Children with a negative body image are more likely to have social, emotional and behavioural issues. Dr Ben Edwards, Manager of Longitudinal Studies at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, gives us the highlights of his research into children’s body perception and dissatisfaction.

Tell us about the Body image of primary school children study

Body image of primary school children uses data from Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, a nationally-representative study of children born in 2000 and 2004. Our research used information collected from a group of children born in 2000 in two separate waves - when they were aged eight-to-nine and 10-11 years.

In both waves, the Pictorial Body Image Instrument was used to assess body image dissatisfaction. In this assessment, a set of seven drawings of children ranging in size from thin to obese was shown to participants. Children were asked to indicate which body type they most resembled in order to identify their perceived body image. Secondly, they were asked to choose the picture that showed how they wanted to be or their desired body image. The discrepancy between these two assessments was a measure of body image dissatisfaction.

Was there any correlation between children who were dissatisfied with their body type and their wellbeing?

The research found that children who were satisfied with their body image were more likely to have good social-emotional and physical health compared to those who were dissatisfied with their body size. Boys and girls who were dissatisfied with their body image were less likely to feel fit, full of energy, or enjoy physical activity. In addition, children who were experiencing dissatisfaction with their body were more likely to report difficulties with their peers as well as high levels of emotional and behavioural problems.

What were the most surprising gender trends from the data?

Probably the most surprising thing is that findings for boys and girls were so similar. Our research shows that regardless of age or whether they were underweight, normal weight or overweight, at least two in five children desired a body size slightly thinner than the average body size.

Were there any key differences in desired body image at both ages?

A large number of boys and girls were dissatisfied with their body size at ages eight-to-nine. Many wanted to be thinner than the average. Our findings showed that when they were younger, children were less likely to report their body size accurately and most thought they were smaller than they were. By the time they reached 10-11 years, children were much more precise in gauging their correct body size and were more likely to be satisfied with their body image.

How many children were actively trying to control their weight when they reached 10-11 years?

The research found 61 per cent of boys and 56 per cent of girls (10-11 year olds) had tried to manage their weight in the 12 months prior to the second research wave. While there were no differences...
between boys and girls trying to lose weight, more boys tried to gain weight and fewer did nothing to control their weight compared to girls of the same age. At this stage, we haven’t collected information about the exact strategies that boys and girls use to gain or lose weight. It is possible that many of these will be positive (e.g., eating more fruit and vegetables) while others will be negative. Future waves of the study will be able to unpack what these strategies are.

Access the full-length *Body image of primary school children* report.

See the KidsMatter *body image* video resource for schools.