Adolescent body image and relevance to health promotion

Purpose
Body image can be related to measures of self-esteem, emotional stability as well as health behaviours. It is therefore important for health promotion strategies to understand the multifaceted relationship between healthy eating and self perception. This is particularly relevant when targeting adolescents who, whilst developing a greater autonomy over health attitudes and behaviours may also engage in heightened risk taking behaviours. Using a questionnaire survey this study explored the predictors of perceived body dissatisfaction and of disparities between healthy and ideal body images in adolescents with particular attention being paid to the role of gender.

Methods
A large survey sampled >3000 adolescents aged 12-17 across the island of Ireland. Variables measured included those of self reported dietary behaviour, BMI, nutritional knowledge, control, identity. Notably a highly differentiated series of questions around body image assessed current, ideal, healthiest and most attractive body image measures for self, same sex and opposite sex. Body images were registered in relation to a series of 9 graduated body contour drawings (Thompson & Gray, 1995)

Results
A range of interesting differences in the relationships between current, ideal, healthy and most attractive body images will be described. Little difference was observed for boys between these four facets of body image although it was clear that older boys wished to be larger than their current size. In contrast, for girls there were significant differences between age and attractiveness scores and a healthy body was larger than both ideal and attractive body images. The extent to which this supports the contention that girls may potentially sacrifice health for attractiveness will be discussed.