

Boys as young as five report clear and unrealistic perceptions of the male body

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Flinders Professor Murray Drummond

(Medical Xpress)—Schools are being urged to include both girls and boys in body image awareness, following a new Flinders University study which reveals boys believe they need to be big, strong and muscular to be a man.

The research – published this month in the international Journal of Child

Health Care – found that [boys](#) as young as five have already formed clear and unrealistic perceptions of the male body through such social influences as the Internet and advertisements on gaming websites.

Based on a larger eight-year longitudinal investigation regarding the construction of masculinity among boys from early childhood to adolescence, the study involved in-depth, focus group interviews with 33 boys aged between five and 10 at a metropolitan Adelaide school.

Flinders Professor of Sport, Health and Physical Education Murray Drummond, who undertook the research with Flinders Social Health Sciences Senior Lecturer Dr Claire Drummond, said an emerging trend across all age ranges was the emphasis on muscular size and strength as a descriptor and signifier of what men are "supposed" to look like.

"The boys were all firm in their belief that men have muscles," Professor Drummond said.

"Regardless of age, the boys understood they weren't yet capable of attaining a highly muscular physique, as some boys stated, 'like my dad', but there was a sense of inevitability that they would become big and muscular simply by becoming a man," he said.

Professor Drummond said the majority of boys regarded a man's body as one in which muscularity, strength and power are synonymous.

"When commenting on an AFL player, one eight-year-old said; 'I really like him because he's really strong and he's muscly and he's tough and if he gets punched in the head he doesn't cry', which was indicative of the way most Year 3 boys articulated their view on men, muscles and strength.

"Asked whether it was important to be muscly, the same boy stated; 'yes

because you win', so for most boys the equation looks something like muscles = strength = power and dominance."

The research also uncovered a prominent focus on the term "six-pack" in relation to male aesthetics, with participants associating abdominal muscles as a sign of strength and appeal to the opposite sex, particularly among boys in the middle primary years.

However, there was no evidence to suggest participants felt anxious about their bodies or envious of men with bodies that they considered muscular, strong and powerful because "they all thought they would one day be muscular, strong and powerful themselves".

Professor Drummond said that considering electronic media and social networking sites are increasingly influencing the way both [girls and boys](#) perceive the ideal body, schools need to start developing strategies to minimise the impact of unrealistic body images across genders.

"Too often schools focus on the meaning of bodies for girls, despite evidence suggesting that [body image](#) and eating disorders are increasing in prevalence among young males.

"Teachers of health education and social studies in the primary years need to be aware of such issues and begin addressing them early in a child's life.

"The male body is something that needs to be dealt with in the nurturing school environment to ensure the information is understood and reinforced.

"It's also important that both boys and girls are privy to sharing discussion around the topic, rather than in gendered isolation, given the significance of society in shaping body ideals for both genders."

More information: Murray Drummond and Claire Drummond. It's all about the six-pack: Boys' bodies in contemporary Western culture. *J Child Health Care* 1367493514538128, first published on June 16, 2014
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