



Why Belonging Matters: Social Influence and Eating Disorders in Adolescents

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Eating disorders (EDs) are complex mental health conditions that do not arise from a single cause. They are best understood through a bio-psycho-social model, which considers biological, psychological, and social factors in their development (Esbenshade & Venegas, 2024). Among the social factors, roles that some of these factors play are especially critical during early adolescence, a sensitive developmental period when identity, peer relationships, and belonging begin to take centre stage in many young people's lives.

During this time, adolescents become increasingly susceptible to external messaging, particularly around body image, appearance standards, and self-worth. As they begin to shift away from the influence of family and spend more time with peers, the opinions and behaviours of their social groups carry more weight in shaping their self-perception and values (Main et al., 2025).

Forming a social identity is a key developmental milestone in adolescence. Social identity helps adolescents understand their place in society, how they relate to others, and which norms and behaviours are expected of them (Main et al., 2025). This developmental period is marked by significant neurological changes, shaped by one's surrounding environments, that can result in lasting behavioural patterns (Main et al., 2025). These include behaviours related to food, body image, and self-regulation. When adolescents struggle to build coherent internal identity, they may be susceptible to identity

deficits, marked by difficulties in knowing oneself. In turn, these deficits can result in a lack of confidence and self-trust, creating difficulties in making decisions that are safe, responsible and well-guided (Frisbie, 2020). Amongst people diagnosed with eating disorders, it is not uncommon to recognize identity deficits, as eating disorders behaviours can help one feel more in control and can function as part of one's identity when developing an authentic sense of self is challenged (Frisbie, 2020).

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Feeling accepted and validated by peers becomes increasingly significant during this time. The desire to belong often leads adolescents to adopt behaviours and attitudes that align with their social surroundings (Albarello et al., 2021, as cited in Main et al., 2025). Social groups can endorse and value behaviours that are potentially harmful to a person's own physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. In this way, social inclusion can unintentionally act as a reinforcing factor for disordered eating, especially when thinness, dieting, or aesthetic conformity are culturally or socially valued in an environment.

When acceptance is based on appearance rather than authenticity, adolescents can feel a strong sense of internalized shame, especially towards their bodies (Frisbie, 2020). The need to feel included and accepted is more than just a social desire – it is a core part of identity development and emotional security. However, when social inclusion is conditional on appearance, it can create environments where disordered eating behaviours are reinforced, celebrated, or even expected. This can often result in the development of a “performative self”, a concept that describes a person’s identity that is built on pleasing others rather than expressing themselves as an authentic individual (Frisbie, 2020).

THE ROLE OF COMPARISON

As adolescents are introduced to new social environments such as school, sports teams, clubs, and extracurricular activities, exposure to comparing oneself to their peers increases. Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that humans evaluate themselves by comparing to others to assess their characteristics, behaviours, and social standing (Festinger, 1954, as cited in Hamel et al., 2015), can explain the relevance of these exposures. Peer comparison is particularly prevalent in adolescence, a developmental period in which self-concept is still forming. These processes are further explained by the Tripartite Influence Model, which proposes that peers, parents, and media exert sociocultural pressures that can influence body dissatisfaction and weight-related behaviours through social comparison and the internalization of appearance ideals (Thompson et al., 1999 as cited in Tanguay et al., 2025). Supporting this framework, specifically the peer influence component, are research findings that an adolescent’s social environment does play a significant role in their behaviours to conformity. Eisenberg et al. (2005) found that among adolescent girls, the perception of friends dieting behaviours and the overall prevalence of weight-loss attempts within a school context, can influence their own unhealthy weight-control behaviours such as self-induced vomiting, use of laxatives or diet pills, or fasting. Additionally, Mueller et al. (2010) found that adolescent girls are more likely to engage in weight-loss behaviours when a significant proportion of their peers are underweight or in smaller bodies. This suggests that, in addition to the widely recognized role of media portrayals of the “thin ideal”, the behaviours and appearances of peers in their immediate social environment are important influences on adolescents (Hamel et al., 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2005).

This phenomenon is further complicated by the rise of appearance-based social comparisons on social media platforms, which can contribute to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and disordered eating behaviours. A study conducted by Blackburn and Hogg (2024) found that exposure to pro-anorexia content on TikTok significantly decreased body satisfaction and increased the internalization of societal beauty standards among female-identified participants aged 18 to 28 years old. While this group did not include individuals under 18, the findings highlight the potential risks for younger populations, particularly given that adolescents are in a heightened stage of brain development, are more susceptible to influence, and are actively forming their social identities.

The more adolescents compare themselves to peers or influencers both online and offline who represent unattainable body standards, the greater the risk of adopting harmful eating patterns. This contributes towards thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that foster disembodiment, encouraging adolescents to view their bodies from the “outside” rather than experiencing them internally (Frisbie, 2020).

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FEAR OF MISSING OUT (FoMO)

The concept of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) was first identified in the early 2000s and describes a psychological phenomenon, characterized by anticipatory anxiety and feelings of exclusion when individuals believe that others are engaging in rewarding experiences without them (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). This experience is especially prominent on social media platforms, where carefully curated posts can lead to adolescent users feeling excluded from social events, trends, or peer approval (Parent, 2024). Adolescents can become hypersensitive to the information they receive in their social settings and how well they are able to “fit in” with their peers (Parent, 2024). FoMO involves two core processes: the perception of being left out, and a compulsive action taken to restore

or maintain social connection (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). This dynamic upholds the need to maintain a performative self to avoid social exclusion, which further disconnects adolescents from their authentic identities (Frisbie, 2020).

Social approval and peer acceptance are top priorities, and FoMO can potentially drive specific actions in young people when experiencing pressure to “keep up”. This includes image management behaviours like modifying physical appearance, or habits like skipping meals to attain a specific body type to maintain perceived social standing. These actions may seem harmless at first, but over time they can normalize disordered eating and mask emerging mental health concerns, especially in youth who lack protective factors like body confidence, family support, or media literacy.

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STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN ADOLESCENT BODY IMAGE

Given the strong influence of sense of belonging on adolescents’ self-image, body confidence and overall self-esteem, it is important to recognize and implement strategies that counteract the effects of social comparisons, particularly in relation to body image. Research shows that adolescence is a critical period for identity formation and body image development, during which peer influence and media exposure significantly shape self-perception (Albarelo et al., 2021, as cited in Main et al., 2025). Participation in programs that emphasize body functionality rather than appearance can support adolescents reframe their relationship with their bodies, fostering appreciation for what the body can do rather than how it looks (Smith et al., 2023). Fostering embodiment can help adolescents reconnect with their internal sensations and emotions, supporting them in restoring their internal identity and

reducing reliance on receiving external validation (Frisbie, 2020). Creating environments that value diversity in appearance and promoting non-appearance-based self-worth can serve as a protective buffer against the development of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction (Alleva et al., 2015). These approaches are especially important in digital spaces where FoMO and appearance-based comparison are amplified by algorithmic exposure to “idealized” bodies and weight-centric trends, as seen on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

For parents, navigating body image conversations with an adolescent child who is susceptible to appearance-related norms that they observe among their friends, classmates, and other social environments, can be highly challenging. Key strategies that are important to consider for fostering positive body image include: staying curious; initiating open conversations about body diversity; modeling respectful behaviour toward all body types; and addressing body-based bullying issues within schools and other community settings in which adolescents spend time (National Eating Disorder Information Centre [NEDIC], n.d.). In addition, using attuned language that focuses on internal qualities such as emotional experiences and personal values rather than appearance or performance supports the development of one’s self-esteem and identity (Frisbie, 2020). These approaches can encourage the development of values that support positive body image and resilience in young people, especially as they navigate diet-centric environments. Encouraging critical thinking about harmful social narratives such as using the term “fat” as an insult or equating larger bodies with undesirability, can also empower them to challenge appearance-based stigma and develop a more inclusive understanding of confidence and self-worth (NEDIC, n.d.)

Overall, by understanding the role of peer comparison, social identity, and FoMO, parents, educators, and health professionals can better identify risk factors while cultivating environments that promote healthy development, body neutrality, and an authentic sense of belonging. Strengthening internal identity and reconnecting adolescents to their authentic selves is central to the prevention and treatment of eating disorders (Frisbie, 2020).

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