



## MEDIA RELEASE

### DIETING A WEIGHT ON TEENAGE MINDS

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A national study of Australian 14-15 year olds has found that many young people have negative feelings and beliefs about gaining weight.

While a tiny minority of mid-adolescents met the diagnostic criteria for anorexia or bulimia, the *Growing Up In Australia* Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found that significant numbers of 14-15 year olds had taken action to try and control their weight.

Australian Institute of Family Studies Director, Anne Hollonds said that negative attitudes and problematic eating behaviours in adolescence can represent a risk for the later development of eating disorders.

“Girls are more concerned about their weight than boys. It was much more common for girls to say that they were afraid of gaining weight or had lost control of their eating than boys,” she said.

“Among the girls, 54 per cent said they had been afraid of gaining weight and 43 per cent said they felt they had lost control of their eating in the last month, compared to 20 per cent of boys,” she said.

“Up to a quarter of the girls said that their weight was very important to how they felt about themselves as a person, compared to 11 per cent of boys.

“Overall, around 38 per cent of girls in the study said they felt they were overweight, compared to 20 per cent of boys who more commonly felt they were underweight.”

Executive manager of the *Growing Up In Australia* Study, Dr Galina Daraganova said that along with expressing negative feelings about their weight, some teenagers also took quite serious actions to try and control it.

“Three per cent of the girls and 1 per cent of the boys had made themselves vomit at least once in the last four weeks to control their weight and about 2 per cent of boys and girls had taken some type of medicine, such as laxatives or appetite suppressants,” she said.

“Exercise was a more common way for adolescents to take action, with 58 per cent of girls and 41 per cent of boys reporting having exercised in the past four weeks specifically to control weight.

“Around a quarter of girls and 12 per cent of boys also reported restricting their food intake by leaving food at mealtimes, taking small helpings, skipping meals or going all day without eating at least once in the last four weeks.”

Dr Daraganova said that among the 14-15 year olds who were dieting, only around half of the boys and a third of the girls were actually overweight, according to their Body Mass Index (BMI).

“This suggests that for most teens and particularly for girls, the aim of their dieting is to either maintain their weight within a healthy weight range or achieve a thinner body shape,” she said.

“For some who were dieting, their desire to lose weight traces back to childhood. The proportion of those who were dieting at 14-15 was higher among those who had also been trying to lose weight at 10-11 and 12-13 years, than those who had not.”

Dr Daraganova said the study confirmed the link between problematic eating behaviours and attitudes and mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and depression.

“Girls who were dieting at age 14-15 had higher levels of emotional problems, compared to those who were not dieting. Among girls who were dieting at this age, 58 per cent had elevated depressive symptoms and 47 per cent had elevated anxiety symptoms,” she said.

“Among boys dieting at age 14-15, 31 per cent had symptoms of depression and 16 per cent had symptoms of anxiety, twice that of boys who were not dieting.

“Dieting did not impact physically on adolescents in the study, but had a marginal, negative effect on adolescents’ levels of school and social functioning.”

To download a copy of the AIFS’ *Growing Up in Australia* Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2017 Annual Statistical Report *Eating problems in mid-adolescence* go to <http://www3.aifs.gov.au/institute/media/docs/tGxliJ48sMY/LSAC-ASR-2017-Chap11.pdf>

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