



# Promoting body positivity and self-esteem could improve children's mental and physical health

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## About the research

As children get older, there is an interrelationship between mental health difficulties and body weight.

- Young people with obesity are at increased risk of low self-esteem and body image concerns, partly due to weight stigma.
- Weight stigma refers to negative stereotypes, social devaluation, and mistreatment of heavier individuals and young people are exposed to this from a young age.
- Body weight is the most common reason that young people are bullied.
- Negative body image is harmful from the perspective of weight management as well as mental health, as dieting adolescents often gain more weight and develop problem eating than those not dieting.

The possible psychosocial mechanisms along the relationship between mental health and body weight, such as dieting behaviours, happiness with appearance, self-esteem and being bullied, are not well understood

## What we did:

In a study of over 18,000 children, we examined self-reported dieting, happiness with appearance, self-esteem and bullying at 14 years as mechanisms in the relationship between mental health (via the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) and Body Mass Index (BMI) adjusted for age and sex at 11 and 17 years for boys and girls.

## Key message:

Prevention strategies to encourage healthy physical and emotional development of children need to focus on the promotion of positive body-image and self-esteem.

## Policy implications

- Reducing weight stigma during adolescence could be one important step to improving long-term physical and mental health
- Healthy behaviours and body positivity need to be promoted at the societal level
- Children need to be protected from social media that encourages unrealistic or unhealthy body image
- National curriculum needs to continue promoting positive body image and self-esteem
- Investment in body image support for young people during this critical window of development could lead to lifelong health and economic benefits



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## Summary of findings

### Body image and self-esteem

11-year-old children at higher weight were more likely to have poor body image and lower self-esteem as they entered their teens than those with average weight. Subsequently, both boys and girls unhappy with their appearance and with low self-esteem at age 14 were more likely to have mental health difficulties at age 17, such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, aggression, and impulsivity and were also likely to have a higher BMI than those with a more positive self-image.

### Obesity, dieting and bullying

Children with obesity<sup>1</sup> had a greater prevalence of emotional problems at age 11 compared to those with a healthy weight. Children who reported frequent bullying were more likely to have poor mental health outcomes during adolescence than those who were not bullied, but there was no significant link between being a higher weight and frequent bullying or being bullied impacting later weight status. Dieting behaviours were associated with higher BMI, but not with worse mental health outcomes.

**19%** of young people who are obese have emotional difficulties



Vs **10%** of healthy weight adolescents



Poor body image & lower self-esteem partially explain this



To promote healthy physical and mental development



curriculum, industry, and social media need to encourage positive body image and self esteem

## About the School

The NIHR SPHR is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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## Find out more:

The full journal article from which this information has been taken can be found at:

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(23\)00169-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(23)00169-4/fulltext)

A news story on this article can be found at:

<https://nihrsphr.link/PoorSelfEsteem>

Further information on the wider project which this research is part of can be found at:

<https://nihrsphr.link/DataChildHealth>

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<sup>1</sup> Cole TJ, Bellizzi MC, Flegal KM, Dietz WH. Establishing a standard definition for child overweight and obesity worldwide: international survey. *BMJ*. 2000

This project is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (Grant Reference Number PD-SPH-2015). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.