



Psicologia em Estudo

ISSN: 1413-7372

ISSN: 1807-0329

Universidade Estadual de Maringá

Neves, Clara Mockdece; Meireles, Juliana Fernandes Filgueiras;  
Morgado, Fabiane Frota da Rocha; Ferreira, Maria Elisa Caputo  
PREOCUPAÇÕES E COMPORTAMENTOS RELACIONADOS À  
APARÊNCIA FÍSICA NA INFÂNCIA: UMA ABORDAGEM QUALITATIVA

Psicologia em Estudo, vol. 23, 2018, pp. 1-16  
Universidade Estadual de Maringá

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/psicolestud.v23.e40289>

Disponível em: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=287159842018>

- Como citar este artigo
- Número completo
- Mais informações do artigo
- Site da revista em [redalyc.org](http://redalyc.org)

redalyc.org

Sistema de Informação Científica Redalyc  
Rede de Revistas Científicas da América Latina e do Caribe, Espanha e Portugal  
Sem fins lucrativos acadêmica projeto, desenvolvido no âmbito da iniciativa  
acesso aberto

## PHYSICAL APPEARANCE CONCERNS AND BEHAVIORS OF CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH.

**Clara Mockdece Neves**<sup>1</sup>, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5240-6710>

**Juliana Fernandes Filgueiras Meireles**<sup>2</sup>, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8396-6449>

**Fabiane Frota da Rocha Morgado**<sup>3</sup>, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3969-9029>

**Maria Elisa Caputo Ferreira**<sup>4</sup>, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3294-7560>

**ABSTRACT.** The child develops internal mechanisms for forming references of the body itself, from an early age, becoming a relevant stage of life for researchers. The aim was to investigate attitudes related to body image from the point of view of children. This descriptive qualitative research was conducted in four focus groups. Nineteen children participated (10 girls and 9 boys), aged 6 to 11 years ( $M=8.36 \pm 1.42$  years old), students of public schools of the city of Juiz de Fora, State of Minas Gerais. The data obtained were treated by categorical content analysis. Three categories emerged from children's report: concerns about specific aspects of the body; concerns about general aspects of the body and body-related behaviors. It is concluded that the evaluated children presented attitudes that indicate concern with the body in general and specific aspects, besides behaviors related to body image. The development and adoption of therapy and intervention strategies in order to promote a positive body image in children are recommended.

**Keywords:** Body image; child; qualitative research.

## PREOCUPAÇÕES E COMPORTAMENTOS RELACIONADOS À APARÊNCIA FÍSICA NA INFÂNCIA: UMA ABORDAGEM QUALITATIVA.

**RESUMO.** A criança elabora mecanismos internos para formação de referências do próprio corpo, desde a tenra idade, tornando-se uma fase da vida relevante para estudiosos. Objetivou-se investigar atitudes relacionadas à imagem corporal sob o ponto de vista de crianças. Esta pesquisa qualitativa descritiva foi conduzida em quatro grupos focais. Participaram 19 crianças (10 meninas e 9 meninos), de 6 a 11 anos ( $M=8,36 \pm 1,42$  anos), estudantes de escolas públicas da cidade de Juiz de Fora-MG. Os dados obtidos foram tratados mediante análise de conteúdo categórica. Três categorias emergiram a partir das falas das crianças: preocupações com aspectos específicos do corpo; preocupações com aspectos gerais do corpo; e comportamentos relacionados ao corpo. Conclui-se que as crianças avaliadas apresentaram atitudes que indicam preocupação com o corpo em aspectos gerais e específicos, além de comportamentos relacionados com a imagem corporal. Recomendam-se a elaboração e a adoção de estratégias de terapia e intervenção no sentido de promover uma imagem corporal positiva em crianças.

**Palavras-chave:** Imagem corporal; infância; pesquisa qualitativa.

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF) - Governador Valadares-MG, Brazil. - E-mail: [clarinhamockdece@hotmail.com](mailto:clarinhamockdece@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora-MG, Brazil.

<sup>3</sup> Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), Seropédica-RJ, Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora-MG, Brazil.



## PREOCUPACIONES Y COMPORTAMIENTOS RELACIONADOS A LA APARIENCIA FÍSICA DE LOS NIÑOS: UN ENFOQUE CUALITATIVO.

**RESUMEN.** El niño elabora mecanismos internos para la formación de referencias del propio cuerpo, desde tierna edad, convirtiéndose en una fase de la vida relevante para estudiosos. Se tuvo por objetivo investigar actitudes relacionadas a la imagen corporal desde el punto de vista de los niños. Esta investigación cualitativa descriptiva se produjo en cuatro grupos focales. Participaron 19 niños (10 niñas y 9 niños), de 6 a 11 años ( $M=8,36\pm1,42$  años), estudiantes de escuelas públicas de Juiz de Fora-MG. Se trataron los datos obtenidos mediante análisis de contenido categórico. Tres categorías indicaron: preocupaciones con aspectos específicos del cuerpo; preocupaciones con aspectos generales del cuerpo; y comportamientos relacionados con el cuerpo. Se concluye que los niños evaluados presentaron actitudes que indican una preocupación con el cuerpo en aspectos generales y específicos, además de comportamientos relacionados a la imagen corporal. Se recomienda la elaboración y adopción de estrategias de terapia e intervención para promover una imagen corporal positiva en niños.

**Palabras clave:** Imagen corporal; niño; investigación cualitativa.

### Introduction

Childhood comprises the period from birth to the onset of puberty/adolescence (Papalia & Feldman, 2013). This phase includes three stages: early childhood (birth to three years); second childhood (from three to six years) and third childhood (from six to the beginning of adolescence) (Papalia & Feldman, 2013). In the third childhood, period between 6 and 11 years (Papalia & Feldman, 2013), the individual's sense of identity becomes more complex (Papalia & Feldman, 2013). Thus, children can establish comparisons between themselves and many other children, influencing their body image (Smolak, 2011).

Body image can be understood as the mental representation of the body (Schilder, 1999). This complex and multifaceted construct (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Ferreira, Castro & Morgado, 2014) involves the image that the individual has of the size, shape and contour of its own body, as well as feelings, thoughts and behaviors in relation to these characteristics (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Childhood emerges as a particularly relevant phase for researchers and scholars of body image, since the construction of this begins at a younger age. According to Fortes et al. (2014) and Smolak (2011), it is during childhood that body-related attitudes such as beliefs, concerns about body weight and shape, and behaviors directed at improving physical appearance may begin.

It is important to note that if these attitudes are elaborated in the direction of negative body image, there is a picture characterized by a profound depreciation of the body itself, which can cause distress, suffering and depression (Ferreira et al., 2014). The development of this condition in early age may constitute a risk factor for the development of psychopathologies in late ages, which makes it fundamental to carry out studies that focus on the body image of children. Nevertheless, body image in childhood has been commonly evaluated with quantitative instruments. Qualitative investigations that aim to verify the children understanding of the importance attributed to body image aspects are still scarce (Neves, Cipriani, Meireles, Morgado, & Ferreira, 2017). Thus, the present study conducted a qua-

litative investigation on attitudes related to body image from the point of view of children between 6 and 11 years of age.

## Method

This is a descriptive qualitative research conducted through the focus group technique.

## Participants

The sample consisted of children aged 6 to 11 from two public schools in the city of Juiz de Fora, State of Minas Gerais. In total, four focus groups were formed, two in each school separated by ages and sexes. The selection of schools was by convenience, that is, those in which the researchers were open to conduct the research. It was decided to separate the genders, due to differences in body image between boys and girls already demonstrated by renowned researchers in the area (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2014; Neves et al., 2017). As for age, Papalia and Feldman (2013) point out that there may be differences in the attitudes of children of different ages (for example, the elaboration of the thoughts of 6-year-old children may differ from those of 11 years). Therefore, it is recommended in the specific literature of focus groups to make encounters with individuals as homogeneous as possible in their essential characteristics, in view of the non-formation of subgroups.

The students were selected by lottery, through the call list of each class. As criteria for inclusion in the research, children should be enrolled and attending classes regularly in selected schools; knowing how to read and write; to deliver the Free and Informed Consent Form signed by the person responsible for the child and to assent with their own voluntary participation.

Thus, 19 children, 10 girls and 9 boys, aged 6 to 11 years (mean = 8.36 years, standard deviation = 1.42 years) participated in the study.

## Data collection procedure

Initially, contact was established with the School Principal of the selected schools to explain the objectives and methods of the study. After the consent, a lottery was made to compose the sample. The chosen children took home the Consent Form for the authorization of those responsible for the child, as well as an informative scheduling the meeting.

All focus groups took place in rooms provided by the schools, with four researchers: two moderators, one observer and one assistant. A brief explanation of the research was given to the children, and the Assent Form was distributed so that they would consent to their voluntary participation. A previously planned semi-structured script served as a guide to foster questions regarding body image of children and guide the discussion, but with some flexibility for modifications that might arise at the time of each meeting. Some questions can be highlighted as examples: "Which parts of your body do you like most? Why?"; "Which ones do you least like? Why?"; "How you define a beautiful body?" The average duration of

the meetings was approximately 70 minutes. The children and their guardians were informed of the need for audio and video recording.

## Data analysis

All recordings of audio and video related to the meetings were transcribed in full. The Content Analysis technique proposed by Bardin (2011) was used to analyze focus group data. The three stages of analysis proposed by the author were followed (pre-analysis, material exploration and treatment of results and interpretation). Categorical thematic content analysis was used (Bardin, 2011).

It should be noted that, in order to preserve the identity of the participating children, their names were hidden, and instead each group received an identification code composed of the group number (G1, G2, G3, or G4); followed by the child's number (P1, P2, P3, (...) to P19); identification of the gender (♂ for boys and ♀ for girls); and finally the age of the participant. The complete code can be exemplified as: "G1, P1, ♀, 7 years".

## Ethical considerations

The research project was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee on Human Beings of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), through opinion number 1402233. All children and their guardians signed TALE and TCLE, respectively.

## Results and discussion

After content analysis, three major categories emerged from the children's speeches. They are: (1) Concerns about specific aspects of the body, (2) Concerns about general aspects of the body, and (3) Body related behaviors. Each of these categories is described and discussed separately below.

### Concerns about specific aspects of the body

To concern means the state of one who is absorbed by an idea; with dominant thinking, or even caring, bothering, or worrying. According to Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe and Tantleff-Dunn (1999), the concern with the body is multidimensional and may be related to different body aspects. The children in the present study had a tendency to relate concerns to specific aspects of the body, separately.

One of the most prominent body parts was hair, mentioned by participants from all four groups formed. In a qualitative study with focus groups, Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2013) pointed out that girls aged 8 to 10 years often engaged in conversations about appearance, and one of the focuses of these conversations is hair. In the present study, the hair was pointed out: in the description of the appearance itself; among the parts of the body that the children like the most and also the ones that they least like; in the description of how a beautiful

girl should be (in the groups of boys); and even comparisons of appearance with the other participants of the groups. Among the adjectives used to characterize the hair are: straight, curly, short, long, beautiful, ugly, among others. The following are some examples of these allusions: *"My hair is long. Since I was little I was born with a lot of hair. So if I do not make curls, my hair looks like a drawing witch (G1, P4, ♀, 7 years)"; "Ah! I love my hair too. But I wanted curly hair. So, if I had a curl at least I would be happy (G2, P5, ♀, 10 years)"; "My niece is a beautiful girl. Her hair is too beautiful. She has straight, longer hair (G3, P13, ♂, 10 years)"; "You have to compare. You have to look at your colleague to see if your colleague is the same. He looks like me. Because the hair looks like (G4, P15, ♂, 6 years)".*

Another aspect which the children also emphasized was the appearance of the face. Schilder (1999) already pointed out the special importance that the face has for the body image as a whole. This is because, according to the author, the face is the most expressive part of the body, since it is the one that can be seen by all (Schilder, 1999). Subjects related to the appearance of the face appeared in three of the four groups formed. The speeches of participants 2 and 11 clearly represent how much the children consider striking the features of the face, although they still cannot express the reason for this importance: *"[part of the body that you like the most] the face because ... I don't know. Because the face is important (G1, P2, ♀, 8 years)"; "I find a beautiful person with beautiful face features. So I think it has to be alike, it cannot be a very different thing from the other. The facial features are important (G3, P11, ♂, 10 years)".*

In this same sense, several facial features were also mentioned. Among them are: eyes, nose, mouth, teeth, cheek and ears. From the speeches of the participants, it was possible to identify that they care about these characteristics, since they clearly know what are the beauty stereotypes associated with these parts. According to Murnen (2011), the ideal of beauty, especially feminine, includes light eyes, elongated lashes, fleshy lips and fine nose. Here are a few accounts of the children in the present study exemplifying these questions: *"[how you define a beautiful person] with blue eyes (G2, P6, ♀, 9 years). There's one in my room that has green eyes (G2, P7, ♀, 9 years)."; "Let's suppose, not wanting to offend people, but so ... people who have a very big nose, a very big mouth ... That's not good. (G3, P11, ♂, 10 years)"; "I don't like my teeth. Because my teeth is very crooked ... (G1, P1, ♀, 7 years)"; "I think I have a lot of cheek (G4, P15, ♂, 6 years)"; "My face is (...) it's not very fluffy like that ... Just my little cheeks from when I was little. My cheek even fell down so big (...) my cheeks are already rosy. (G1, P4, ♀, 7 years)"; "I don't like my ear because it's big. (G2, P5, ♀, 10 years)".*

Skin color was also a significant body attribute highlighted by participants, especially during the description of their own appearance. Máximo, Larrain, Nunes and Lins (2012) identified that children from 9 to 12 years old presented a tendency to bleaching in the racial self-categorization. The results obtained by these researchers showed that 71% of black children described themselves as brown skin and 23% as white. According to the authors, this was due to an attribution of socially favorable characteristics (beauty and communicability) associated with white figures; and of socially unfavorable characteristics (dishonesty) attached to dark-skinned and black figures.

The trend presented by Máximo et al. (2012) was not found in the present investigation. The description of the skin tone occurred from the children themselves, since the focus



group theme was the body. Words such as “white”, “black”, “coffee with milk” and “brown skin” were used as adjectives of skin color, without a pejorative connotation or an intention of self-bleaching. The following statements exemplify the body’s self-description regarding this characteristic: “*Color may be different. She is whiter and I am brown* (G2, P9, ♀, 10 years).”; “*Each one has a different color* (G2, P6, ♀, 9 years).”; “*I have black eyes. I’m black. My hair is black. My leg is black. My nose is black. My mouth is black. I’m black. Oh, I’m tall. Anything else* (G4, P19, ♂, 8 years).”; “*My color is coffee with milk. I have black eyes. Brown hair. My hair has a part that is white. It has white strands. But the rest is black. The legs are dark coffee with milk. The back is brown.* (G4, P15, ♂, 6 years).”.

In the female focus groups, body characteristics related to thinness were exalted. Similarly, in the study of Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2013) with focus groups, most girls discussed the importance of thinness. In the present investigation, girls reported worrying about body weight and with belly and waist size. They even identified that “having a big belly” or “potbelly”, as of their parents, would be a negative body attribute. Expressions like “good waist” and “six pack stomach” also appeared in their testimonials as positive characteristics: “*I like to see how much I’m weighing. To see if I have gained weight a little, if my waist is good* (G2, P8, ♀, 10 years).”; “*I’m pulling my belly [inward] to look in the mirror. I like to have six pack stomach* (G2, P7, ♀, 9 years).”; “*My father has a big belly* (G1, P4, ♀, 7 years).”; “*My father, too. But he says I’m chubby like him. But in the case, he is fat, right?! I’m chubby* (G1, P2, ♀, 8 years).”; “*There’s a potbelly, just like my father* (G1, P4, ♀, 7 years).”.

In addition to attributes related to thinness, bulky breasts and buttocks were also pointed out by the girls during the description of what a beautiful body would look like. In their language, they termed these body parts as “big busty”, “big buttock”: “*I wanted big busty that looks like with silicone, aunt* (G2, P8, ♀, 10 years).”; “*I like Anita. She has a big busty and a big buttock.* (G2, P7, ♀, 9 years).”; “*I wanted to be my sister. She has a big busty like that girl they’re talking about. And a big buttock too, aunt* (G2, P6, ♀, 9 years).”.

In one of the groups formed with boys, the expressions “buff chest” and “musclebound chest” were frequent. The boys talked about “having buff chest” as a body trait valued by the opposite sex. In addition, the “six pack stomach” was also highlighted by the boys. The following reports exemplify this question: “*They [women] like a strong man. With buff chest* (G4, P16, ♂, 8 years).”; “*Musclebound chest is beautiful* (G4, P16, ♂, 8 years).”; “*I like to have a six pack stomach* (G2, P13, ♂, 8 years).”.

According to Murnen (2011), the ideal body for women, advocated in Western societies, is strongly associated with thinness and, more specifically, aspects that reinforce a sexy body. Large breasts, broad hips and thin waist are among these characteristics (Murnen, 2011). Among boys, the ideal body emphasizes muscularity, structured by broad shoulders tapering to a thin waist (“V-shape”), well-defined abdominal muscles (“six pack abs” or “six pack stomach”) (Murnen, 2011). Thus, well-defined chest muscles reinforce this body pattern. With this in view, it is possible that the boys and girls participating in the present study have exalted these bodily characteristics due to the desire to reach that ideal (beautiful and successful) body that is increasingly propagated by the media and consumer society.

The lower limbs were also cited by the children, however, less prominently. The legs, knees and feet have emerged in some focus groups linked to those parts of the body that children like the most and least like and among the things they would like to change in their

body. This can be seen in the following lines: *"I like my leg because with the leg I can do many things. You can stay in different positions (...). I do not like my knee. I like it, but I always have something about the knee. When I stretch my leg, I cannot stretch much (G3, P12, ♂, 10 years)"*; *"I wanted my two knees to be more resistant because I always fall on my knees and hurt (G3, P11, ♂, 10 years)"*; *"My foot is big. It's from a family. I wanted to have a smaller foot. I wanted to wear shoes exactly like a child wears (G1, P2, ♀, 8 years)"*; *"I wanted to change my foot. I wanted my foot to be small (G2, P10, ♀, 9 years)"*. In this sense, for the legs and knees, at times, the children's speeches did not refer to aesthetic characteristics, but to their functionality, differing from the mentions made of the other parts of the body. Thus, it was observed that the function was stronger than aesthetics when the focus is lower limbs.

### Concerns about general aspects of the body

In addition to concerns with specific body parts, children have also shown to be aware of the overall appearance of the body. Thompson et al. (1999) describe that concern with the body may be directed toward body weight or appearance in general. The category "concerns with general aspects of the body" encompasses children's concerns regarding overall appearance, muscularity, fat, weight, and height.

In relation to the general appearance, there was no consensus in children's speech. Some participants reported being satisfied and enjoying their bodies, while others had divergent opinions, as can be seen below: *"I don't like being like this (G4, P17, ♂, 7 years)"*; *"I think the way I am is good. I don't need to change anything. Each one likes to be the way it is (G3, P12, ♂, 10 years)"*; *"There's nothing I wanted to do that I need to change my body. I like my body (G3, P11, ♂, 10 years)"*. This incongruence was also observed in different studies in the literature. When asking directly to children about their satisfaction with their own body, Patalay et al. (2015) found low frequency of negative body image in girls and boys. On the other hand, from the studies of Leite, Ferrazzi, Mezdari and Höfelmann (2014) and Ling, McManus, Knowles, Masters and Polman (2015), which used Silhouette Scales, most of the children evaluated were discontented with some aspect of their appearance. It should be noted that body image is a labile construct that is constantly reworked by individuals, which can be influenced by social, economic and cultural relations (Cash & Smolak, 2011). In addition, the body image of children is developing and can change according to their daily findings (Papalia & Feldman, 2013).

Muscularity was an aspect that attracted the attention of the children, especially among the boys, being emphasized as a positive factor among them, and also as something valued by the opposite sex. A study by Skelton, Irby, Guzman and Beech (2012) corroborates this idea, since for boys aged 8 to 12 years, who participated in focus groups, health seemed to be linked to unrealistic notions about muscularity. In this way, being muscular was considered as synonymous with being healthy. For the authors, this limited and superficial understanding of health points to the need for greater education and information and enlightenment measures for this age group. In the present investigation, the boys' speeches illustrate the idea of muscularity as a positive factor of body appearance: *"They [girls] like strong men, who have a buff chest (G4, P16, ♂, 8 years)"*; *"I sure think it's cool to be like this [muscular]. So you can keep showing off. If I were that strong, I would definitely. I think I's*



*cool to be like this* (G3, P13, ♂, 10 years); *“There are people who are strong. It’s muscle. Being strong is good* (G4, P14, ♂, 8 years)”.

During the speeches of the children participating in the present study, it was possible to observe an aversion to fat. Similarly, Martin (2015) found that children over the age of 10 saw as one of the main disadvantages of fat the lower capacity of obese children to play with the others. In fact, the ability to play sports with colleagues was the most cited reason for both sexes in this age group to want to lose weight (Martin, 2015). In the present investigation, the idea that fat is a negative aspect was reinforced by the boys, being tied to the idea of inferior ability: *“I don’t like being fat* (G4, P19, ♂, 8 years); *“Because runs less* (G4, P18, ♂, 7 years).”; *“Because the belly is heavy and you run less* (G4, P15, ♂, 6 years); *“If you have big belly, if a guy hits you, you fall on time. Then you cannot, you’re already on the ground. If you are fat* (G4, P18, ♂, 7 years); *“Fatty boys do not run much. I like being small because I run a lot* (G4, P15, ♂, 6 years)”.

However, negative aspects of fat directed to body esthetics were also noted: *“I don’t like fat people* (G4, P19, ♂, 8 years); *“Aunty, fat person has nothing to do* (G4, P18, ♂, 7 years); *“Because it’s weird. It is very fat* (G4, P19, ♂, 8 years)”. Concerning this finding, Martin (2015) pointed out negative, consistent and emphatic views of children about being overweight. According to the author, for the five-year-olds, there was a clear view that being fat is the same as being ugly. Thus, fat was considered a negative aspect both because of functionality and aesthetic factors.

Moreover, negative comments from others about fat were reported by children in the present study. Garousi (2014) had already identified lipophobic attitudes significantly related to high BMI in girls. Harrison, Rowlinson and Hill (2016) investigated children’s preferences among characters from children’s stories who varied in weight. The results showed that children’s judgments were affected by fat, with a clear preference for lean figures and rejection of obese children, thus being related to satisfaction with appearance and social acceptance. Participant speeches reveal that comments about their appearance affect children’s feelings about their bodies: *“There’s a boy who’s bullying my cousin. Because my cousin is a bit chubby. He does nothing to take care of the body. He feels bad* (G4, P14, ♂, 8 years); *“Auntie, once my colleague humiliated my other colleague. He made him cry. He made fun of him. He said he was fat. He said it looked like a killer whale* (G4, P18, ♂, 7 years)”.

The thinness was pointed out as a positive factor, especially for the girls. Among the boys, some of them reported fear of being too thin. This attitude demonstrates a tendency towards the adequacy of what is considered ideal body for the different sexes, considering that thinness is valued for the female, but not for the male sex (Murnen, 2011). Thus, while the girls appreciated this body pattern, the boys showed a tendency to balance, that is, they did not want to be too thin, but only slightly. *“I pull inward my belly to look in the mirror, then I relax (...) I like to look slim ...* (G2, P7, ♀, 9 years); *“My niece is a beautiful girl (...) Her body is beautiful. She is thin. That’s all* (G3, P13, ♂, 10 years); *“My cousin calls me skinny and I say, ‘You are too’. I do not like being skinny. I wanted to be a just little skinny* (G4, P18, ♂, 7 years).”

Still in the sense of concern about being overweight, some children reported being aware of their body weight. It is interesting to point out that both boys and girls said to control this measure, showing concern about how much they weigh. However, researchers point

out that girls may find it more difficult to deal with judging their weight and body size than boys (Fortes et al., 2014; Smolak, 2011). Concern about body weight was also present in Australian boys and girls evaluated by Fairweather-Schmidt and Wade (2015). The following statements may illustrate that concern about being overweight can afflict children, regardless of sex: *“I like to weigh myself to see if I’m fat or thin (G4, P19, ♂, 8 years)”*; *“I like to know how much I’m weighing. To see if I have gained weight a little, if my waist is good (G2, P8, ♀, 10 years)”*; *“I like to weigh myself to see if I’ve gained weight a bit because up to now it’s only 30 kg. For a while. And I wanted to get fat at least a little. (G3, P13, ♂, 10 years)”*.

In addition to body weight, height also caught the attention of children. When asked about their desire to change something in their bodies, they reported willingness to be “taller” or “higher” or even “larger”. Similarly, “being taller” was pointed out as an advantage among 5-year-olds in Martin (2015). The words of participants 5 and 10 exemplify this issue: *“I would change. I wanted to be tall. Tall, really tall. Because short I do not reach anything. (G2, P5, ♀, 10 years)”*; *“I wanted to change my height and my foot (G2, P10, ♀, 9 years)”*.

### Body-related behaviors

The third category that emerged from the children’s speech was that of “body-related behaviors”. In general, behavior means a set of actions that the individual adopts in the face of the interactions provided by the environment where the individual is involved. The behavior of each person may be the incarnated expression of some aspects of the body’s identity and, therefore, may express conflicts or anxieties of the individual, deserving special attention (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2014). In the concept of body image, body-directed behaviors are part of its attitudinal component (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2014), and some examples are: avoidance of body exposure, body check, comparison of the body with that of other individuals, the practice of exercises with the purpose of modifying the body (losing weight or gaining muscles), the adoption of alterations in feeding with the same purpose, among others. Some of these behaviors were verified in the children’s speeches and, thus, the creation of this category is justified.

During the conduction of focus groups, it was found that body checking is a resource often used by children. This behavior includes constant actions of self-assessment of the body, such as: periodic verification of body weight, examination of body size and shape (through mirrors or other reflective surfaces); touch of the body in search of “undesirable” body fat; among others (Mountford, Haase, & Waller, 2006; Shafran, Fairburn, Robinson, & Lask, 2004). Some of the participants’ statements may be examples: *“I weigh myself once a day. I like to weigh myself (G4, P17, ♂, 7 years)”*; *“Every day I look in the mirror, I look just like a bamboo (G2, P9, ♀, 10 years)”*; *“I have a big cheek [tightening the cheeks]. (G4, P17, ♂, 7 years)”*.

According to Cash and Smolak (2011), if body-checking behaviors are repeated compulsively, consuming time and energy of the individual, this may indicate a negative image of the body. In a study carried out with university students, Carvalho, Filgueiras, Neves, Coelho and Ferreira (2013) pointed out that body check was associated with inadequate food attitudes and body dissatisfaction, regardless of the individual’s gender. In children, a study by Neves et al. (2017) did not identify investigations that sought to evaluate body

check in children, and therefore, the authors emphasized the need for further research with this intention.

Added to that, the use of certain clothes was emphasized in the children's speeches. A study by Jellinek, Myers, and Keller (2016) sought to determine the effect of doll clothes (swimwear or social clothing) and body type (thin or overweight) on the body dissatisfaction of six- to eight-year-old girls. The authors identified that the body type of the dolls influenced girls' body dissatisfaction, both in bathing suits and in social clothing. In this study, when asked about what they think a person has to be to be beautiful, some girls reported using "beautiful clothes" as strategies adopted: "(...) *Just makeup and done (...) Put on a nice clothes and that's it. Better to be beautiful and to be normal.* (G1, P4, ♀, 7 years)"; "*Put on some pretty clothes, put some cute earrings.* (G1, P2, ♀, 8 years)". These statements demonstrate the importance girls attribute to clothes, possibly due to media influence over fashion.

The use of clothes was also associated with imitation of celebrities. In a qualitative study conducted by Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2013), both girls and boys reported copying celebrities that they have prestige about the style of clothes used, haircut, etc. According to the authors, the girls tended to copy famous actresses and singers, while the boys looked for behaviors similar to the idols of the sport. In the present study, two dialogues in the girls' focus groups on this subject can be cited as examples: "*Mc Guimê. He is very beautiful. (...) He has a cap. He wears a cap. I think if he was here at school I would faint* (G2, P6, ♀, 9 years)"; "*Anitta. I think she's beautiful. (...) Her clothes are beautiful.* (G2, P10, ♀, 9 years)"; "*Mc Tati Zaqui. I love Mc Tati. I wanted to have her hair. Blue* (G2, P5, ♀, 10 years)"; "*I think Larissa Manuela is beautiful! (...) Because every time I see her in the magazine I love everything she uses. Then I find her very pretty, even on TV* (G1, P4, ♀, 7 years)".

In one of the boy groups, it was identified that boys have a certain amount of vanity when dressing and choosing the clothes they wear. In addition to the choice of clothing, they have shown that they are aware of clothing brands (e.g. All Star, Nike and Polo) in order to achieve the "playboy style". The following dialogue proves this question: "*I took a playboy style picture. Photo of playboy with beautiful tennis. Black jacket. Big necklace. And a cap* (G4, P14, ♂, 8 years)"; "*I went countryside yesterday and I got my jacket, pants, All Star sneakers and a necklace here that has that "S" ... that has a risk in the middle* (G4, P15, ♂, 6 years)"; "*I like to be meddlesome. I like to choose the clothes I'm going to use* (G4, P19, ♂, 8 years)"; "*I like Nike and Polo shoes* (G4, P16, ♂, 8 years old)".

Questions to others about body shape and physical appearance are described as other examples of body checking behavior (Mountford et al., 2006; Shafran et al., 2004), which may be present in young adults (Carvalho et al., 2013). In the present study, this behavior was present in the reports of participants 2 and 12. Their statements demonstrate a tendency to check other people's opinions regarding appearance: "*When I go to get ready, I ask my grandmother if it's okay. If I wear shorts that my grandmother does not like ?! I say like this: 'Is it good, Grandma ?!' When it is not good, she says, 'Ah, let's put something else. This is not good.'* (G1, P2, ♀, 8 years)"; "*Sometimes, I ask. For example, one day I'm feeling that I got taller, so I go and ask. If I gained or lost more weight*" (G3, P12, ♂, 10 years).

The action of comparing the shape and physical appearance or specific body parts with other children was also verified in the speeches of the participants of the present study. It is important to emphasize that reports directed to social comparison

appeared in the four groups and both girls and boys said or demonstrated to adopt this behavior. Festinger (1954) had already pointed out that there exists in the human body an impulse to evaluate its opinions and skills. In this sense, the children's speeches of the present study confirm that the act of comparing is present even in individuals of the youngest age: *"It has to compare. Have to look at the colleague to see if the colleague is the same (G4, P15, ♂, 6 years)"*; *"[When someone is] looking with repairing look. She has a friend and she keeps looking at us (G2, P8, ♀, 10 years)"*; *"The colors may be different. For example, she is whiter. I'm darker (G1, P2, ♀, 8 years)"*.

Comparisons can occur spontaneously and unintentionally (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004), or in a strategic and deliberate way with the intentional choice of a standard of comparison (Festinger, 1954). Depending on the intensity and frequency that an individual engages in a comparison process and also with the standard which is used for it (the standard may be superior or not to the individual in the characteristic in question), this process may have negative consequences in body image of people.

The practice of physical exercises for body modification was a behavior reported by children. Both boys and girls said that activities like Zumba, gym and bodybuilding can be used to "get thinner", "lose the belly", gain "more body and more butt", among others. The following statements demonstrate this question:

*"If the chubby one wanted to get thinner, it was just him getting more different. Practicing more exercises (...) Do not stand still ... that to be more beautiful you have to exercise. The body. (G3, P12, ♂, 10 years)"*; *"Practice exercises to have a beautiful body. Because if you don't, you'll be weak. Exercise makes you stronger and stronger (G3, P13, ♂, 10 years)"*; *"Gym also gives more body, gives more butt (G2, P9, ♀, 10 years)"*; *"Exercising is really cool. It gives you a beautiful body (G2, P6, ♀, 9 years)"*; *"My mother dances Zumba also to lose her belly. Zumba burned some fat. Zumba burns (G2, P8, ♀, 10 years)"*.

Still with regard to exercise, Skelton et al. (2012), when investigating the perception of children aged eight to 12 years on health, pointed out that this is based on muscular appearance and frequency of exercise. The boys considered that physical fitness is important, and having six-pack abs was indicative of health. In addition, when asked to provide examples of healthy individuals, they listed mainly celebrities or people they knew with muscular bodies, reinforcing the idea that for them, individuals engaged in "exercising every day" and having "many muscles" were health models.

In the research by Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2013), the term *fit* was often adopted by girls and boys to describe an ideal body. This term was related to the practice of physical exercises and the maintenance of characteristics and physical abilities desirable for the children. Among boys, the sport was pointed out as a means to achieve the ideal body. In that sense, they pointed out that they would be happier if they were more muscular. In turn, among the girls, they said they would like to have more muscles, but not a very muscular body, as it would not be attractive. They emphasized the importance of thinness as the best body type. Thus, the children's statements of the present study corroborate the findings of Skelton et al. (2012) and Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2013) since they give importance to the practice of physical exercises in favor of the corporal esthetics.

With regard to food, eating practices have been associated with aesthetics in the sense that overeating can lead to weight gain. As examples, the following excerpts stand out: *"Ah, because I do not really like to eat because I think I'm fat (G1, P2, ♀, 8 years)"*; *"I think*



*I'm skinny. Sometimes I think I'm a bit chubby, I like to eat things (...) if you want to get fat just eat [laughs]* (G3, P12, ♂, 10 years)"; *"I'm fat, eat a lot* (G4, P14, ♂, 8 years old)". Thus, children in the present study also realized that eating can contribute to the modification of the body.

It is also noted that in addressing this issue, participants mentioned the influence of parents, recognizing that they follow the standards established within their own homes. The following account exemplifies this question: *"My mother is very skinny. In fact, she eats very little. I'm more like my father. My dad eats a lot. I eat very much like my father* (G1, P3, ♀, 6 years)". The family influence in the feeding of children has already been demonstrated in previous studies (Damiano et al., 2015, Michael et al., 2014; Swaminathan et al., 2013). According to Goodell, Johnson, Antono, Power, and Hughes (2017), the role that parents play in developing eating habits in preschool children is critical, as they are the "guardians of food" Thus, possibly, the speech of children related to food is strongly influenced by parents.

In addition, in adolescents, Banna, Buchthal, Delormier, Creed-Kanashiro and Penny (2016) aimed to understand the sociocultural influences in feeding using qualitative methods. The authors have identified that these influences occur at the individual (intrapersonal), social (interpersonal) and environmental (community) levels. Individual influences on behavior included knowledge related to nutrition, lack of financial resources to buy food, and concerns about body image. At the social level, parents promoted healthy eating by providing advice on food selection and home-cooked meals. The physical environment also influenced the intake, with predominance of food available in schools.

Despite the contributions of the present study to the knowledge of the area, it presents limitations that must be pointed out. Initially, all focus groups were conducted by women researchers, including male groups. Thus, participating boys might have felt inhibited when talking about the body characterizing this issue as a limiting factor. Nevertheless, they were not intimidated and reported their honest opinion on the subject. Another limitation arises from the fact that the children included in this study were from two schools in the public education sector of the same city for convenience. Thus, the findings should not be generalized. However, the present research sought to evaluate in depth the opinions of children regarding aspects related to their body image. Finally, despite understanding that parents influence children's speeches, interviews with family members were not developed to understand in depth whether the reports are just reproductions. It has been established that social relations are of great importance during child development, since the immediate social context for a child is usually the family (Papalia & Feldman, 2013). Thus, it is not possible to measure to what extent the participants' statements are their own opinions or only repetitions of the adults.

It can be concluded that from the point of view of the children evaluated in this study, the main attitudes related to the body image are directed to: concerns about specific parts of the body, concerns about general aspects of the body and behaviors directed to the physical appearance itself. These results are important in that children from 6 to 11 years old can already internalize ideal standards of beauty that are diffused by the media and potentially valued by their families, negatively impacting their body image.

Considering that a negative body image during childhood may be a risk factor for the development of psychopathologies later during adolescence or adulthood, this public



should be under the focus of attention and intervention. In view of children's mental health, it is recommended to promote a positive body image as a prevention strategy. In addition, the development of quantitative research is suggested in order to evaluate a greater number of children, as well as the creation of specific psychometric instruments for children.

## References

- Banna, J. C., Buchthal, O. V., Delormier, T., Creed-Kanashiro, H. M., & Penny, M. E. (2016). Influences on eating: A qualitative study of adolescents in a periurban area in Lima, Peru. *BMC Public Health*, 16(1), 1-11.
- Bardin, L. (2011). *Análise de conteúdo* (3a ed.). São Paulo: Edições 70.
- Carvalho, P. H. B., Filgueiras, J. F., Neves, C. M., Coelho, F. D., & Ferreira, M. E. C. (2013). Checagem corporal, atitude alimentar inadequada e insatisfação com a imagem corporal de jovens universitários. *Jornal Brasileiro de Psiquiatria*, 62(2), 108-114.
- Cash, T. F., & Smolak, L. (2011). *Body image: A handbook of science, practice, and prevention* (2nd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Damiano, S. R., Gregg, K. J., Spiel, E. C., McLean, S. A., Wertheim, E. H., & Paxton, J. S. (2015). Relationships between body size attitudes and body image of 4-year-old boys and girls, and attitudes of their fathers and mothers. *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 3(16), 1-10.
- Fairweather-Schmidt, A. K., & Wade, T. D. (2015). Piloting a perfectionism intervention for pre-adolescent children. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 73, 67-73.
- Ferreira, M. E. C., Castro, M. R., & Morgado, F. F. R. (2014). *Imagem corporal: Reflexões, diretrizes e práticas de pesquisa*. Juiz de Fora, MG: UFJF.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A Theory of Social Comparison Processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117-140.
- Fortes, L. S., Kakeshita, I. S., Filgueiras, J. F., Pasian, S. R., Almeida, S. S., & Ferreira, M. E. C. (2014). Imagem corporal e Infância. In M. E. C., Ferreira, M. R., Castro, & F. F. R., Morgado (Orgs.), *Imagem corporal: Reflexões, diretrizes e práticas de pesquisa* (pp. 49-65). Juiz de Fora, MG: UFJF.
- Garousi, S. (2014). Body Weight Concerns and Antifat Attitude in Iranian Children. *International Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 5(12), 1587-1593.
- Goodell, L. S., Johnson, S. L., Antono, A. C., Power, T. J., & Hughes, S. O. (2017). Strategies Low-Income Parents Use to Overcome Their Children's Food Refusal. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 21(1), 68-76.
- Harrison, S., Rowlinson, M., & Hill, A. J. (2016). "No fat friend of mine": Young children's responses to overweight and disability. *Body Image*, 18, 65-73.

- Jellinek, R. D., Myers, T. A., & Keller, K. L. (2016). The impact of doll style of dress and familiarity on body dissatisfaction in 6- to 8-year-old girls. *Body Image*, 18, 78-85.
- Leite, A. C. B., Ferrazzi, N. B., Mezdari, T., & Höfelmann, D. A. (2014). Insatisfação corporal em escolares de uma cidade do Sul do Brasil. *Revista Brasileira de Crescimento e Desenvolvimento Humano*, 24(1), 54-61.
- Ling, F. C. M., McManus, A. M., Knowles, G., Masters, R. S. W., & Polman, R. C. J. (2015). Do children emotionally rehearse about their body image? *Journal of Health Psychology*, 20(9), 1133-1141.
- Martin, G. M. (2015). Obesity in question: understandings of body shape, self and normalcy among children in Malta. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 37(2), 212-26.
- Máximo, T. A. C. de O., Larrain, L. F. C. R., Nunes, A. V. de L., & Lins, S. L. B. (2012). Processos de identidade social e exclusão racial na infância. *Psicologia em Revista*, 18(3), 507-526.
- Michael, S. L., Wentzel, K., Elliott, M. N., Dittus, P. J., Kanouse, D. E., Wallander, J. L., ..., & Schuster, M. A. (2014). Parental and Peer Factors Associated with Body Image Discrepancy among Fifth-Grade Boys and Girls. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(1), 15-29.
- Mountford, V., Haase, A., & Waller, G. (2006). Body checking in the eating disorders: associations between cognitions and behaviors. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 39(8), 708-715.
- Murnen, S. K. (2011). Gender and body images. In T. F. Cash, & L. Smolak (Eds.), *Body image: A handbook of science, practice, and prevention* (2nd ed., pp. 173-179). New York: The Guildford Press.
- Mussweiler, T., Ruter, K., & Epstude, K. (2004). The man who wasn't there: Subliminal social comparison standards influence self-evaluation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(5), 689-696.
- Neves, C. M., Cipriani, F. M., Meireles, J. F. F., Morgado, F. F. R., & Ferreira, M. E. C. (2017). Imagem corporal na infância: Uma revisão integrativa da literatura. *Revista Paulista de Pediatria*, 35(3), 331-339.
- Papalia, D. E., & Feldman, R. D. (2013). *Desenvolvimento Humano* (12a ed.). Porto Alegre: AMGH.
- Patalay, P., Sharpe, H., & Wolpert, M. (2015). Internalising symptoms and body dissatisfaction: untangling temporal precedence using cross-lagged models in two cohorts. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, 56(11), 1223-1230.
- Schilder, P. (1999). *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body: Studies in the Constructive Energies of the Psyche*. London: Routledge.

- Skelton, J. A., Irby, M. B., Guzman, M. A., & Beech, B. M. (2012). Children's Perceptions of Obesity and Health: A Focus Group Study With Hispanic Boys. *Infant, Child and Adolescent Nutrition*, 4(5), 289-296.
- Shafran, R., Fairburn, C. G., Robinson, P., & Lask, B. (2004). Body checking and its avoidance in eating disorders. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 35(1), 93-101.
- Smolak, L. (2011). Body image development in childhood. In T. Cash & L. Smolak (Eds.), *Body Image: A handbook of science, practice, and prevention* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 67-75). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Swaminathan, S., Selvam, S., Pauline, M., & Vaz, M. (2013). Associations between body weight perception and weight control behaviour in South Indian children: a cross-sectional study. *BMJ Open*, 3(3), 1-8.
- Tatangelo, G. L., & Ricciardelli, L. A. (2013). A qualitative study of preadolescent boys' and girls' body image: Gendered ideals and sociocultural influences. *Body Image*, 10, 591-598.
- Thompson, J. K., Heinberg, L. J., Altabe, M. N., & Tantleff-Dunn, S. (1999). *Exacting beauty: Theory, assessment and treatment of body image disturbance*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Received: Nov. 01, 2017

Approved: Apr. 23, 2018

---

**Clara Mockdece Neves:** Adjunct Professor of the Institute of Life Sciences (UFJF-GV). PhD in Psychology, Federal University of Juiz de Fora (2017). Master in Psychology from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. Graduate in Conceptual and Methodological Aspects of Scientific Research (2013) by the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. Graduate (2011) and Licentiate (2012) in Physical Education by the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. She has experience in dance teaching, artistic gymnastics, circus activities, aerial acrobatics in fabric and in the area of Physical Education with emphasis in research, acting mainly in the following subjects: body image, body dissatisfaction, athletes, dance, food behavior, adolescents and children.

**Juliana Fernandes Figueiras Meireles:** PhD in Psychology, Federal University of Juiz de Fora (2018). Master in Psychology from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (2015). Graduate in Conceptual and Methodological Aspects of Scientific Research (2013) by the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. Graduate (2011) and Licentiate (2012) in Physical Education by the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. She has experience in Physical Education, with emphasis on research, working mainly in the following subjects: physical activity, karate, body image, pregnant women and postpartum women.

**Fabiane Frota da Rocha Morgado:** PhD in Physical Education from the State University of Campinas (2013) - FAPESP Fellow. Master in Physical Education from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (2009). Specialist in Methodological and Conceptual Aspects of Scientific Research by the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (2007). Graduated in Full Degree in Physical Education from the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (2004). She is currently Adjunct Professor of the Department of Physical Education and Sports of the Institute of Education of the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro and leader of the Group of Studies and Research on Psychosocial Aspects of the Body, certified by CNPq. She has experience in the areas of adapted physical activity and socio-cultural aspects of the human movement, with a main activity in the following subjects: body

image, visual impairment, scientific research methodology, psychometrics, aquatic activities, school physical education, as well as in the body image of specific groups, such as military personnel, adolescents and people with disabilities.

*Maria Elisa Caputo Ferreira:* Graduated in Physical education from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (1993) and Bachelor of Social Service from the Faculty of Social Service of Rio de Janeiro (1977). Specialist in University Teaching from the University Castelo Branco (1995). Master in Physical Education from University Gama Filho (1998), and Master in Science of Human Motricity from University Castelo Branco (1996). PhD (2006) and Post-doctor in Education by the University of São Paulo (2002). Currently, she is adjunct professor at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports (FAEFID) of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), leader of the Research Group Body and Diversity of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). Mentor in the Graduate programs in Physical Education UFV-UFJF and in Psychology ICH-UFJF. She has experience in Physical Education (Human Movement), with emphasis on Body Studies, working mainly on the following subjects: body image, prevalence of body (dis)satisfaction in adolescents, young and adults, athletes and non-athletes, obesity and aging.