

# Middle school dilemma: Girls' body image affected by older peers

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The media is highly criticized for contributing to body image issues in adolescents. However, a study out today in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* finds a different source for body dissatisfaction among young girls: older girls at school.

A research team led by Jaine Strauss, Professor of Psychology at Macalester College, surveyed 1,536 5th through 8th-grade female [students](#) attending schools with different grade groupings. Some 5th and 6th graders attended school with older students (i.e. in districts that follow the "middle school" model) and others attended school with younger students (i.e. in districts where 7th and 8th graders attend a "junior high" apart from younger grades). The students completed three questionnaires asking about their eating habits, attitudes about appearance, and feelings of body consciousness.

The researchers, which also included a high school teacher and two [high school students](#), found that female 5th and 6th graders who were educated alongside older girls reported a greater desire to be thin as well as less satisfaction with and more self-consciousness about their bodies. For example, 5th graders who attended school with 6th through 8th graders had a mean [body dissatisfaction](#) score that was 1.7 times higher than girls in the same grade who attended a typical elementary school.

"Elevated levels of body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, thin-ideal internalization, body surveillance, and body shame may undermine young teens' social, emotional, and academic well-being both during the

early teen years and in later life," the researchers commented. "Although [body image](#) tends to decline as [girls](#) move through adolescence, this study suggests that school grade groupings may influence the pace and timing of this decline."

The researchers discussed changes that can be made to the education system to delay younger students' exposure to older grade levels.

"The ideal solution, of course, would be to eliminate the body travails of students of all ages; if older teens were more satisfied with their bodies, then exposure to older schoolmates would be benign."

**More information:** "Contextualizing 'Student Body': Is Exposure to Older Students Associated with Body Dissatisfaction in Female Early Adolescents." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* , 2014.

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