

Research Briefing N^o47

The views of young people in the UK about obesity, body size, shape and weight: a systematic review

This systematic review aims to identify, appraise and synthesise published and unpublished research on young people's views (aged from 12 to 18) about obesity and body size, shape and weight.

Key words: young people; views; obesity; body size; shape; weight

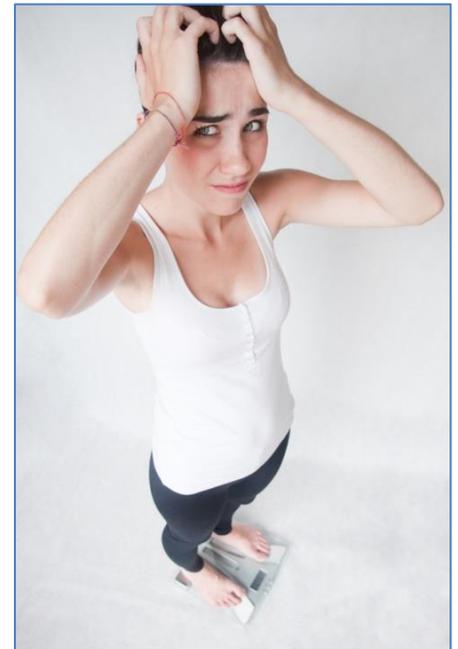
The review was carried out by the **Institute of Education's Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre)** in 2013. It was commissioned and funded by the Policy Research Programme in the Department of Health.

Key findings

This review will inform policy-makers, commissioners, practitioners, advocates and researchers who have a remit to explore policy issues or to promote or conduct research with young people on the topic of obesity.

A total of 30 studies were found. These studies included a total of over a 1,000 young people aged from 12 to 18. Study findings were incorporated into a synthesis. This found that:

- Young people of all sizes placed a great emphasis on personal responsibility. They emphasised the social, rather than health implications of being overweight.
- Young people with experience of obesity described severe, unrelenting size-related abuse and isolation.
- Regardless of their own size, young people were judgemental of individuals who were overweight.
- Young people with experience of obesity described an environment that contained multiple barriers to weight loss.



What we did

Body size in young people continues to be a public health issue in the UK: young people can experience physical and psychosocial problems as a result of having a large body size, and young people's attitudes to and beliefs about their bodies, which can include high levels of body dissatisfaction, have also raised concern. Little is known from research about young people's own perspectives on obesity and body size, shape and weight. And yet young people have a stake in this issue and can contribute valuable insights.

This systematic review aims to address this gap and to examine recent research findings from the UK where young people aged from 12 to 18 provide views about their own body sizes or about the body sizes of others. Read also about the views of children aged 4 to 11: [Rees et al. \(2009\) Children's views about obesity, body size, shape and weight: a systematic review](#)

Implications

The findings suggest that there is a need:

- For those who run or develop weight reduction initiatives: to recognise the physical, psychological and social constraints faced by young participants; to consider how they can reduce stigma; to consider including a component of peer support and social activity; to provide young people with practical skills to support their emotional health and identify patterns of comfort eating; to deliver initiatives over the long-term; to support weight loss maintenance; and to support parents and health professionals in understanding and responding effectively, and yet sensitively.
- At the policy level: to address weight stigma in society through social interventions; to consider the full range of factors that contribute to obesity, especially those that are social or environmental in nature; to provide opportunities for young people to engage in positive healthy behaviours; and to involve diverse groups of children in the development and evaluation of initiatives.
- For research: to explore the social implications of body size with young people in greater depth and actively engage young people in how to address these issues in society; for further research with young men and with young people from minority ethnic and differing socio-economic groups; and research that is influenced more by the young people that participate.

For the full report see ['The views of young people in the UK about obesity, body size, shape and weight: a systematic review'](#)

How we did it

The review addressed the following questions:

- What are young people's views about the meanings of obesity or body size, shape or weight (including their perceptions of their own body size), and what experiences do they describe relating to these issues?
- What are young people's views about influences on body size?
- What are young people's views about changes that may help them to achieve or maintain a healthy weight?

We located studies through sensitive searches of a large number of databases, as well as specialist websites and contact with experts. Studies needed to have been produced since 1997 and to collect the views of young people in the UK aged 12 to 18 using qualitative methods (e.g. interviews/focus groups). Reports needed to have described basic aspects of a study's methods. Included studies were described and quality-assessed by two reviewers independently. A thematic synthesis was conducted to configure the studies' findings. A consultation was held with young people to explore the credibility of the findings and their possible implication

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