



Review article

A systematic review of body dissatisfaction and sociocultural messages related to the body among preschool children



Gemma Tatangelo^{a,*}, Marita McCabe^a, David Mellor^b, Alex Mealey^b

^a The Institute for Health and Ageing, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia

^b Deakin University, Burwood, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines body dissatisfaction and the influence of sociocultural messages related to body image among preschool children. The review was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines and 16 studies were included in the final analysis. Findings suggest that children under the age of 6 years old experience body dissatisfaction, however, the proportion of children who are dissatisfied varied from around 20% to 70%, depending on the method of assessment. The literature was divided on whether preschool aged girls experience more body dissatisfaction than boys. Parental influence appears to be an important factor in the development of preschool children's body dissatisfaction and attitudes. However, more research is needed to understand the influences of children's peers and the media. The need for more sensitive measures of body dissatisfaction and prevention programs for preschool children is discussed.

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Introduction

Body dissatisfaction, or the level of discontent that individuals feel towards their physical appearance (Cook-Cottone & Phelps,

2003), appears to be an increasing problem among young children (e.g., Shriver et al., 2013). Studies indicate that almost half of children aged 6–12 years are unhappy with their physical appearance (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Ricciardelli, McCabe, Holt, & Finemore, 2003). However, the age at which body dissatisfaction starts to become a concern is not clear. Some studies have shown that a significant number of preschool aged children experience body dissatisfaction (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Edwards-Leeper, Persson, & Goldstein, 2003; Pallan, Hiam, Duda, & Adab, 2011). On the other hand, some studies have found

* Corresponding author at: The Institute for Health and Ageing, Australian Catholic University, Level 6, 215 Spring St, Melbourne 3000, Australia.
Tel.: +61 03 9953 3722.

E-mail address: Gemma.Tatangelo@acu.edu.au (G. Tatangelo).

that children of this age are mostly satisfied with their appearance (e.g., Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000; Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ives, 2006). As yet, there is no synthesis of the research that examines body image concerns among preschool aged children. In order to move forward in understanding and preventing the development of body image concerns among children, it is important to consolidate and review the current evidence in this area.

It is clear that children between the ages of 3 and 6 years already have negative attitudes towards fat and a preference for a thin body (Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2003; Spiel, Paxton, & Yager, 2012; Tremblay, Lovsin, Zecevic, & Larivière, 2011). For example, Harriger et al. (2010) found that girls aged 3–5 years associated negative adjectives with heavier figures and positive adjectives with thinner figures, suggesting that girls as young as 3 years of age are already emotionally invested in the thin ideal. Similarly, Spiel et al. (2012) found that boys and girls aged 3–5 chose larger figures to represent negative attributes compared to positive attributes. Given that preschool children as young as 3 years old demonstrate these attitudes, it is important to determine whether these attitudes inform their evaluations of their own body.

It is recognised that the development of body image is associated with a range of sociocultural factors (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005), and theoretical models have been used to explain body image among children (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Ricciardelli et al., 2003). The Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) proposes that three sociocultural factors affect the development of body dissatisfaction: parents, peers, and the media. Support for the effect of parental, peer, and media influence on body image is evident among preadolescent children (e.g., McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Ricciardelli et al., 2003). For example, parents have been shown to be influential in shaping children's body image via verbal messages or modelling of appearance-related attitudes and behaviours (Phares, Steinberg, & Thompson, 2004). Research has also demonstrated the relationship between peer influence (e.g., teasing, conversations, and modelling) and preadolescent children's body dissatisfaction (Phares et al., 2004). Messages emphasising body stereotypes, including the thin ideal, are frequently present in children's media (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004). Media images promoting body ideals have also been shown to be associated with body dissatisfaction among preadolescent children (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Despite the above findings, the extent to which these sociocultural factors are related to body image in preschool children is poorly understood.

In addition to sociocultural factors, there are several biological factors that are important predictors of body dissatisfaction among children. BMI is consistently shown to be related to children's body image and use of body change strategies (e.g., Ricciardelli et al., 2003). McCabe and Ricciardelli (2005) found that BMI longitudinally predicted children's body image, whereby children who had a higher BMI at time one were more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies at time two. Gender is another important consideration, as research among preadolescent children has indicated that boys and girls may have different body concerns. For instance, preadolescent girls have been shown to be primarily concerned with their weight, while boys are concerned with their muscle and physical abilities (e.g., Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2013).

Age is another critical factor to consider when examining very young children's body image. It is important to acknowledge that children under the age of 5 demonstrate inconsistencies and inaccuracies in their judgments of their own body size. Difficulties identified in the literature include children's short attention span, perceptual difficulties, and difficulties in understanding questions (Davison et al., 2000; Smolak, 2004). Research indicates that children's awareness of their own size, shape, and weight

in relation to other objects emerges around the age of 2 and is not fully developed until after the preschool years (Boyer, Carlson, & Ptasnik, 2012; Brownell, Zerwas, & Ramani, 2007). In their recent literature review, Dunphy-Lelii, Hooley, McGivern, Guha, and Skouteris (2014) concluded that body dissatisfaction can be difficult to assess in preschool children due to developmental differences in their ability to accurately perceive their body size and compare themselves to a hypothetical ideal. Although preschool children's accuracy of perception of body size is an important issue in assessing their body image, this will not be the focus of the current review as it has been comprehensively reviewed recently (Dunphy-Lelii et al., 2014). Therefore, this study will only refer to the issue of children's accuracy of perception where relevant.

Although research on the body dissatisfaction of preschool children has increased in recent years, there has been no comprehensive review of studies that have examined body dissatisfaction among this age group. Therefore, our knowledge and understanding of the level of body image concerns and the factors affecting body dissatisfaction among this age group remains limited. Body dissatisfaction is highly predictive of later eating disorders and chronic health problems (e.g., Brausch & Gutierrez, 2009; Bun, Schwiebbe, Schütz, Bijlsma-Schlösser, & Hirsing, 2012). Therefore, if found to be a concern, preschool may provide a unique opportunity to instil positive body image messages for children and their parents to prevent body image concerns in childhood and adolescence.

This paper will systematically review the literature related to body dissatisfaction among preschool children, and the factors that are associated with the development of body image dissatisfaction. Specifically, it will (1) examine body dissatisfaction among preschool children according to the method of assessment utilised; (2) examine the nature of body image dissatisfaction among preschool children according to gender and age; (3) discuss sociocultural factors associated with body dissatisfaction in preschool children; and (4) identify how body mass index (BMI) is related to body dissatisfaction for preschool aged children.

Method

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009). Electronic databases Medline Complete, SCOPUS, Web of Science, and PsychINFO were utilised to search for relevant studies. In addition, the journal 'Body Image' was searched manually. The body image search terms entered were "body image" OR "body esteem" OR "body dissatisfaction". The age-group search terms entered were "preschool" OR "pre-school" OR "infant" OR "kindergarten". These terms were searched within titles and abstracts of articles. After an initial screening process, two researchers read the articles in full to determine whether they satisfied the following inclusion criteria:

1. Studies were included if they were published after the year 1999 to ensure the review reflects up-to-date trends in the literature.
2. Only peer reviewed journal articles were included.
3. The mean age of participants in the study must have been between 3 and 6 years, unless data were analysed and reported for a younger age-group within a larger sample. In this case, the number of children in the younger group must have been specified, and must have included at least 20 children to ensure an adequate sub-sample for inclusion in the review. For example, Lowes and Tiggemann (2003) examined body image among children aged 5–8, with a mean age of 6.18. However, they examined

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