

MEDIA RELEASE

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Parents and teachers unintentionally sending negative body image messages to preschoolers

Parents and teachers need to be educated on the potentially dangerous messages they send preschoolers about their body image, according to Deakin University Professor of Psychology Marita McCabe.

Professor McCabe said a study conducted by Deakin University revealed children as young as four were focussed on their body appearance and trying to conform to society's "ideal" shape.

The study of 53 children across four kindergartens revealed that four-year-old girls were expressing concerns about their weight and four-year-old boys were concerned about their muscles.

"Even at this young age, mothers are already communicating different messages to boys and girls," the study found.

The study, "Where Is All The Pressure Coming From? Messages From Mothers And Teachers About Preschool Children's Appearance, Diet and Exercise", was the first to focus on the socio-cultural influences on body image among pre-schoolers, according to Professor McCabe.

She said the development of eating disorders was one of the dangers of parents and teachers communicating messages about "ideal" bodies to boys and girls.

"They do this by their attitude to their own bodies, and by suggesting to their daughter that they need to exercise more (to lose weight) and to their sons that they need to eat more (to increase their muscles).

"Education programs need to be developed and implemented among preschool teachers and parents, as it would appear that body image concerns and associated behaviours are already present among children of this age," Professor McCabe said.

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