

# Boys' problems with body size and eating need to be taken seriously

July 13 2021, by Wenche Margrethe Kulmo

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Credit: AI-generated image

Poor mental health and eating problems are clearly linked, according to a study that has reviewed data from 7350 teenagers who participated in the Young-HUNT3 (2006-08) Trøndelag Health Study.

Farzaneh Saeedzadeh Sardahaee is an NTNU researcher and specialist in

psychiatry who completed the study for her doctoral dissertation. She believes that social body ideals must be challenged.

"We have to talk about the ideals we set for boys and girls. It's important to prevent the adverse effects of eating [disorders](#) in these [young people](#)," says the researcher.

## **Many young people have eating problems**

"The broad extent of eating disorders in society is surprising," says Saeedzadeh Sardahaee.

A lot of young people have such severe eating [problems](#) that it poses a risk to their [mental health](#).

"It's time to look more broadly at the problems, so that we're not only looking at young people with a diagnosed eating disorder. A lot of adolescents haven't been diagnosed, because the nature and extent of their problems change over time. They don't fit into the diagnostic system," Saeedzadeh Sardahaee says.

"These young people still have serious problems that they're not getting help for since they don't have a diagnosis."

She points out that in a school with 200 students, about 34 typically have disordered eating.

## **Raises risk of suicidal ideation**

In general, very little research funding supports research on young people's mental health and their relationship to body and food, according to Saeedzadeh Sardahaee. And in the research that is being done, young boys are an overlooked group.

"A lot more research has been done on eating disorders in girls than in boys. Their symptoms are different, their bodies are different," she says.

"Measuring BMI doesn't work as well for detecting problems in boys, who more often do strength training. Some also take anabolic steroids. In addition, eating disorders have been seen as girls' problems," she said.

Her research has shown that girls and boys who had disordered eating and who rated their bodies as "not the same as others" or who were dissatisfied with their weight, had a double to fivefold risk of suicidal ideation. The risk was higher among boys.

The proportion of young people with suicidal thoughts from the entire sample was 23 percent. Among those with eating disorders, 44.1 percent of respondents with poor appetite and undereating had suicidal thoughts.

In the group with overeating and uncontrolled appetite, the proportion was 35 percent. Among young people without eating problems, 20.5 percent had suicidal thoughts.

## **Worry more dangerous than obesity**

The research study also revealed that worrying about one's weight is worse for mental health than actually being overweight.

"And if respondents overestimated their own body size, the mental strain was five times higher," she said.

Saeedzadeh Sardahae's research also showed that genes influence to what degree and which eating problems young people develop. Typically, thin individuals will be predisposed to develop anorexia, while young people with more body fat have a greater predisposition to

develop problems with overeating and bulimia.

The research showed that:

- Young people with eating problems are more exposed to other mental [health](#) problems.
- Young people with eating problems have a higher risk of suicidal ideation.
- Genetic predisposition to obesity also increases the risk of disordered eating.
- Young people with overweight, weight anxiety and who consider their [body](#) to be bigger than it is, have a higher risk of mental problems.
- Worry related to weight is associated with mental illness.
- Young boys are more vulnerable than young girls.

**More information:** Farzaneh Saeedzadeh Sardahaee et al, Suicidal ideation in relation to disordered eating, body size and weight perception: a cross-sectional study of a Norwegian adolescent population: the HUNT Study, *BMJ Open* (2019). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2019-029809](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-029809)

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