

Current data on BMI and adolescents' idea of being too fat

A representative study of 1,462 girls and boys between the ages of 6 and 19 shows: In 2015, 78% of girls and boys are normal weight and 13% of girls and 18% of boys are overweight. The study also identifies the critical moments in which adolescents' dissatisfaction with their bodies increases: For the 10-year-olds, the idea that they were too fat increased dramatically as they watched the television show *Germany's Next Topmodel*. For the 17-year-olds, 8 in 10 girls thought about whether they were too fat. This not only lowers their self-esteem, it can also contribute to the start of an eating disorder.

Munich, 4 May 2015 – In a recent study in March 2015, the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television and the *Bundesfachverband Esstörungen e.V.* (BFE, German Association for Eating Disorders) questioned 1,462 representatively selected adolescents between 6 and 19 years of age.¹ First the BMI data were collected and the respondents were asked how much they thought about being too fat. Then data was gathered about consumption of the show *Germany's Next Topmodel*, which had been identified in a different study to be particularly important for the intensification of eating disorders. This means that current data on the development of BMI and children's and adolescents' satisfaction with their body image is available and connected to information on watching *Germany's Next Topmodel* so that correlations can be seen.

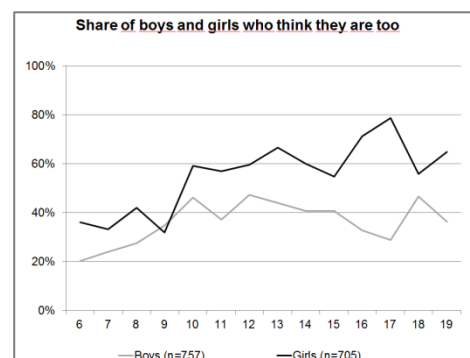
4 in 5 children and adolescents are of normal weight

A large majority (78%) of the 6- to 19-year-olds were fortunately of normal weight. Girls were more frequently in the lower end of the spectrum of normal weight, boys in the upper end. The percent of girls that are underweight (10%) is also lower than boys (5%), while 18% of boys are overweight and 13% of girls. As they get older, there are no significant differences. Diets, which have been proven not to lead to the desired results in the long term, are not necessary for the majority of children and adolescents. As an international study shows, the incidence of overweight and obese children in Germany is stagnating or even slightly decreasing, at least for children just starting school.²

Thoughts of being too fat increase dramatically in 10-year-old girls

Diets are driven by thoughts of being too fat. German adolescents take the lead internationally when it comes to this (WHO, 2012).³ In the current IZI study, the development of this idea is followed as children age. When asked whether they "constantly," "sometimes," "seldom," or "never" think that they are too fat, 55% of all 6- to 19-year-olds said they never think they are too fat. Boys answered this way much more frequently than girls.

The number of children and adolescents with these thoughts increases with age, especially the number of girls. Phases in



¹ Carried out by IconKids & Youth, Munich.

² Moss, Anja et al. (2012). Declining prevalence rates for overweight and obesity in German children starting school. *European Journal of Pediatrics*, 171(2), 289-299.

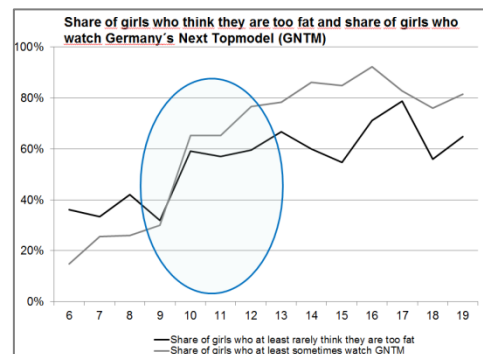
³ In a comparison of 39 countries, the WHO collected data on BMI and whether 11- to 15-year-olds „felt like they were too fat.“ German adolescents were in the middle range for BMI, but German girls and boys held the number one position in „feeling too fat.“ Available online at: http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/163857/Social-determinants-of-health-and-well-being-among-young-people.pdf

which the increase is particularly evident can be seen first in 10-year-old girls (when the figure jumps from 32% to 59%). It is the time of development in which being a girl is manifested in a particular way through the body with growing breasts and pubic hair and the start of menstruation. In this age, the fat percentage in the female body increases as an introduction to the next development stage and the start of menstruation. If the girls starve away their fat reserves during this time, the natural development cycle can be seriously disrupted. The second increase is in the 15- to 17-year-olds, during a time characterized by first relationships and sexual experiences. If girls have internalized an ideal of beauty that rejects womanly curves and idealizes a slim, nearly fat-free body, then it makes sense that they would perceive themselves as lacking during these times. The self-critical attitude about their own body reaches its pinnacle in 17-year-olds: 8 in 10 girls have thoughts that they are too fat. In the case of “slender girls,” who are in the lower range of normal or are underweight, 9 in 10 girls think they are too fat but are objectively not fat at all.

Germany's Next Topmodel viewers are much more critical of their own body

The show *Germany's Next Topmodel* plays a particularly important role in defining the ideal of how girls today are supposed to look. In the first three grades, one in every five girls watches *Germany's Next Topmodel*, and nearly all 16-year-old girls watch this show at least sometimes. The show has the largest growth in girls around 10 years old.

What is particularly concerning: especially the “slender girls” who are underweight or in the lower range of normal and watch *Germany's Next Topmodel* have much more frequent thoughts of being too fat than those who do not watch the show.



Conclusion: More education and care when it comes to diets in childhood and adolescence

Girls feel too fat but usually aren't. These thoughts increase in particular during times in which they experience themselves as being feminine due to development stages. Especially during these times, it would be important to help them develop a positive attitude towards their own body. The data once again points to *Germany's Next Topmodel* strengthening inappropriately self-critical thoughts in girls. Sigrid Borse and Andreas Schnebel from the Bundesfachverband Essstörungen e.V. call for more education and prevention: “Adolescents need a positive attitude about their own body, especially when the body is changing due to development.” The head of the study, Dr. Maya Götz, calls for more media literacy, including from mothers who often introduce their daughters to *Germany's Next Topmodel*: “If you have to watch *Germany's Next Topmodel*, then please keep a critical distance and remember: That is not how a normal girl looks!”

The study will be presented **on 18 June 2015 in Frankfurt** at the conference #bestimmt_schön held by the *Frankfurter Zentrum für Ess-Störungen* (Frankfurt Center for Eating Disorders) and the *Frauenreferat Frankfurt* (Women's Unit Frankfurt).

You can obtain more information, a summary of the results of the study, and figures for graphics, etc., from Dr. Maya Götz, Head, International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television.

Tel.: 089/5900 42264, Internet: www.izi.de, E-mail: Maya.Goetz@br.de

You can register for the conference #bestimmt_schön by contacting Karina.voloder@stadt-frankfurt.de