KEY STUDY: BUTTON
SELF ESTEEM AND EATING DISORDERS – A PROSPECTIVE STUDY

Aim:
To investigate the role of self esteem as a cause of eating disorders

Procedures:
- Self-esteem was measured in 594 schoolgirls aged 11 to 12 years, using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale.
- 400 girls were followed up at age 15 to 16. They completed a questionnaire about eating and other psychological problems.

Findings:
- Those with low self-esteem at age 11 to 12 were more inclined to have low self-esteem at 15 to 16 years
- Girls with low self-esteem at age 11 to 12 were significantly more at risk of eating disorders than those with higher self-esteem.
- Girls with low self-esteem at age 11 to 12 were more likely to display other problems at age 15 to 16 relating to health, family and school.

Conclusions:
- Low self-esteem at age 11 to 12 is a significant risk factor for girls developing eating disorders later on.
- This study lends support to the argument that psychological factors play a part in eating disorders
- It may be worth trying to enhance self-esteem in childhood and adolescence to help prevent eating disorders

Criticisms:
- This study relied on questionnaire data that may be unreliable and the sample was incomplete as some head teachers declined to let their pupils participate. This resulted in a biased sample: 60% of the girls' families were in social classes 1 and 2
- We cannot be sure that the self-esteem measured at age 11 to 12 predated the onset of eating disorders. Early processes in eating disorders might have already started.