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Body image in adolescents

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Abstract

Body image is most often defined as an individual's subjective perception of their physical appearance, i.e., the mental image that an individual has of their own body dimensions, contours, figure, and feelings associated with these characteristics. Adolescence is a critical period in the development of body image, and numerous factors have an influence on its development and characteristics - gender, age, family, peers, body mass index, socio-cultural norms, media, and physical activity. Biological factors, primarily age at which changes related to puberty occur, are considered crucial for the development of body image. Body image in early adolescence is primarily influenced by parents, and peer influence increases with age. Adolescent girls want to be thinner, while boys want to have an athletic appearance. Body mass index is one of the most important factors influencing body image and satisfaction with weight and physical appearance, and different studies have shown association between obesity and negative body image. During the last decades, the influence of the internet, social media, and computer games on body image has been significantly higher than traditional media such as television, newspapers, and magazines. A number of different questionnaires and scales are used to assess different aspects of body image. One of the most comprehensive studies that addresses different aspects of adolescent health and includes body image assessment is the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study, HBSC. Given that body image (dis)satisfaction can change drastically during adolescence, it can also have a significant impact on mental health (ranging from depression to anxiety), as well as other health-related behaviours. Therefore, it is important to identify adolescents at risk who will adopt different eating behaviors to regulate their body weight, especially those who underestimate and overestimate their body weight, as well as those who are obese.

Keywords: *body image; adolescents.*

INTRODUCTION

Body image represents a set of different dimensions of self-perceived body, including thoughts, feelings, and behaviours related to physical appearance [1]. Body image is most often defined as an individual's subjective perception of their physical appearance, i.e., the mental image that an individual has of their own body dimensions, contours, figure, and feelings associated with these characteristics [2,3]. Body image represents what an individual thinks and feels, how they experience their body, and how they behave toward it [4].

The two basic components of body image include perception on the one hand, and evaluation and attitudes about one's own body on the other. Body perception is the mental image of one's own body, that is, the image we form about the appearance and size of our own body. This mental image can be realistic or distorted, meaning that we can see ourselves as thin or obese even though we are not. Evaluating one's own body in relation to others involves comparing one's own body with an imagined idea of what one's body should look like, but also involves comparing one's appearance to appearance of others.

FACTORS AFFECTING BODY IMAGE

Adolescence is a critical period in the development of body image, and numerous factors have an influence on its development and characteristics - gender, age, family, peers, body mass index, socio-cultural norms, media, and physical activity [5].

PUBERTY AND BODY IMAGE

Biological factors, primarily age at which changes related to puberty occur, are considered crucial for the development of body image [6,7]. Early adolescence is characterized by intensive physical changes that accompany physical growth and development as well as sexual maturation: limbs lengthen and, due to hormonal changes, fat deposition in pelvic region occurs (including hips, gluteal region, and thighs), especially in girls who develop faster than boys at this age. On average, around the age of 14 years, boys reach their body weight, and between 15 and 16 years, they reach body height of girls. On average, boys reach girls' weight around the age of 14, and girls' height between the ages of 15 and 16.

Changes of body composition are also typical for adolescence, with boys having greater muscle mass than girls. However, significant changes in physical appearance as a result of growth and development often do not meet adolescents' expectations [8].

Longitudinal studies have shown that both early and late puberty negatively affect body image in adolescents, in line with differences that exist among peers. In a seven-year study, late puberty (both self-perceived and actual) was a predictor of body image dissatisfaction both in boys and girls [9]. On the other hand, early onset of puberty in a 16-month study was a negative predictor of body image dissatisfaction in normal-weight girls, but also predicted bulimic-like behaviour in normal-weight adolescents of both sexes as compared to their overweight peers [10].

PARENTS AND BODY IMAGE

Body image in early adolescence is primarily influenced by parents who convey socio-cultural messages relevant to ideal physical appearance to their children. Parent-child relationship has a significant impact on the development of body image dissatisfaction.

Parents can either increase or decrease the risk of body image disorders developing. Studies show that parents who constantly consider and comment on weight and weight control behaviours have a significant impact on body weight and physical appearance satisfaction. Parental comments about child's weight and physical appearance, teasing about body weight and shape, pressure to diet for weight control all have direct impact on body image in children. Indirect impact exists when parents' behaviours are not consciously directed at adolescent: negative comments about their own or someone else's weight and physical appearance, or when parents are dieting or excessively exercising for weight control. Such behaviours encourage adolescents'self-criticism and lead to self-evaluation based purely on physical appearance [11].

Research shows that adolescents who have a better relationship with their parents are less likely to express dissatisfaction with their physical appearance [12].

PEERS AND BODY IMAGE

Peer influence increases with age, and gender stereotypes have a significant impact on body image in adolescents [13]. Adolescent girls want to be thinner, while boys want to have an athletic appearance [14,15,16]. In adolescence, acceptance by the peer group is of great importance, and therefore, adolescents develop different behavioural models that they believe would help. They observe others and imitate their behaviors [17].

Teasing about physical appearance and body weight significantly contributes to negative self-image and dissatisfaction with physical appearance, leading to weight loss pressure in girls and muscle building in boys, and at the same time leading to different unhealthy weight-control behaviours [18]. Distorted body image is more likely to occur if an adolescent was exposed to continuous criticism regarding physical appearance, including teasing about body size/dimensions and body shaming while growing up, or if physical appearance was the main reason for exclusion from peer group [19].

BODY MASS INDEX AND BODY SATISFACTION

Body mass index (BMI) is one of the most important factors influencing body image and satisfaction with weight and physical appearance. It significantly contributes to weight and physical appearance perceptions and also to fear of negative evaluation. Fear of negative body evaluation is more common in overweight compared to normal-weight adolescents [20].

Studies consistently show that negative self-image is associated with obesity and physical inactivity [21] and plays a role in the development of eating disorders [22]. Most children and adolescents perceive overweight and obesity as undesirable body characteristics, as demonstrated in a systematic review of children and adolescents' attitudes about obesity, body size and shape, and body weight [23].

Overweight girls (according to BMI) are significantly less satisfied with their weight and physical appearance than other girls [24]. Also, studies showed that overweight and obese adolescents are less satisfied with their appearance than those with normal weight [25]. Still, some studies show that size acceptance is also possible among overweight adolescents [26].

Body mass index is the most important factor contributing to negative body image in both sexes. Overweight is considered a predictor of body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls, while the same applies to underweight boys [27]. Girls whose body weight is

above the 50th percentile express the greatest body weight dissatisfaction, as do boys whose weight is either above the 75th or below the 25th percentile [28].

Perception of body weight is also important. Girls with normal weight who perceive themselves as fat have greater risk of developing negative body image and engaging in weight-control behaviours, including dieting, excessive exercising, inducing vomiting, or use of laxatives and/or diuretics [29]. Also, girls who perceive themselves as fat and are not satisfied with their physical appearance are more likely to engage in unhealthy weight-control behaviours such as skipping meals, fasting, vomiting, using laxatives and/or diuretics [30]. In addition, dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance can result in repeated dieting, and attempts to lose weight may lead to weight gain and even greater dissatisfaction with one's own physical appearance, according to research data [31]. Body weight perception is a subjective interpretation of body weight [32]. The discrepancy between actual and perceived body weight occurs in the form of underestimation of one's own weight in relation to actual BMI and overestimation of one's own weight, in which case one's body weight is perceived as greater than it actually is. This discrepancy is associated with dissatisfaction with physical appearance and has a negative impact on mental health, including low self-esteem and a higher incidence of depression [33].

SOCIAL MEDIA – EMERGING FACTOR IN SHAPING BODY IMAGE

Eating habits are strongly influenced by self-perceived physical appearance and socially acceptable beauty standards [34,35]. Media have a strong impact on body image development [36]. During the last decades, the influence of the internet, social media, and computer games on body image is significantly higher than traditional media such as television, newspapers, and magazines. Number of social media users is constantly increasing as they are very popular among youth. Social media users often post their photos as well as photos of others, but they also edit photos they post, comment on others' photos, or receive comments on the photos they have posted, and compare photos with their internal perception of their own physical appearance. Results of the systematic review of studies confirmed association between social media use and dissatisfaction with physical appearance both in adolescents and adults [37]. At the same time, results confirmed negative comments about physical appearance and body weight, online and in person, have an impact on preoccupation with physical appearance and weight [38,39,40].

BODY IMAGE ASSESSMENT

Several different questionnaires and scales are used to assess different aspects of body image. One of the most well-known certainly is the Stunkard Silhouette Scale [41], which consists of 9 silhouettes of the male and female body, which gradually increase from very thin to very obese. The scale was primarily used to assess anthropometric characteristics and categorization of overweight individuals [42,43,44], and recently it has been used to assess body image and satisfaction with physical appearance and weight [45,46,47]. In order to assess body image, the respondent chooses the silhouette that most closely resembles the appearance of their own body, while dissatisfaction with physical appearance is assessed by the difference between the chosen and ideal figure [47].

The Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) is a 34-item scale that assesses body shape concerns that may be associated with eating disorders [48].

The Drive for Muscularity Scale (DMS) [49] is a scale that assesses the perception of muscularity, i.e., it focuses on attitudes and behaviors related to muscular appearance. This scale clarifies the extent to which an individual is preoccupied with muscular appearance.

The Adolescent Body Image Satisfaction Scale (ABISS) [50] has 16 statements that assess satisfaction with physical appearance in male adolescents, and includes three aspects – physical ability, (in)adequacy, and internal conflict.

The Multidimensional Body-Self Relations – Appearances Scales Questionnaire (MBSRQ-AS) [51] is a 34-question instrument covering several dimensions of body image and includes five subscales: appearance evaluation, appearance focus, preoccupation with overweight and obesity, self-classification of body weight, and satisfaction scale of different body parts. This scale is one of the most comprehensive and is recommended for people aged 15 and older.

The Body Image Coping Strategies Inventory (BICSI) [52] is a 29-item instrument designed to assess the main strategies, including avoidance, appearance "fixing," and positive rational acceptance, used to manage perceived threats and challenges related to personal experiences with physical appearance.

The Eating Attitude Test-26 (EAT-26) [53] is a questionnaire containing 26 statements and includes three subscales – dieting behavior ("dieting"), food preoccupation and bulimia, and so-called oral control.

AVAILABLE DATA ON BODY IMAGE IN ADOLESCENTS

A comprehensive international study that addresses various aspects of health and health-related behaviours in adolescents is the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study (HBSC). This study has been

conducted since 1983, every four years, and includes students aged 11, 13, and 15. The same methodology is applied in every country, allowing for comparisons between the countries as well as monitoring trends [54]. Participation is voluntary and anonymous, and students fill in the questionnaire containing mandatory and optional questions. Body image is assessed in this study with a question that estimates satisfaction with one's own body/appearance through an assessment of self-perceived weight [55]. According to the results of the latest survey carried out in the 2021/2022 school year in 45 countries, one third of adolescents perceive themselves as obese (29%), significantly more often older adolescents and girls compared to boys (38 vs. 23%, respectively) [55].

THE IMPORTANCE OF BODY IMAGE

Given that (dis)satisfaction with body weight can change drastically during adolescence, it can also have a significant impact on mental health (ranging from depression to anxiety), as well as on other health-related behaviours. Overweight and obese adolescents, those who consider themselves overweight or express dissatisfaction with their own body (physical appearance), are more likely to diet and use unhealthy ways to control their weight [56]. Therefore, special attention should be paid to adolescents at risk who will adopt different eating habits aimed at weight control, especially to those who underestimate and overestimate their body weight, as well as to obese. Research data indicate the need for more intensive health education of adolescents, not only to prevent overweight and obesity but also to prevent so-called risky eating habits such as skipping meals, snacking, etc.

Health risks associated with the way adolescents perceive their body weight indicate the necessity to identify and monitor weight control behaviours to avoid health consequences, raise awareness among primary health care physicians, and design interventions aimed at improving adolescent diet habits.

Body image has a significant impact on both the physical and mental health of adolescents. A positive body image can be improved primarily by emphasizing functional body features and providing information that is not exclusively focused on body weight. Also, empowering adolescents in relation to risks of social media use may prevent possible adverse events, as well as fostering those aspects of personality that contribute to positive body image. Since parents have a primary impact on body image development, it is important to educate them as well in order to prevent adverse events in body image development.

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Slika tela kod adolescenata

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Kratak sadržaj

Slika tela se najčešće definiše kao subjektivna slika pojedinca o svom spoljašnjem izgledu, odnosno mentalna slika koju pojedinac ima o dimenzijama sopstvenog tela, konturama, figuri i osećanjima povezanim sa ovim karakteristikama. Adolescencija je kritičan period u razvoju slike o telu, a brojni faktori utiču na sliku o sebi odnosno doživljaj težine i fizičkog izgleda - pol, uzrast, porodica, vršnjaci, indeks telesne mase, socio-kulturološke norme, mediji, fizička aktivnost. Smatra se da biološki faktori, pre svega uzrast u kome se dešavaju promene povezane sa pubertetom, imaju ključnu ulogu. Slika tela u ranoj adolescenciji je pod uticajem roditelja, a sa uzrastom raste uticaj vršnjaka. Devojčice u adolescenciji žele da budu mršavije, a dečaci da imaju atletski izgled. Indeks telesne mase je jedan od najvažnijih faktora koji utiče na sliku o telu, a različite studije pokazale su da je negativna slika o telu povezana sa gojaznošću. Tokom prethodnih decenija uticaj interneta, društvenih mreža i kompjuterskih igrica je značajno veći na sliku tela u odnosu na tradicionalne medije kao što su televizija, novine, časopisi. Za procenu različitih aspekata slike sopstvenog tela koristi se više različitih upitnika i skala. Jedna od najsveobuhvatnijih studija koja se bavi različitim aspektima zdravlja adolescenata i uključuje i procenu slike tela je Istraživanje ponašanja školske dece u vezi sa zdravljem (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study, HBSC). S obzirom da se (ne) zadovoljstvo slikom tela može drastično promeniti tokom adolescencije, ono može imati značajan uticaj na mentalno zdravlje (od depresije do ansioznosti), kao i na druga ponašanja koja utiču na zdravlje. Zato je važna identifikacija adolescenata pod rizikom koji će primeniti različita ponašanja u ishrani kako bi regulisali svoju telesnu masu i to posebno na one koji potcenjuju i precenjuju svoju telesnu masu, kao i na one koji su gojazni.

Ključne reči: *slika tela; adolescenti*.