

Relationship Between Body Image and Social Acceptance of Sixth and Eighth Grade

Males and Females


by

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A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree  
in

Guidance and Counseling

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

  
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May, 2005

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**ABSTRACT**

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<b>Relationship Between Body Image and Social Acceptance of Sixth and Eighth Grade Males and Females</b>			
(Title)			
<b>Guidance and Counseling</b>	<b>Barbara Flom, Ph.D.</b>	<b>May, 2005</b>	<b>54</b>
(Graduate Program)	(Research Advisor)	(Month/Year)	(# of Pages)
<b>American Psychological Association, 5<sup>th</sup> edition</b>			
(Name of Style Manual Used in this Study)			

Body image and social acceptance are two important topic areas when looking at middle schools students. Males and females in grades six and eight from a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin were given a five-question body image survey and a five-question social acceptance survey. Thirty-two sixth grade and seventeen eighth grade students participated in the study.

Percentages were tabulated for each item on the body image survey and for each item on the social acceptance survey. Significant correlations between the body image and social acceptance scores when calculating the Pearson Correlation Coefficient were

found for the total group of participants, the female participants, the sixth grade participants, and the sixth grade female participants. An independent samples *t* test found no significant differences in the survey scores between the male and female participants and between the sixth and eighth grade participants. These findings are not consistent with past research, which has suggested that females have a lower body image than males. A study investigating body image and social acceptance of students in grades other than sixth and eighth, as well as at a larger school, is recommended as future research. Implications for school counselors are discussed.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Barbara Flom, for her patience, guidance, and feedback on this paper. I would also like to thank my parents, who are both in the education field. Both of my parents inspired me to pursue a degree in school counseling. Seeing the impact they have had on students' lives is a constant reminder that I have chosen the right profession.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

In today's society, being attractive is equated with being thin. Society's standards for being attractive are affecting children at young ages. Many studies have shown that children display concerns regarding their body image by ages seven and eight (Bryant-Waugh, Cooper, Taylor, & Lask, 1996; Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000; Frost & McKelvie, 2004). Even children cannot escape the messages that adults see daily regarding the many diets that exist today, such as low-carb, no carb, no fat, high protein, and so on. Girls as young as five years old are going on diets because they think they're too fat (Davison et. al, 2000). It is easy to get caught up in the many messages regarding dieting and physical appearance in our society. It is no wonder that children are falling victims to this faulty thinking as well.

Children are growing up in a culture that puts an emphasis on physical appearance, which can be very detrimental to a child's well-being and self-esteem. A child's early experiences are very important in the development of one's self-perception (Hopkins & Altman-Klein, 1993). A person's self-perception includes how he or she feels about his or her own body, which is referred to as body image. A child's body image is an important factor in a child's quality of life, participation in physical activities, and overall wellness (Duncan, Woodfield, O'Neil, & Al-Nakeeb, 2002).

Not developing a healthy body image during childhood may greatly affect one's self-esteem and confidence as an adult. The development of a healthy and positive body image may lead to higher self-esteem and confidence (Duncan et. al, 2002). Past research has found a connection between self-esteem and body image. Hayes, Crocker, and Kowalski (1999) found that a person's self-esteem is positively related to one's body image satisfaction. A healthy body image may also lead to changes in one's lifestyle, such as increased physical activity and

decreased binge eating (Duncan et. al, 2002). Having a healthy body image is important for both males and females of all ages.

Typically, females tend to have lower body satisfaction than males. A study conducted in Melbourne, Australia surveyed both boys and girls in grade three through five. The researchers found that the boys were more likely than the girls to want a larger body size than they currently possessed (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Holt, & Finemore, 2003). In the past, girls have been more judgmental of their bodies than boys. Being dissatisfied with one's body has typically been an issue for females (Green & Pritchard, 2003). However, more and more boys are also feeling self-conscious about their own bodies if they do not fit into the athletic ideal that is shown in the media. Boys as young as six and seven are developing the preference for the muscular ideal, as portrayed in the media (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). In contrast to past belief, both males and females are affected by the ideals that society sets forth regarding physical attractiveness.

Children and adolescents are quickly shown the value that is placed on physical appearance in today's society (Daley & Hunter, 2001). This message that physical appearance determines one's self-worth is transmitted to children through a variety of mediums, such as family, the media, and one's peers. It is very difficult to ignore messages that are being sent from all different directions, but have the same idea: being attractive is important in order to be successful and popular. Children experience pressures to be thin at a very young age from their families, friends, and the media (Kostanski & Gullone, 1999).

An individual's family environment may influence one's body image and self-esteem. Past research has shown that one's family environment can influence whether a person engages in disordered eating (Felker & Stivers, 1994). In a study conducted by Schur, Sanders, and

Steiner (2000), 77% of third through sixth grade students had heard about dieting from their family, usually from a parent. A child's family may put pressure on him or her to go on a diet or to be perfect, which can cause a child to have low self-esteem and poor body image. Families may also stress the importance of perfectionism with their children, meaning that their children need to excel in school and in sports. Not meeting these expectations may cause a child to develop lower self-esteem and poor body image.

The media also play a big role in communicating the messages that being beautiful means to be thin. The media, which include television, magazines, radio, and movies, pressure individuals to be thin and to have negative feelings regarding their own appearance if they do not have the ideal body type (Green & Pritchard, 2003). The media emphasize the ideal body type for both men and women. For men, this ideal body type is very muscular and slender (Ray, 2004). For women, the ideal body type is tall and thin. Most men and women do not even come close to fitting into the ideal body type that the media emphasizes. If a person does not fit into the ideal body type set forth by the media, he or she may develop low self-esteem or poor body image.

Fifty-five percent of students surveyed in a past research study had heard about dieting from messages on television (Schur et. al, 2000). The media is full of messages regarding different diets and other weight loss procedures, along with stick-thin models and actors and actresses. Seeing these messages daily can seriously affect a person's well-being and overall self-confidence.

Peer relationships are extremely important for children and adolescents. A child's friends may influence feelings about his or her own body. A study looking at fourth through eighth graders found that the importance that one's peers put on weight and eating was the most

important variable in predicting excessive weight concerns (Taylor, Sharpe, Shisslak, Bryson, Estes, Gray, McKnight, Crago, Kraemer, & Killen, 1998). A child's social group is viewed as an important part of a child's school experience. If a child does not develop healthy relationships in school, he or she may not feel accepted by peers and may develop low feelings of self-worth.

A child's peer relationships affect his or her development in other areas, such as school, family, and the community (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). A child may in actuality be very accepted by his or her peers. However, this child may not believe that he or she is accepted by these peers. Therefore, a child's perceived social acceptance may be lower than his or her actual social acceptance. Having a lower view of one's own social acceptance may result from poor self-esteem or self-confidence.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

The topic of body image is important because having a distorted body image may be linked to the development of an eating disorder. Those individuals who have been identified as having an eating disorder have also reported having a somewhat distorted body image (Utenbaucher, Kraehe, & Krieg, 1997). The topic of social acceptance is important because a child's peer group is important to healthy social and emotional development. Not developing healthy relationships in childhood may hinder one's ability to do so in adulthood.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether a relationship exists between body image and perceived social acceptance. Male and female students in grades six and eight were given two surveys, one investigating body image and the other investigating social acceptance. Research took place at a middle school in northwestern Wisconsin during April of 2005.

### *Research Questions*

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between body image and perceived social acceptance?
2. Are there differences in the body image and social acceptance scores between males and females?
3. Are there differences in the body image and social acceptance between the sixth and eighth grade students?

### *Definition of Terms*

*Body image* – the subjective evaluation of one's own body and the resulting feelings and attitudes (McCrea, Summerfield, & Rosen, 1982).

*Peer acceptance* – the degree to which children are liked or disliked by the children in their peer group (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

*Anorexia nervosa* – the refusal to maintain a normal body weight, which is defined by weight of less than 85% of typical bodyweight for a given height and an intense fear related to gaining weight (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

*Bulimia nervosa* – characterized by eating a large amount of food during a limited time period, experiencing a lack of control over eating during a time period, and engaging in purging behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

*Self-esteem* – the expression of approval or disapproval, indicating the extent to which a person believes himself or herself competent, successful, significant, and worthy (Coopersmith, 1981).

### *Assumptions of the Study*

The researcher assumed that all questions in the surveys were answered honestly. The researcher also assumed that students understood all terms used in the surveys. It was assumed that the questions used in the body image survey were assessing body image, as well as that the questions used in the social acceptance survey were assessing social acceptance.

### *Limitations of the Study*

A limitation to this study was that the researcher was only looking at the link between body image and social acceptance. There are many other variables that could have been studied as well, including the influence of the family and the media. Another limitation in this study was that only sixth and eighth grade males and females were studied. The results will not be able to be generalized to children from other age groups. The researcher conducted this study at a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin; therefore, another limitation is that the subject population was not very diverse and results of this study are not able to be generalized to other schools.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Body image and social acceptance are two very important topics when looking at middle school aged students. The following literature review will first discuss the adolescence time period and the difficulties that middle school students face. Next, statistics on body image satisfaction will be given, regarding gender differences, age differences, and ethnic differences. The influences of family, the media, and peers in relation to body image will then be discussed, followed by the importance of social acceptance during adolescence.

### *Adolescence and Puberty*

The time period of adolescence can be very difficult for children and their families. Feelings of confusion are common, along with many questions that sometimes do not get answered because children are too embarrassed to ask them. Adolescence is a time of change (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Along with changes in relationships, many physical changes come about. This again brings feelings of confusion. During adolescence, the messages given by someone's peer groups and family shape his or her behavior (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003).

Because of the many changes that adolescents go through, body image dissatisfaction is prevalent among the adolescent population (Phelps, Johnston, Jimenez, Wilczenski, Andrea, & Healy, 1993). Adolescents develop both physically and emotionally at different rates. Those adolescents who do not develop when their peers do may have low feelings of self-esteem because they don't look like their friends. Those adolescents who do develop at the same rate or faster than their peers may still experience low self-esteem because of the many changes that happen to their bodies.

Not only do females develop at different rates than their female peers and vice versa, males and females go through puberty at different times, which affects feelings regarding self-

esteem. Research has found that under the age of thirteen, girls have higher self-esteem than boys. However, after age thirteen and during adolescence, boys have higher self-esteem than girls (Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000). In other words, between childhood and adolescence, there is a decrease in the self-esteem of girls and an increase in the self-esteem of boys (Frost & McKelvie, 2004). Low self-esteem may also affect a person's views of his or her own body.

### *Prevalence of Body Dissatisfaction*

Research has shown that more and more young people have concerns over their appearance, resulting in body image dissatisfaction. Children as young as seven years old have low body image satisfaction (Kostanski & Gullone, 1999). These unhealthy feelings about one's own body tend to carry over into adulthood as well, causing eating problems through the adult years.

Along with feelings of low body image satisfaction, many children engage in dieting to try to achieve the perfect body. A study found that girls as young as ten years old reported being on a diet to try to lose weight (McVey, Tweed, & Blackmore, 2004). Those young children who turn to dieting to try to achieve the perfect body have low feelings of self-esteem. Studies have shown that a significant relationship exists between body image dissatisfaction and participating in dieting behaviors (Kostanski & Gullone, 1999).

A study involving 202 children in Melbourne, Australia in grades three and four investigated body satisfaction of both boys and girls. Thomas, Ricciardelli, and Williams (2000) found that 11.3 percent of the girls and 9.6 percent of the boys scored a twenty or higher on the Children's Eating Attitude Test (ChEAT). A twenty or above on the ChEAT indicates disordered eating patterns, along with anorexic attitudes towards eating. The researchers in this study also found that 48.5 percent of girls and 48.6 percent of boys reported that they had dieted at least



once. Sixty-six percent of girls and 42.9 percent of boys reported being scared about becoming overweight (Thomas et. al, 2000). These findings demonstrate that children of any age may feel dissatisfied with their bodies and may resort to dieting to try to obtain the perfect body.

A study by Veron-Guidry and Williamson (1996) found that 40.5% of students in grades three through seven wanted to be thinner and 13.5% of these students reported that they had restricted their caloric intake. More and more children feel dissatisfied with the way they look. Those children who develop unhealthy eating attitudes early in life may be at greater risk for body image problems throughout adulthood. An abundance of research exists when looking at attitudes towards one's body. When looking specifically at eating attitudes and body image, past research has found gender differences in these areas.

### *Gender Differences*

Typically, females have lower body image satisfaction than males. A study researching students in grades seven through nine in Britain found that boys reported having a more positive view of their bodies than girls (Duncan et. al, 2002). One possible explanation for this is that females may be affected more than males by the media to achieve the thin ideal.

Females also tend to diet more than males. A study conducted by Vander Wal and Thelen (2000) found that females of average weight were more likely to be on a diet than males of average weight. This study involved male and female students in second, third, fifth, and sixth grade. The majority of dieting advertisements on television and in magazines show females in them. This may give women the idea that all females should be dieting, which will in turn, create the perfect, thin body.

A study involving 227 male and female students in grade four through six found many other gender differences in relation to self-esteem and body image. Researchers found that males

had higher self-esteem than females, and males also had higher body image satisfaction than females (Frost & McKelvie, 2004). These results may be due to a number of reasons. Females may have more pressure on them from their families to conform to the thin ideal. Female friends may encourage each other to diet and to strive to achieve a more slender body. Because males and females develop at different rates, the females in this study may have been going through puberty, which can bring about many changes in bodies and feelings. Typically, females do feel more pressure to conform to the thin ideal in today's society.

However, more and more males are becoming dissatisfied with their own bodies (Daley & Hunter, 2001). While females are supposed to live up to the stick-thin model ideal, males are supposed to live up to the muscular, athletic ideal. Many male athletes, in particular, feel pressures to achieve the ideal, muscular, perfect body (Daley & Hunter, 2001). This muscular, ideal body for males is shown in television, movies, and in magazines. As with females, it is difficult to try to ignore these images. In addition to gender differences that exist when researching body image, ethnic differences exist as well.

### *Ethnic Differences*

Past research has shown ethnic differences in regards to body image satisfaction. African American children reported having a higher body image satisfaction than Asian children (Duncan et. al, 2002). Preferences for ideal body shapes also exist between different ethnic groups. Research has shown that African American females chose larger body sizes as their ideal than do white females (Thompson, Corwin, & Sargent, 1997). White females tend to want to be thinner than their current body size.

According to research, adolescent African American females receive more approval regarding their body size from African American males than white females receive from white

males (Thompson et. al, 1997). This study also found that African American males chose a larger female body size than white males when asked which picture they found attractive.

A study conducted by Thompson (1996) found that adolescent African American males selected a larger body size as their ideal body size than white males. This study also found that African American males dieted less often than white males. In conclusion, much research exists on body image differences found based on gender and ethnic background. Many other variables affect body image satisfaction, including family environment.

### *Body Image and Family Environment*

One's family environment may influence his or her self-esteem and body image. A child's family affects his or her behavior, thinking, and values (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). The family is the primary agent for a child's socialization in general. A family tends to be the socialization agent for transmitting messages to children about their appearances and what constitutes healthy eating (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Families may or may not teach their children about what makes a healthy meal, how much soda they should be drinking, and how much candy they should consume each day. These ideas about healthy eating may carry over from childhood into adulthood. A family also may or may not teach children about the importance of self-esteem and being satisfied with your body.

Research has shown that, while a child's entire family transmits messages regarding eating and body image, a child's mother plays the most important role in this transmission of messages (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). The most important family relationship seems to be between a mother and her daughter. Mothers who encourage their daughters to diet increase the dieting behavior of their daughters; this is especially true for adolescent girls (Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998).

A mother may not realize the importance she plays in her daughter body satisfaction development. Because of the sensitive nature of the time period of adolescence, even one comment about a diet from a mother to an adolescent daughter may negatively affect her view of her own body. Research has found that adolescent girls reported the two most important influences on body image were their mother and best friend (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). This again emphasizes the important role that a mother plays in the overall healthy development of her daughter.

### *Body Image and the Media*

The media's powerful influence over today's society contributes to the development of poor body satisfaction and eating problems in the American culture (Thompson, Heinberg, Altobe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Television, movies, magazines, and newspapers are filled with pictures and images of attractive, thin, and flawless men and women. Seeing these images daily can greatly damage one's self-esteem, which may result in low body image satisfaction. Being dissatisfied with one's body has become the norm for women in the United States particularly (Berg, 2001). However, men are also becoming more affected by these images, resulting in an increase in body image concerns (Berg, 2001).

The media glorify the thin and slender standard of attractiveness (Berg, 2001). Television, movies, magazines, and newspapers show those men and women who are thin as having more fun, having more friends, and having a nicer personality than those individuals who do not fit into the thin ideal. The media make it seem that anyone can achieve this thin ideal body if they work hard enough at it. The media also communicate that those who are not thin are not putting forth an appropriate amount of effort (Kater, Rohwer, & Londre, 2001).

The myth that everyone is capable of being stick-thin is affecting people of all ages, especially adolescents. Because of the many changes that occur during the time period of adolescence, a child may not be capable of having a stick-thin body. Seeing the messages sent forth by the media may make this child feel unimportant and unattractive. Children are immersed in a culture that is greatly influenced by the media, particularly the importance of how certain actors and actresses look. It is virtually impossible for people of any age to try to ignore these images because they are so widespread in today's society (Schur et. al, 2000).

### *Body Image and Peers*

A child's peers play a very important role in development, particularly during the adolescent time period. A child's peers may influence body image and self-esteem. Past research has found that peer relationships and affiliations may affect one's body image and eating patterns, particularly dieting (Gerner, 2003). It is common to find that those students who have unhealthy eating attitudes socialize with each other. These students may also decide to diet together. A study conducted by Schur et. al (2000) found that twenty-six percent of students surveyed reported that they had heard about dieting from their peers.

A research study examining the role of peers in body satisfaction and weight concerns was conducted in California and Arizona (Taylor et. al, 1998). Seven hundred and eighty-eight fourth and fifth graders and 333 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders were surveyed regarding their weight concerns. Researchers found that, for fourth and fifth graders, the importance that their peers put on eating behaviors and weight was most strongly related to developing severe weight concerns (Taylor et. al, 1998). For sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, the researchers found that the importance that their peers put on eating patterns and weight was the main risk factor for the development of disordered eating patterns.

Peer relationships seem to influence individuals to resort to extreme weight-loss behaviors, particularly among adolescent girls (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Those children who have low body satisfaction seem to encourage each other to continue dieting and engaging in other unhealthy behaviors. For example, research has found that a group of individuals who had been diagnosed with bulimia reported being pressured by their peers to participate in both bingeing and purging (Stice, Nemeroff, & Shaw, 1996).

Some children believe that the quality of their peer relationships would improve if they lost weight. A past study by Gerner (2003) found that those girls who were overweight believed that the quality of their friendships would improve if they were to lose weight. This goes back to the thin ideal that women strive for. Today's society sets forth the message that those who are thin have more friends and are happier. Obviously, these messages are affecting how children view their own peer relationships. While some children want to improve the quality of their relationships, others just want to feel accepted by their peers.

### *Social Acceptance by Peers*

By the middle of childhood, more than thirty percent of a child's social interactions involve his or her peers (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Many children view these interactions as the most important part of their school day. Most children want to be accepted by their peers and to have friends. Not developing healthy relationships during childhood can affect an individual's ability to develop healthy relationships in adulthood.

A child's social relationships with peers and friends are associated with many aspects of healthy development (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Children learn many things from having healthy peer relationships, such as teamwork, communication, listening, and respect.

Children's relationships with peers and friends are also associated with many aspects of adjustment, including the ability to achieve in schools (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

Children who are not socially accepted may go to extreme lengths to be heard. For example, those students who were involved in the brutal killings at Columbine did not feel accepted by their peers. They were reported to be the targets of teasing and ridicule from their classmates (Aronson, 2004). The fact that they were teased certainly does not validate anything that they did, but it does give new light to what can happen when students do not feel accepted. Children are teased by the peers for many reasons, including dressing differently than others or being overweight.

### *Teasing*

Teasing is very common during the school-aged years, especially during adolescence. The most common of this teasing is usually related to one's physical appearance (Cash, 1995). Being teased in childhood has a direct link to one's body image and self-esteem in adulthood. Research has shown that frequent teasing in childhood can decrease one's body image satisfaction and self-esteem in adulthood (Gleason, Alexander, & Somers, 2000). The negative feelings that result from constant teasing may influence one's ability to function in a healthy manner during adulthood. In these cases where teasing affected body image and self-esteem in adulthood, peers are typically the worst perpetrators of teasing (Cash, 1995).

Childhood obesity has become more and more evident in today's society. Childhood obesity has severe repercussions for children, including the development of major health problems and possible mortality in adulthood (Anderson, Crespo, Bartlett, Cheskin, & Pratt, 1998). Those children who are obese are also at a great risk to be teased and ridiculed by their classmates. Research has shown that those school children who are overweight report higher

levels of teasing by peers than children who are not overweight (Pierce & Wardle, 1997).

Overweight children are also denied the opportunity to have a spot on sports teams, including the denial of overweight females on cheerleading squads (Aronson, 1997).

Students who are overweight face discrimination and constant harassment at school (Aronson, 1997). Not only are these students not accepted by their peers, but they also must deal with the constant name-calling and practical jokes that students in their schools put them through. Having to deal with this constant harassment daily may be too much to have to deal with. For one student, the constant teasing became unbearable to take anymore. In 1996, a twelve year-old boy in Florida committed suicide because his peers were reported to have repeatedly teased him about his weight (Aronson, 1997). It is imperative for educators to not only emphasize to students the importance of having high body satisfaction, but also the importance of respecting your peers.

### *Eating Disorders*

Having low satisfaction of one's own body may cause an individual to participate in unhealthy dieting patterns. Body dissatisfaction has been reported to predict eating disorders among young women in the United States (Mildred, Paxton, & Wertheim, 1995). Those individuals who have low body satisfaction are willing to go to great lengths to try to change their bodies. Another contributing factor to the development of eating disorders is low body esteem, or how one feels about his or her body (Mildred et. al, 1995).

Students in elementary, middle, and high schools are affected by disordered eating patterns. The earliest stages of the development of disordered eating patterns may begin at the time of or before puberty (Veron-Guidry & Williamson, 1996). Feelings of low body satisfaction may affect children at any age. This makes it imperative for educators to become familiar with



programs to prevent eating disorders and emphasize the importance of appreciating your own body.

Body image and social acceptance are both very important topic areas when looking at middle school students. Many children experience difficulties when going through adolescence, which can affect their self-esteem and their perceived social acceptance. Much research has been conducted looking at body image satisfaction, particularly studying gender differences, age differences, and ethnic differences. An adolescent's family, peers, and the media may influence his or her body image.

### Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of the study was to see whether a relationship existed between body image and social acceptance among middle school students. Male and female students in grades six and eight were surveyed during the spring of 2005 at a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin. This chapter will discuss subject selection and description, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations.

#### *Subject Selection and Description*

The subjects surveyed in this study were both males and females in grades six and eight at a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin. The town where the middle school is located has a population of about 1100 people. Volunteer students in two sixth grade classes were surveyed, which totaled 32 students. Volunteer students in two eighth grade classes were also surveyed, which totaled 17 students.

#### *Instrumentation*

Two surveys were used in this study to assess body image and social acceptance. The body image survey (See Appendix A) is a modified version of the Children's Eating Attitudes Test (ChEAT). The researcher modified the survey to five questions for this study. Subjects chose between four responses: never, rarely, sometimes, and always. Subjects circled the answer that was most applicable to their feeling and thoughts. Permission to use this survey was given via fax and e-mail by Lina Ricciardelli, a psychology professor at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia.

The social acceptance survey was created by Susan Harter, a psychology professor at the University of Denver (See Appendix B). The social acceptance survey is five questions and subjects chose between two answers by circling the answer that was most applicable to their

feelings and thoughts. Permission to use the social acceptance survey was granted through the purchase of a manual, entitled *Self-Profile in Children*.

#### *Date Collection Procedures*

The researcher was granted permission to conduct this study at a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin. A permission form was sent home to the parents of students in grades six and eight (See Appendix C). Parents were asked to sign the form and have their child return it to their homeroom teacher. Those students who did not turn in a permission form to their teacher did not participate in the study. The researcher went into two sixth grade and two eighth grade classrooms.

The researcher handed out the surveys to students and read the directions on top of the survey. Students were told that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions and then asked to complete the surveys. Once completed, the researcher collected all surveys. Students were told that the counselor would be available following the survey if anyone felt uncomfortable after answering the survey questions. The same procedure was repeated for the remaining classrooms as well.

#### *Data Analysis*

Percentages were calculated for total responses for each of the ten total survey questions. The researcher explored possible variables based on the results, including gender, grade, and the scores on both surveys. A *t* test was used to see if differences in scores existed based on gender and grade. The data were also analyzed using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient to see if a relationship existed between a student's score on the body image survey and the social acceptance survey.

### *Limitations*

A limitation of the methodology was that students may not have understood all of the terms that were used in the surveys. This may have hindered their ability to accurately answer the survey questions. Another limitation of the methodology was that the researcher used only five questions of the 25 questions that make up the ChEAT. This may have hindered the survey's ability to be an accurate representation of unhealthy eating patterns and low body image.

### *Summary*

Students in grades six and eight at a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin were surveyed using a version of the ChEAT and a version of the Harter Social Acceptance Scale. The research was analyzed using a *t* test to explore possible relationships between the variables.

## Chapter IV: Results

The present study looked at body image and social acceptance of sixth and eighth grade males and females at a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin. The following results section will first discuss demographics, followed by the item analysis on the body image survey and the social acceptance survey. A data analysis using the independent samples *t* test will examine the differences between the sixth and eighth grade students and between males and females. Next, a Pearson Correlation Coefficient will examine the relationship between body image and socially acceptance. Finally, the research questions of the study in relation to the results will be addressed.

### *Demographics*

Thirty-two sixth grade and seventeen eighth grade students participated in the study. Of the total sixth graders, eleven were male and twenty-one were female. Of the total eighth graders, three were male and fourteen were female. Forty-nine total participants were given the surveys.

### *Item Analysis: Body Image Survey*

Percentages were tabulated by both grade and gender for the five questions on the body image survey. Participants chose one of the following four responses for each item: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, or Always. The total percentages for the responses for each item on the body image scale are found in Figures 1 through 5.

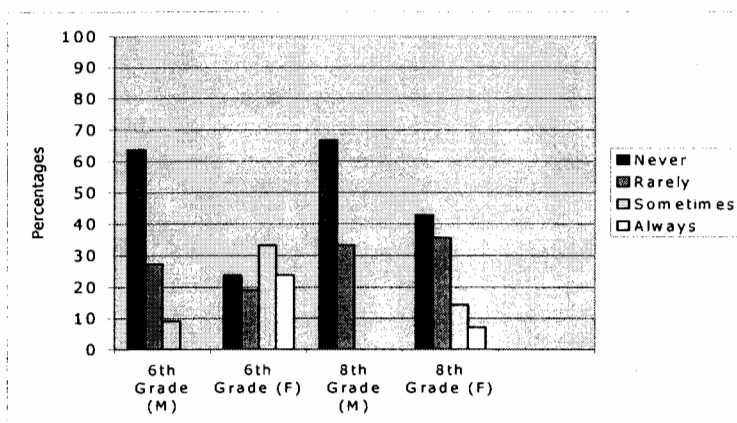


Figure 1. Body image survey item one: I am scared about being overweight.

For the body image survey item one, 40.8% of the total group stated that they never felt scared about being overweight, 26.5% rarely felt scared, 20.4% sometimes felt scared, and 12.2% always felt scared about being overweight. Of note is the fact that, when looking specifically at the sixth and eighth grade females together, 17.1% reported always feeling scared about being overweight.

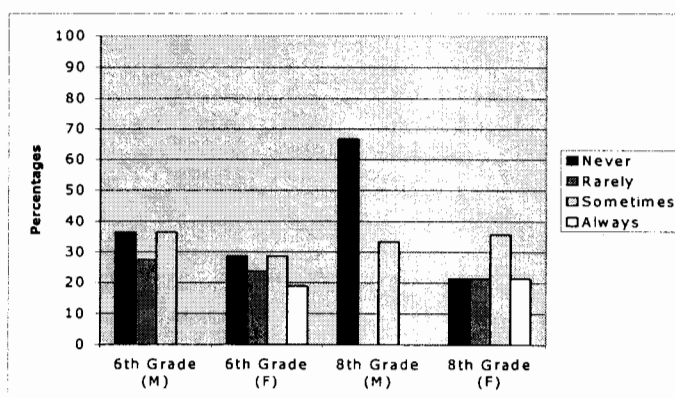
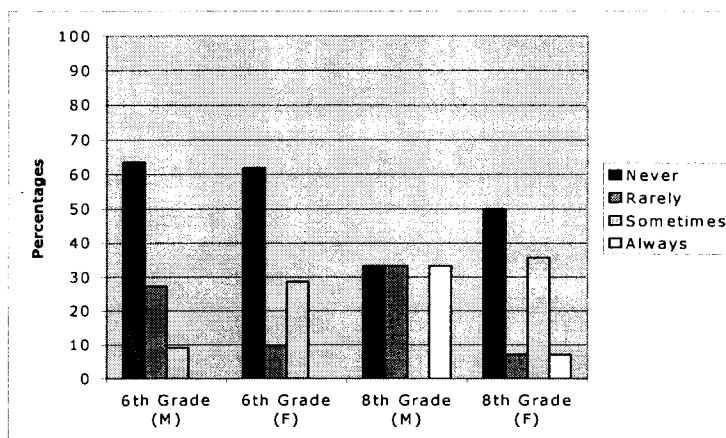


Figure 2. Body image survey item two: I think a lot about wanting to be thinner.

For the body image survey item two, 30.6% of all participants reported that they never think a lot about wanting to be thinner, 22.4% rarely think about this, 32.7% sometimes think

about this, and 14.3% always think about wanting to be thinner. Of note is the fact that, when looking specifically at females, 20% reported that they always think a lot about wanting to be thinner.



*Figure 3.* Body image survey item three: I have been dieting.

For the body image survey item three, 57.1% of total participants never had been dieting, 14.3% rarely had, 24.5% sometimes had, and 4.1% always are dieting. In contrast to previous body image survey questions, when looking specifically at males, 7.1% reported that they are always dieting, while only 2.9% of females reported that they are always dieting.

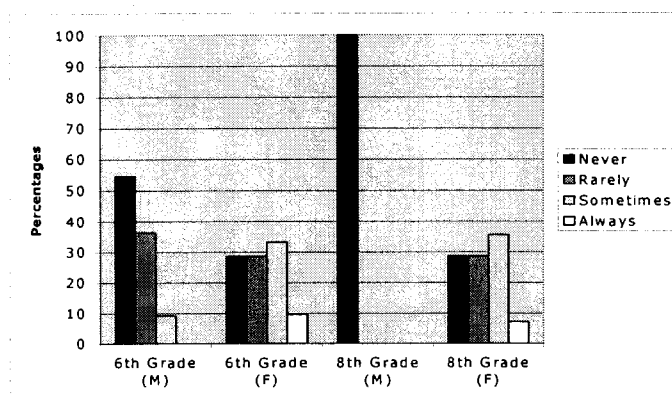


Figure 4. Body image survey item four: I think a lot about being fat.

For the body image survey item four, 38.8% of total participants never think about being fat, 28.6% rarely do, 26.5% sometimes do, and 6.1% always think about being fat. Of note is that 8.6% the sixth and eighth grade females always think about being fat.

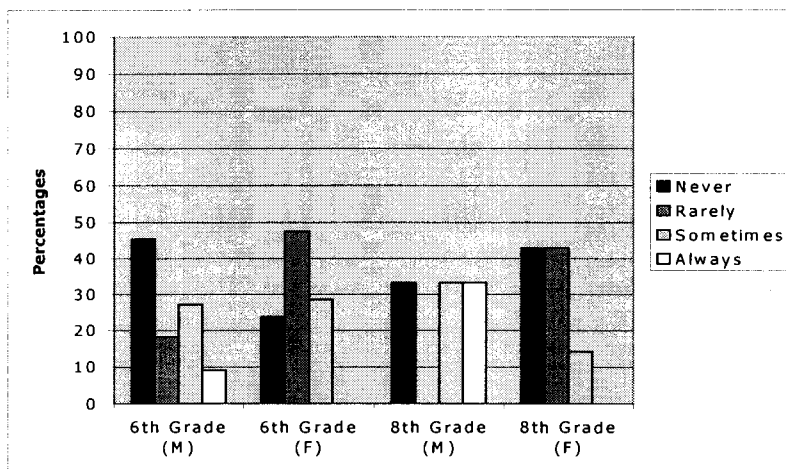


Figure 5. Body image survey item five: I give too much time and thought to food.

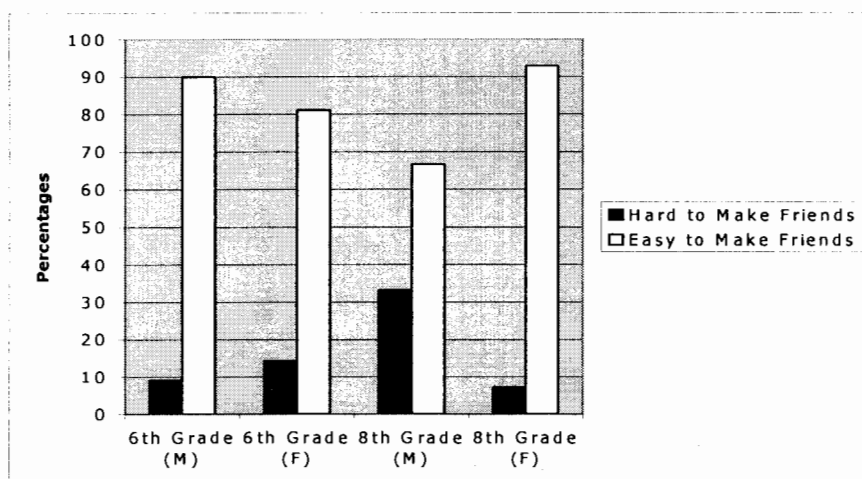
For the body image survey item five, 34.7% of total participants never give too much time and thought to food, 36.7% rarely do, 24.5% sometimes do, and 4.1% always give too much time and thought to food. Of note is that, for sixth and eighth grade males, 14.3% always give



too much time and thought to food, while no female participants indicated that they always give too much time and thought to food.

### *Item Analysis: Social Acceptance Survey*

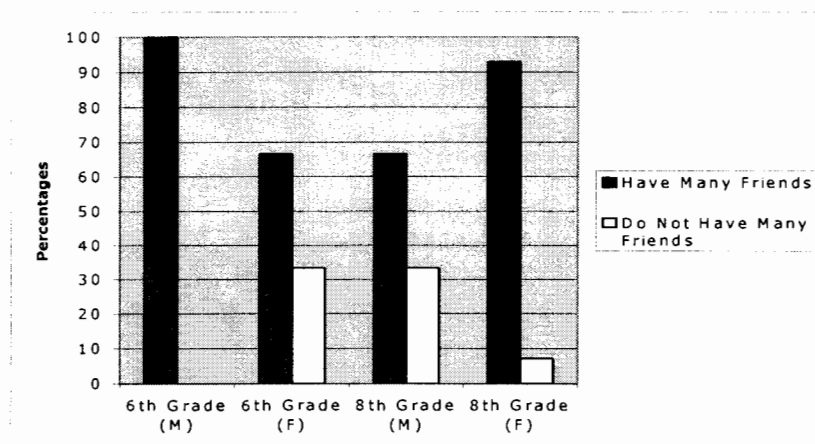
Percentages were tabulated by both grade and gender for the five questions on the social acceptance survey. Participants chose one of the two responses provided. The total percentages for the responses for each item on the social acceptance survey are found in Figures 6 through 10.



*Figure 6. Social acceptance survey item one: I find it hard/or easy to make friends.*

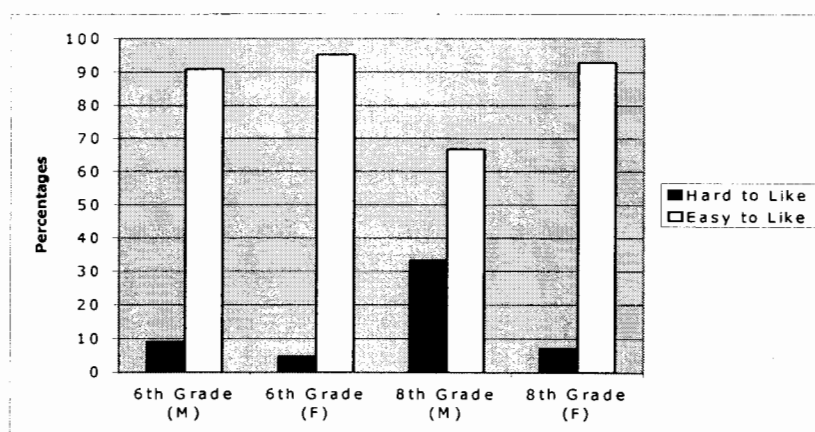
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For the social acceptance survey item one, 12.2% of total participants find it hard to make friends, while 85.7% find it easy to make friends. For the total male respondents, 14.3% find it hard to make friends, while 85.7% find it easy to make friends. For the total female respondents, 11.4% find it hard to make friends, while 88.6% find it easy to make friends.



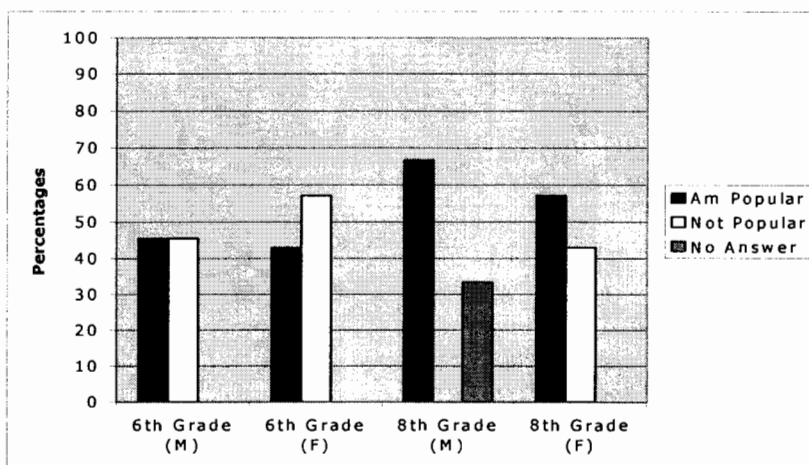
*Figure 7.* Social acceptance survey item two: I have a lot/or not many friends.

For the social acceptance survey item two, 81.6% of total participants have a lot of friends, while 18.4% do not have a lot of friends. For males, 7.1% believe that they do not have many friends, while 22.9% of females believe that they do not have many friends.



*Figure 8.* Social acceptance survey item three: I am hard/easy to like.

For the social acceptance survey item three, 8.2% of total participants believe they are hard to like, while 91.8% believe they are easy to like. For sixth and eighth grade females, 5.7% believe they are hard to like, and 14.3% of males believe they are hard to like.



*Figure 9.* Social acceptance survey item four: I am popular/not very popular.

For the social acceptance survey item four, 49% of total participants believe they are popular, while 46.9% believe they are not very popular. Two percent of the total participants did not circle a response for this statement. For total females, 51.4% believe they are not very popular, while 35.7% of total males believe they are not very popular.

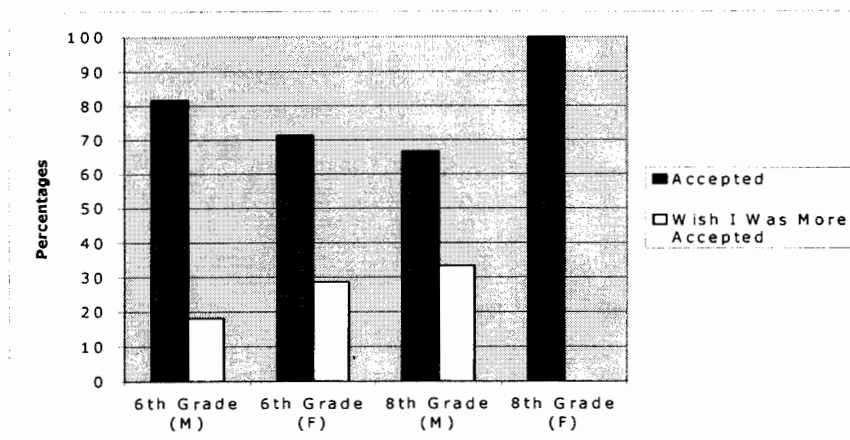


Figure 10. Social acceptance survey item five: I am accepted/or wish I was more accepted.

For the social acceptance survey item five, 81.6% of total participants believe they are socially accepted, while 18.4% wish they were more socially accepted. For sixth and eighth grade males, 21.4% wish they were more socially accepted, while 17.1% of total females wish they were more socially accepted.

#### *Data Analysis: Group Comparisons*

Data were then analyzed using an independent samples *t* test. Mean and standard deviation scores were tabulated by grade and gender for the body image survey and the social acceptance survey. Participants' results for the body image survey are found in Table 1, and results for the social acceptance survey are found in Table 2.

Table 1

*Body Image Survey Mean Scores*

Gender	Grade	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Male	6 <sup>th</sup>	8.45	2.697
Female	6 <sup>th</sup>	10.90	4.253
Male	8 <sup>th</sup>	9.00	1.732
Female	8 <sup>th</sup>	10.36	3.433

A total score of 20 was possible on the body image survey, which would indicate low body image. The mean score and standard deviation for participants' responses are found above in Table 1. The *t* test showed that there were no significant differences between males and females or between sixth and eighth graders on the body image survey.

Table 2

*Social Acceptance Survey Mean Scores*

Gender	Grade	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Male	6 <sup>th</sup>	.864	.8970
Female	6 <sup>th</sup>	1.405	1.5134
Male	8 <sup>th</sup>	1.500	2.5981
Female	8 <sup>th</sup>	.643	.9288

A total score of 5 was possible on the social acceptance survey, which would indicate low perceived social acceptance. The mean score and standard deviation for participants' responses are found above in Table 2. The  $t$  test showed that there were no significant differences between males and females or between sixth and eighth graders on the social acceptance survey.

#### *Data Analysis: Body Image and Social Acceptance*

Data were further analyzed using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient. A significant correlation between body image and social acceptance was found for the total group of participants. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient of .332 was calculated. This was significant at the  $p < .05$  level ( $p = .02$ ). This indicates that a correlation was found between a negative body image and negative perceived social acceptance for the total group of participants.

A significant correlation between body image and social acceptance was also found for participants in the sixth grade when combining both males and females. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient of .490 was calculated. This was significant at the  $p < .01$  level ( $p = .004$ ). This indicates that a correlation was found between negative body image and negative perceived social acceptance for the total group of sixth grade respondents.

A significant correlation between body image and social acceptance was found for the female respondents when looking at both the sixth and eighth grade females. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient of .450 was calculated. This was significant at the  $p < .01$  level ( $p = .007$ ). This indicates that a correlation was found between negative body image and negative perceived social acceptance for the total group of female respondents.

A significant correlation between body image and social acceptance was found for the sixth grade female respondents. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient of .562 was calculated. This was significant at the  $p < .01$  level ( $p = .008$ ). This indicates that a correlation was found

between negative body image and negative perceived social acceptance for the group of sixth grade female respondents.

No significant relationship between body image and social acceptance was found for the sixth grade male, eighth grade male, and eighth grade female respondents. No significant relationship was found for the eighth grade when combining males and females and for the male respondents from both sixth and eighth grades.

### *Research Questions*

This study answered the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between body image and perceived social acceptance?

A significant correlation between body image and social acceptance was found for the total group of participants. A significant correlation between the body image and social acceptance was also found for the female respondents, the sixth grade respondents, and the sixth grade female respondents.

2. Are there differences in the body image and social acceptance scores between males and females?

The data were analyzed for differences between males and females. No significant differences were found in the body image and social acceptance scores between males and females.

3. Are there differences in the body image and social acceptance between the sixth and eighth grade students?

The data were analyzed for differences between sixth and eighth grade students. No significant differences were found in the body image and social acceptance scores between the sixth and eighth grade participants.

The percentages were tabulated for each item on the body image survey and for each item on the social acceptance survey. No differences were found between males and females or between sixth and eighth graders in relation to the body image and social acceptance scores. Significant correlations were found among the total group of respondents, the female respondents, the sixth grade respondents, and the sixth grade female respondents in relation to the body image and social acceptance scores.



## Chapter V: Discussion

The following chapter will begin with a summary of the present study. Limitations of the study will be discussed, followed by recommendations for future research on body image and social acceptance.

### *Summary*

Body image and social acceptance are two important topic areas for middle school students. Sixth and eighth grade males and females at a rural middle school in northwestern Wisconsin were given a five-question body image survey and a five-question social acceptance survey. Volunteer students in two sixth grade classrooms were surveyed, which totaled 32 students. Volunteer students in two eighth grade classroom were surveyed, which totaled 17 students.

Percentages were tabulated for each item on the body image survey and for each item on the social acceptance survey. An independent samples *t* test found no significant differences between the male and female participants or between the sixth and eighth grade participants. Significant correlations when between the body image survey scores and the social acceptance survey scores when calculating the Pearson Correlation Coefficient were found for the total group of participants, the female participants, the sixth grade participants, and the sixth grade female participants.

### *Limitations*

A limitation to this study was that only sixth and eighth grade females were studied, so the results cannot be generalized to children from other age groups. The participants in this study were from a rural northwestern town in Wisconsin, so the results cannot be generalized to schools that do not fit this description. Another limitation is that only body image and social

acceptance were looked at in this study. There are other variables that could have been studied, including the influence of the family or the media. A limitation within the methodology is that a student may not have understood all of the terms used in the surveys. Also, the researcher used a modified version of the body image survey, which may hinder the ability to measure a student's body image.

### *Conclusions*

The present study found a correlation between negative body image and negative social acceptance for the total group of respondents, the female respondents, the sixth grade respondents, and the sixth grade female respondents. Previous research has not looked specifically at the link between body image and social acceptance. However, past research has found a significant correlation between high body image and high self-esteem (Hayes et. al, 1999). Traditionally, those individuals who have a high self-esteem tend to feel more accepted by their peers. Having confidence or self-esteem is essential to healthy development, including the development of healthy relationships (Duncan et. al, 2002). Therefore, the finding in this study that negative body image correlates with negative social acceptance relates to past research on self-esteem and body image.

The present study did not find significant differences in the body image and social acceptance scores between male and female participants. This is not consistent with previous research. Past research has found that differences in body image satisfaction exist between males and females (Green & Pritchard, 2003; Duncan et. al, 2002). Past research has found that boys are more likely than girls to desire a larger body size than they currently possess (Ricciardelli et. al, 2003). One explanation for the findings in the present study is that boys in our society are

becoming more self-conscious of their own bodies. More and more males are becoming affected by the muscular, thin ideal that the media sets forth (Spitzer et. al, 1999).

The present study did not find significant differences in the body image and social acceptance scores between the sixth and eighth grade participants. Past research has found that body image dissatisfaction is prevalent during the adolescent time period (Phelps et. al, 1993). Students in middle school, grades sixth through eighth, are all in the adolescent time period. This may explain why no difference between the sixth and eighth graders was found in relation to body image and social acceptance.

Past research has found that females are more likely than males to be on a diet (Vander Wal & Thelen, 2000). In the present study, 7.1% of male respondent reported that they are always dieting, while no female respondents reported that they are always dieting. This is not consistent with previous research on the dieting behaviors of males and females. Another study found that girls as young as ten years old reported that they were on a diet to try to lose weight (McVey et. al, 2004).

The present study found that 20% of females reported that they think a lot about wanting to be thinner. This is consistent with past research on this topic area. Being dissatisfied with one's own body has become quite common for many females in the United States (Berg, 2001). One explanation for this is that the media emphasize the thin ideal for females. Those individual who do not live up to this standard may feel inadequate.

When comparing males to females, 21.4% of males wish they were more accepted by peers, while only 17.1% of females felt this way. The present study also found that only 49% of all respondents reported that they were popular. Past research has found that the time period of adolescence is difficult for many children. Adolescence is a time when many changes take place

(McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). A child's peer relationships are extremely important during the time period of adolescence. The messages that are given by a child's peer group shapes his or her behavior and opinions (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). During the school years, a child desires to be accepted by his or her peers. The present study relates to past research on the time period of adolescence, in that a child believes that his or her social group is very important.

### *Recommendations*

The researcher suggests that further research should be conducted looking at the relationship between body image and social acceptance. Besides middle school students, elementary and high school aged students could be studied as well. Comparisons could be made between these three different educational levels: elementary, middle, and high school. The researcher also recommends that a similar study is conducted in a larger school district than this study took place. The results of a similar study could then be generalized to a larger population than the present study. Ethnic groups could also be studied to see whether differences exist between groups. A longitudinal study could also be conducted to see how body image and social acceptance change over the elementary, middle, and high school years.

The results of this study involving body image and social acceptance provide many implications for school counselors and other individuals working with children in some capacity. The development of a healthy body image is extremely important for the development of positive self-esteem and healthy relationships. Children should be taught the importance of being proud of who they are and what they have accomplished. In the elementary school years, children should be taught through guidance lessons the importance of loving and appreciating your own body. During the middle and high school years, a school counselor could run small groups focusing on positive self image and positive body image.

Being accepted by peers is important to children of all ages. These feelings should not be overlooked. Guidance lessons given in the elementary and middle school levels could address the feelings of wanting others to like you and what to do if this doesn't always happen. Children should be encouraged to speak up to their peers or to a trusted adult if they do not feel accepted by their peers. More small guidance groups could be started focusing on peer acceptance. Small groups can focus on a number of topics, including friendship, social skills training, relationship building, and teamwork. All of these topics may help children relate better to their peers.

In conclusion, there are many things that school counselors and others can do to promote healthy body image and healthy relationships. The first step is recognizing the importance that positive body image and social acceptance have on healthy development. School counselors, along with other individuals working with children, can help children see the importance of having positive feelings and attitudes towards themselves and others.

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## Appendix A: Body Image Survey

**Body Image Survey**

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Your responses to the following questions will be anonymous. The survey is completely voluntary. By submitting your answers, you agree to allow them to be used in the study. You may stop taking this survey at any time.

**Please circle your gender and grade in school:**

**Gender:**      Male                      Female

**Grade:**      6<sup>th</sup>                      7<sup>th</sup>                      8<sup>th</sup>

Please answer the following five questions by circling the answer that best describes you.

**1. I am scared about being overweight.**

Never      Rarely      Sometimes      Always

**2. I think a lot about wanting to be thinner.**

Never      Rarely      Sometimes      Always

**3. I have been dieting.**

Never      Rarely      Sometimes      Always

**4. I think a lot about being fat.**

Never      Rarely      Sometimes      Always

**5. I give too much time and thought to food.**

Never      Rarely      Sometimes      Always

## Appendix B: Social Acceptance Survey

**Social Acceptance Survey**

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Your responses to the following questions will be anonymous. The survey is completely voluntary. By submitting your answers, you agree to allow them to be used in the study. You may stop taking this survey at any time.

Please answer the following five questions about yourself by circling the appropriate response.

**1. I find it . . .**

Hard to make friends      OR      Easy to make friends

**2. I . . .**

Have a lot of friends      OR      Do not have many friends

**3. I am . . .**

Hard to like      OR      Easy to like

**4. I . . .**

Am popular      OR      Am not very popular

**5. I . . .**

Am socially accepted      OR      Wish more people accepted me

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

<p><b>This research has been approved by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46.</b></p>
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**Parent/Guardian Permission Form**

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Rebecca Russell, and I am a graduate student at UW-Stout in the School Counseling program. I am currently working as a school counseling practicum student with Maribeth Ballard at Tiffany Creek Elementary School and Boyceville Middle School.

I am also currently working on my thesis for graduate school, which is on body image and social acceptance. The middle school principal, Susan Halseth, has given me permission to conduct my research at Boyceville Middle School I will be conducting my research at Boyceville Middle School during the week of April 4<sup>th</sup> through April 8<sup>th</sup>. I am asking your permission for your child to be included in this study.

Students will complete one five-question survey on body image and one five-question survey on social acceptance. The surveys are expected to take the students about ten minutes to complete. Each student's responses will be kept anonymous. Participation in the survey is completely voluntary. A risk involved with this survey is that students may experience emotional discomfort when thinking about their body image and social acceptance. However, students will be given the option to withdraw from this survey at any time. The benefit of this study is to gain more insight about some of the issues facing adolescents. If you will allow you child to participate in the study, please complete the form below and have your child return it to their homeroom teacher by Monday, April 4<sup>th</sup>.

**IRB Approval:**

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact Rebecca Russell or Dr. Barbara Flom. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact Sue Foxwell.

**Investigator:**

Rebecca Russell, Practicum Student  
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**Research Advisor:**

Dr. Barbara Flom, Assistant Professor  
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**IRB Administrator:**

Sue Foxwell, Director, Research Services  
152 Vocational Rehabilitation Bldg.  
UW-Stout  
Menomonie, Wi 54751  
(715) 232-2477  
E-mail: foxwells@uwstout.edu

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Rebecca Russell

Please cut the bottom portion off and return.

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I, \_\_\_\_\_, will allow my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in this study about body image and social acceptance.

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Signature of parent or guardian

Date