly more boys chose a thinner ideal than

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