4.3 Health promotion in schools

4.3.10 Promoting healthy body image

Background

Body image has been defined as the picture of our own body which we form in our mind. The negative body image experienced by young people is of increasing concern among educators and mental health practitioners in Australia and around the world.\(^1\) Current research suggests that body image dissatisfaction and weight preoccupation is prevalent\(^2\) with body image topping the list of concerns held by young people.\(^3\)

In Australia, studies have shown less than a quarter of young women are satisfied with their size.\(^4\) This preoccupation with eliminating fatness is not based on concern for a healthy weight; rather, it represents unprecedented preoccupation with achieving the “right” appearance. Given this context, pubescent girls have become intensely anxious about and dissatisfied with their naturally developing, fuller bodies.\(^5\) Although it is well-documented that body image concerns are widespread amongst the adolescent population\(^5,6\), there is also evidence that body image ideals can be apparent in children as young as six years of age.\(^7\)

Powerful socio-cultural forces such as family relationships, peers, and media contribute to body image concerns\(^2,5\). There is a strong causal link between body image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, eating disorders, and the delayed development of interpersonal skills.\(^4,6\) Ultimately, body image dissatisfaction can compromise physical, emotional and mental health, energy levels, concentration and ability to learn.\(^8\)

The high level of concern regarding body image highlights the need for comprehensive responses from organisations and individuals, including families, schools, governments, community organisations and media industries.\(^9\) Schools are ideally placed to promote a healthy body image through the formal school curriculum, the school ethos and environment and via a variety of policies and practices. A health promoting school can positively influence knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviour of students in relation to body image. Given that body image dissatisfaction is a predictor of eating disorders and other health concerns, it is important that preventative programs are developed.\(^1\)

General principles

Prevention programs should employ student-centred approaches that develop self-esteem and media literacy for both boys and girls.\(^10\)

- Self-esteem involves learning ways to deal with stress, building a positive sense of self, exploring individuality of self and peers, acceptance of self and others, participation in activities that you enjoy and looking after your body’s needs.\(^11\)
Media literacy is the ability of students to critically analyse media messages. This aims to encourage self-acceptance and help decrease the internalisation of the thin ideal and the body image norms which are constantly reinforced by the media.\footnote{12}

A universal program (for all) is most appropriate.\footnote{4, 13} Teaching and learning strategies should be highly interactive and participatory.\footnote{4}

It is recommended that prevention programs be introduced to primary school children\footnote{1, 4, 5} with repeated booster sessions during the early adolescent period to sustain initial intervention gains.\footnote{13}

When addressing body image it is vital to promote and support healthy lifestyle behaviours, in conjunction with a greater sense of self-acceptance. Do not focus on weight or weight management.\footnote{14, 15}

**Key messages**

- Unhealthy body image attitudes and eating practices are difficult to reverse once established so **prevention of the problem is critical**.

- **When implementing programs it is important to remember do no harm.** Directly instructing students about unhealthy weight control behaviours such as vomiting, laxative abuse, slimming pills etc is believed to introduce students to these ideas which may encourage their use among vulnerable young people.\footnote{11}

- Guidelines to promoting **physical activity, healthy eating and body image** are not mutually exclusive and serve to enhance each other.

**Role of the community health staff**

In practice, Community Health nurses should work collaboratively with other Community Health, Public and/or Population Health staff (e.g. health promotion officers) as part of a School Health Service team. Whilst Community Health nurses are not solely responsible for health promotion within schools, it is acknowledged that school staff frequently turns to the Community Health nurse for guidance and advice on effective school health promotion approaches.

This guideline has suggested healthy body image promotion strategies suitable for the school setting. Depending on capacity and existing expertise within the school community, the Community health nurse’s role in developing or delivering these strategies can vary greatly between being a leader, a catalyst for action or a point of reference for advice to others within the school community.

The strategies in this guideline have been structured around the three major components of the Health Promoting Schools Framework. Below are some suggestions which may assist nurses to identify what their role within each of these components may be.
### School curriculum, teaching and learning:
- Actively seek to be informed about and support curriculum in learning outcome areas
- Advocate where there are gaps in curriculum areas
- Provide resources and information to assist teachers in delivery of teaching and learning

### School environment, policies and practices
- Advocate to develop Healthy Body Image policies
- Assist in the development of school policies which have an impact on health

### Partnerships with the community
- Be aware of existing services and support personnel within the school and wider community
- Promote a coordinated and holistic approach to health related issues
- Advocate for the involvement of parents, health professionals and other members of the wider community in the promotion of healthy body image.
- Link individuals and families to appropriate services to assist with health concerns

#### Curriculum, teaching and learning
- Encourage teachers to promote positive body image within the formal school curriculum.
- Ensure general school based healthy body image promotion focuses on: nutrition themes of variety, balance and moderation; positive outcomes of enjoying healthy foods rather than emphasising ‘good’ or ‘bad’ foods; supporting student and family initiatives to encourage healthy eating.
- Identify and plan for initial teacher and other school/community personnel professional development and training to help promote a healthy body image. Encourage teaching styles and classrooms which promote diversity, uniqueness, individual differences, interests and talents, self-acceptance and tolerance of others and non-competitive participation.
- Encourage growth and development lessons which focus on positive messages such as expected body changes, enjoyment of foods and the benefits of physical growth and development for both boys and girls; explain that weight and height are expected to increase with growth; celebrate uniqueness and reinforce diversity in shapes and sizes.11
School environment, policies and practices

- Assess current policies, structures and processes which impact on body image, and identify strengths, weaknesses and areas which can be addressed.

- Develop a whole of school body image charter or policy.

- Involve teachers and parents in learning to develop their own sense of self-worth and a positive body image as important role models.

- Encourage teachers to reinforce self-esteem across all school year groups.

- Ensure students are involved in school decision making wherever possible.

- Advocate that the school develops and implements an anti-bullying policy, involving staff, students and parents. Reduces risk of bullying by considering evidenced bullying reduction programs (see ‘Useful Resources’ below).

- Advocate that the school adopts inclusive school practices, e.g. caters for new arrivals and promotes peer support practices.

- Ensure whole of school programs for body image and self-esteem are implemented.

Partnerships with the community

- Provide information for the whole school community to increase knowledge regarding healthy body image, role of school and support people, and agencies and services in the local community.

- Provide links to community health services for students, teachers, school nurses and families such as mental and allied health services.

- Review and promote a collaborative approach between the school and community, for example student/school participation in external training programs for prevention of body image problems.¹⁶

- Encourage parent involvement in programs that aim to improve body image using a broad school/community approach.⁴

- Advocate that the school creates a welcoming atmosphere and be approachable within the school community.

Related professional development

- The MindMatters Professional Development Calendar provides details of free MindMatters professional development activities. Details for Western Australia can be found at: http://www.mindmatters.edu.au/professional_development/professional_development_landing
Related policies, procedures and guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Related Policies</th>
<th>Procedures</th>
<th>Guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3 Health promotion sub-policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Health promoting school model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4 Promoting healthy eating in schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.5 Promoting physical activity in schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.6 Promoting mental health and resilience in schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.10 Promoting healthy body image</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.3.4 Early identification and management of eating disorders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty of Care for Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Useful resources

Everybody’s different: details how to apply the self-esteem approach in schools, community settings and clinical situations to improve body image conceptions, prevent eating disorders and obesity, and foster health, nutrition and media literacy for body image improvement. Book and contact details can be found at http://apcen.edfac.usyd.edu.au/staff/odeaj/

The Butterfly Foundation is a community based charitable organisation that supports eating disorder sufferers and their carers through direct financial relief, advocacy, awareness campaigns, health promotion and early intervention work. Has a national support line, online web counselling and awareness campaigns. www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au

The Friendly Schools PLUS program helps school communities enhance their skills, knowledge and capacity to implement an evidence based whole-school approach to the reduction of bullying. http://www.friendlyschools.com.au/

KidsMatter: A primary school mental health promotion and prevention initiative http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Owner</th>
<th>Portfolio</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director Statewide Policy Unit.</td>
<td>School aged children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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References

1. Ha M, March H, Halse C. Actual/ideal body images of high school girls and how it affects their self-esteem: Implications for educational and clinical institutions. Sydney: SELF Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.


