Dieting behaviour among schoolchildren in Ireland

Aoise Gavin, Clióna Fitzpatrick, SiobhÁn O’Higgins and the HBSC Ireland Team, Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway.

Summary

HBSC Ireland 2006 has found that 11.5% of children report dieting (8.3% of boys and 14.9% of girls), this figure has remained stable since 2002. The percentage of girls dieting is higher among older girls (8.3% of 10-11 year olds and 19.7% of 15-17 year olds), whereas the percentages of boys dieting remains stable across age groups. Children who report dieting are less likely to live with both parents, find it easy to talk to their parents, like school, have excellent health or be happy with their lives, and are more likely to report feeling pressured by schoolwork, and spending four or more evenings per week with friends. Dieting in this factsheet refers to children who report that they are on a diet or doing something to lose weight at present.

Why this topic?

Dieting is a prevalent behaviour among adolescents and weight control practices can comprise a mixture of acceptable and less acceptable methods. Body image or self-perception of overweight are significant factors associated with adolescents’ attempts to lose weight. Inadequate dietary intake during adolescence can have serious short and long term health implications. Dieting is also associated with low self-esteem and other negative psychological states.

Trends 2002-2006

The overall percentage of children who report dieting has remained stable from 2002 (13.1%) to 2006 (11.5%). There has been a slight decrease among girls (17.9% to 14.9%), with figures for boys remaining stable (6.6% to 8.3%).

Dieting in context

• Children who report dieting are less likely to live with both parents (77.9% vs. 80.9%) than those who do not.
• Children who report dieting are less likely to find it easy to talk to their mother (75.9% vs. 81.3%) and father (54.7% vs. 65.2%) than those who do not.
• Children who report dieting are more likely to spend more than four evenings a week with friends (46.2% vs. 41.7%) than those who do not.
• Children who report dieting are more likely to feel pressured by schoolwork (51.1% vs. 39.6%) and are less likely to like school (62.8% vs. 68.5%) than those who do not.
• Children who report dieting are less likely to report excellent health (19.4% vs. 35.2%) and being happy with their lives (38.0% vs. 51.1%) than those who do not.
• Dieting is not associated with social class.
Dieting behaviour among schoolchildren in Ireland

International

Fifteen year old schoolchildren in Ireland (boys and girls together) are ranked 27th among 41 countries in Europe and North America with 13% reporting that they are dieting. Overall 11 year old children are ranked 38th (8% report being on a diet) and 13 year olds are ranked 31st.

Implications

The number of children in Ireland reporting that they are on a diet has remained stable since 2002 and Ireland is relatively low in comparison to other European and North American countries. Communication with parents and positive school environments appear to be protective factors against dieting. Dieting is an issue among both genders but particularly among girls as dieting increases substantially with age among girls. Dieting is associated with lower levels of feeling happy with life and subjective health. School and other community settings have the potential to support healthy eating habits.

References


This factsheet was prepared by Aoife Gavin, Siobhán O’Higgins, Graham Brennan, Pauline Clerkin, Aingeal de Róiste, Clíona Fitzpatrick, Colette Kelly, Michal Molcho, Larri Walker and Saoirse Nic Gabhainn.