



## The impact of doll style of dress and familiarity on body dissatisfaction in 6- to 8-year-old girls



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### ABSTRACT

We tested the impact of exposure to dolls of different body types and wardrobes on girls' body dissatisfaction. In Study 1, 112 girls (6 to 8 years old) were randomized to one of four conditions: thin (Barbie™) or full-figured (Tracy™) dolls dressed in a swimsuit or modest clothing. In Study 2, a different cohort of girls ( $n = 112$ ) was exposed to one of four conditions containing unfamiliar dolls of different body size (thin vs. full-figured) and dress (modest vs. swimsuit). In both studies, girls who played with thin dolls experienced higher body size discrepancies than girls who played with full-figured dolls. Girls who played with full-figured dolls showed less body dissatisfaction after doll exposure compared to girls who played with thin dolls. Playing with unrealistically thin dolls may encourage motivation for a thinner shape in young girls.

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### Introduction

Body dissatisfaction is a disturbance of body image (Cash & Deagle, 1997), in which negative feelings are experienced toward one's own weight and figure (Crowther & Williams, 2011). Symptoms of body dissatisfaction emerge at a young age (Truby & Paxton, 2002) and have been shown to increase in severity through young adulthood (Slane, Klump, McGue, & Iacono, 2014).

Body dissatisfaction results from pressures to be thin (Stice & Bearman, 2001) that come from a variety of sources, including friends, family, and peers (Schutz & Paxton, 2007), as well as media exposure (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005). The media is a transmitter of the sociocultural thin body ideal (Levine & Harrison, 2004; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999) that exposes women and young girls to images of extremely thin figures, a look that is unattainable for the average woman. The average female body portrayed in the media is between 13% and 19% below the expected weight for women (Engel-Maddox, 2005). The achievement of this socially accepted body type is associated with happiness and acceptance (Weissman, 1999). However, when the ideal body shape cannot be attained, dissatisfaction with one's

own body may be the result (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2008; Truby & Paxton, 2002).

Body dissatisfaction is associated with strict dieting, which is a precursor to eating disorders (Muller, 1998). Cahill and Mussap (2007) found that, after exposure to thin-ideal images, women desired a thinner body type and displayed signs of disordered eating. High levels of body dissatisfaction are a strong predictor of the onset of disordered eating among middle-school girls (Stice, Marti, & Durant, 2011). However, awareness toward and actions regarding weight may start prior to middle school, even as early as the preschool years. Preschool children experience negative feelings toward images of overweight peers (Truby & Paxton, 2002) and report evidence of disordered eating behaviors (Stice, Agras, & Hammer, 1999). Children are not only aware of weight, but they also internalize the thin-ideal body; fifth and sixth grade children dislike their obese peers significantly more than peers of healthier body shapes (Latner & Stunkard, 2003). This stigmatization is significantly more prevalent in girls than in boys (Latner & Stunkard, 2003), and girls are of particular concern, as they also report higher body dissatisfaction than boys (Davison & McCabe, 2006), possibly related to increased mass media targeting campaigns of the thin body ideal toward females (Levine & Harrison, 2004). Girls' desire for a body type thinner than their actual body type has been reported to emerge at around age 6 years (Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003). However, Dittmar, Ive, and Halliwell (2006) reported that the association between exposure to the iconic Barbie™ and body

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dissatisfaction was apparent among 5- to 7-year-olds, but not among older girls (Dittmar et al., 2006), an effect attributed to developmental changes that occur in girls' relationships with this popular doll.

Young children learn by emulating behaviors and internalizing the visuals that they encounter (Villani, 2001). The Barbie™ doll offers a tangible image of a thin body shape that becomes internalized when young girls are developing their body images (Kutcher & McDonald, 2004). Playtime is crucial to a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development (Huizinga, 1955; Nice & Russ, 2002). The Barbie™ doll is a predominant playtime image for many children, and some sources suggest that up to 99% of 3- to 10-year-old girls own at least one of these dolls (Rogers, 1999). The Barbie™ doll attracts young children, who are more vulnerable to these images than are older children (Warren, Gleaves, Cepeda-Benito, Fernández, & Rodríguez-Ruiz, 2005). Barbie™ embodies the thin-ideal body shape with real-life proportions of a height of 5 feet 9 in., a bust of 36 in., and an 18-in. waist (McDonough, 2010). Her shape is not only unattainable, but also improbable and unhealthy; fewer than 1 in 100,000 women will match Barbie's proportions (Norton, Olds, Olive, & Dank, 1996), and if she were a real woman, her weight would be so low that she would likely be unable to menstruate (Rintala & Mustajoki, 1992). Exposure to Barbie™ is linked to greater body dissatisfaction in girls (Oliver & Thelen, 1996). Dittmar et al. (2006) found that girls (aged 5 to 7 years old) who were passively exposed to images of Barbie™ dolls experienced lower body self-esteem, as well as a greater desire for a thinner body shape, compared with girls who were exposed to a full-figured doll. However, a related study done by Anschutz and Engels (2010) exposed 6- to 10-year-old girls to Barbie™ and a full-figured doll through playtime and measured the discrepancy between participants' actual versus ideal body sizes. Although the findings did not show a relationship between playing with Barbie™ and increased body dissatisfaction among girls, the authors did report that girls who played with full-figured dolls consumed more food after playtime compared to girls who played with Barbie™. Additional research is needed to better understand these discrepancies.

Dissatisfaction with one's body has been linked to self-sexualization (Liss, Erchull, & Ramsay, 2011). Starr and Ferguson (2012) have expanded the field of study of self-sexualization beyond women and adolescents, as they examine young girls' preferences for sexualized clothing. Six-year-old girls show a preference for sexualized clothing, though this preference depends on maternal self-objectification and media consumption. Although previous studies have assessed the impact of Barbie™ doll exposure on body dissatisfaction in girls, no previous studies have examined sexualized clothing as a potential moderating effect on the relationship between doll exposure (thin vs. full-figured) and body dissatisfaction. Since one previous study used images of clothed dolls as visual stimuli (Dittmar et al., 2006) and the other used playtime with nude dolls (Anschutz & Engels, 2010), the present study aimed to follow-up on these previous findings by testing the effect of *both* doll type and style of dress (swimsuit vs. modest) on young girls' body dissatisfaction after playtime. In Study 1, we tested whether the style of dress (swimsuit vs. modest clothing) interacted with doll type (either Barbie™ or a popular full-figured doll) to influence girls' body dissatisfactions. In the present study, we hypothesized that girls who played with Barbie™, regardless of how the doll was dressed, would have greater reported body dissatisfaction than girls who played with the full-figured doll. Second, we hypothesized that Barbie™ dolls dressed in revealing and sexualized swimsuits would evoke greater body dissatisfaction than Barbie™ or full-figured dolls dressed in modest clothing, due to increased visibility of the thin body shape.

## Study 1: The Impact of Doll Clothing and Body Shape on Girls' Body Dissatisfaction When Familiar Dolls Are Used

### Method

**Participants.** The sample consisted of 112 girls ages 6 to 8 years old recruited from a Pediatric Healthcare Center on Long Island and two Long Island libraries. The mean age of the sample was  $7.0 \pm 0.4$  years old. Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Wesleyan College. All locations were approved by their respective supervisors (i.e., the head librarian or director) and were overseen by the research supervisor.

At both recruitment sites, parents of participants were approached by the primary research investigator and were asked if they would allow their child to participate. After parents gave informed consent for their child's participation, participants were read an oral assent form explaining an overview of their role in the study. Personal information of participants such as name, nationality, weight, or height was not recorded. However, recruitment sites were located in a predominately Caucasian community.

### Materials.

**Visual stimuli.** In the first study, a popular thin doll (Barbie™, Mattel®) and a well-known full-figured doll (Tracy Turnblad™, Play Along®) were compared in two different styles of dress: swimsuit versus modest clothing (Fig. 1). The Tracy doll, modeled from "Hairspray: The Musical," served as the full-figured doll in this study. Prior studies have used the Emme Doll™, Tonner Doll Company® (Anschutz & Engels, 2010; Dittmar et al., 2006); however, Tracy was selected for the present study because it was found in pilot studies to be more familiar to this demographic group than the Emme Doll™. We opted to use actual dolls, as opposed to images, because of recent reports that playing with three-dimensional dolls evokes stronger feelings from girls than exposure to drawn images (Worobey & Worobey, 2014).

Barbie™ was selected to represent the thin-ideal because of her popularity among 6- to 8-year-old girls (Rogers, 1999). The dolls that were selected were presented in either a two-piece swimsuit or in modest clothing. See Fig. 1 for visual stimuli used in Study 1.

**Body Esteem Scale.** Participants completed the Body Esteem Scale (BES; Mendelson, White, & Mendelson, 1996), which contains



**Fig. 1.** Visual stimuli for Study 1. Pictures of the four doll conditions for Study 1: Barbie™ Modest, Tracy Modest, Barbie Swimsuit™, and Tracy Swimsuit. The dolls that were selected were presented in either a two-piece swimsuit or in modest clothing.

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