

Tackling teen body image at home

March 2 2016, by Rob Payne, Sciencenetwork Wa



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It is no secret that body image impacts a large portion of West Australians, with eating disorders affecting an estimated [1 million Australians at the end of 2012](#).

It has spurred the creation of entire branches of psychology, and campaigns such as Love Your Body Week, and The Body Image challenge, encouraging people to take charge of their self-image.

Body images issues significantly affects young women, with approximately [90 per cent of cases](#) of anorexia nervosa and [bulimia nervosa](#) in Australia occurring in females.

Large campaigns aside, it seems the best remedies may start in the home, with a recent international study led by Curtin University, finding pre-adolescent and early adolescent girls who believe their mothers are concerned about their weight feel more concerned themselves.

"This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the key influence of parental factors in the development of weight concerns in pre-adolescents and adolescents." Curtin University researcher Dr Cecilie Thøgersen-Ntoumani says.

The result is a cascading effect that can lead to restrained eating and more frequent discussions of weight issues with friends.

This peer interaction can create an 'appearance culture' in which girls internalise media ideals of thinness and [body image](#) dissatisfaction—in turn increasing the risks of eating disorders, depression and health problems.

Researchers surveyed 232 girls between 10 and 16 years of age and their mothers using a modified Family History of Eating Survey

They asked mothers how often they told their daughters that they should eat less or differently, should exercise more and whether they had prevented the consumption of certain foods, over the previous 12 months.

Daughters answered the same survey, adjusted to determine whether they suspected that their mothers had limited foods.

High BMI was a key predictor in mothers taking action.

"Previous research has shown that parents tend to be more worried about their child's weight when their child is overweight or obese, which was confirmed in the present study," Dr Thøgersen-Ntoumani says.

So, a common instigator of the cycle was girls already being overweight.

But what about the media?

The study's modelling shows that multiple issues, such as peers and the media, work concurrently to create anxiety about weight and subsequent related behaviours.

Researchers suggest that mothers be aware of their own social expectations and realise that their daughters could be picking up verbal and nonverbal cues of criticism.

Establishing open lines of communication between mothers and daughters to discuss issues and resolve misunderstandings, is beneficial for both parties.

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