

OBESE CHILDREN AND SELF-ESTEEM

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.
Psychologist

Obese boys and girls are likely to suffer from low self-esteem by their early teens, and may be more likely than their normal weight peers to smoke and drink, according to new study in the Journal of Pediatrics (January, 2000). These researchers studied 1,520 children and looked at their weight and a variety of other factors at ages 9 to 10, and again at ages 13 to 14. About 17% of the study participants were obese, defined as having a body mass index over the 95th percentile for age and gender. The proportion of children who were obese varied by gender and ethnicity from 14% in white males to 23% in black females.

This study found no significant differences between obese and non-obese children in self-esteem at ages 9 to 10. By ages 13 to 14, however, the self-esteem of obese children tended to have decreased from previous levels more often than in non-obese children. These decreases were particularly notable in white and Hispanic girls, in whom 69% of obese girls showed decreased self-esteem, compared to 43% of non-obese girls. In addition, obese boys in all ethnic groups showed more decline in self-esteem than non-obese boys. Obese children whose self-esteem decreased over the study period reported higher levels of sadness, loneliness, and nervousness than those whose self-esteem either increased or stayed the same.

The consequences of decreases in self-esteem were apparent in both obese and non-obese teenagers: The study reports that children whose self-esteem decreased over the 4-year period were more likely to smoke and drink alcohol than children whose self-esteem increased or remained unchanged.

This data demonstrate a significant relationship between obesity and changes in self-esteem during early adolescence. It was found that there were increased feelings of sadness, loneliness, and nervousness among those whose self-esteem decreased which also demonstrates significant social consequences of decreasing self-esteem in obese children. Unfortunately, negative attitudes toward obese children begin quite young and may be difficult to change, the researchers conclude.