

Research and Professional Briefs

Weight-Related Teasing in a Racially Diverse Sample of Sixth-Grade Children

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ABSTRACT

Negative outcomes are associated with weight-based teasing. Among children, little research to date has explored the extent to which teasing occurs, the effects of teasing, or differences among sources of teasing. The purpose of this secondary data analysis was to assess the prevalence and frequency of weight-related teasing by peers and families in a low-income, multiracial/ethnic sample of children; to determine how bothered children were by the teasing; to evaluate whether teasing varied by overweight status and sex; and to see whether body satisfaction varied based on teasing history. In 2007, baseline data were obtained from 148 children (aged 11 to 12 years) in a classroom intervention pilot study in four public schools serving low-income communities in St Paul, MN. Participants completed a classroom survey assessing body satisfaction and weight-related teasing. Height and weight were measured. Forty percent of children reported being teased by peers and 36% reported being teased by family members about their weight. Significantly more overweight/obese children reported being teased by peers ($P < 0.01$) and family members ($P < 0.05$) than normal weight children. No significant differences were seen between weight status and the degree to which children were bothered by teasing. Body satisfaction was lower among children teased by family members or peers than those who were not teased ($P < 0.05$). These results

suggest that weight-related teasing is a problem for children, especially those who are overweight or obese. A better understanding is needed of the long-term effects of teasing on behavioral and psychosocial outcomes in racially/ethnically diverse samples of children.
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Obesity is a major health problem facing youth today. Approximately 32% of US children and adolescents are overweight or obese (1). Minority youth are disproportionately affected by this epidemic; for example, 39% of non-Hispanic black girls and 41% of Mexican-American boys are overweight or obese, compared to 30% of white girls and 32% of white boys (1).

Weight stigma, defined as “negative weight-related attitudes and beliefs that are manifested by stereotypes, bias, rejection, and prejudice” (2), is a growing concern for individuals who are overweight and obese (3), but has only recently begun to receive substantial attention from the pediatric medical and scientific communities (4). In a recent review, Puhl and Latner (2) concluded that the majority of work has been conducted in disproportionately white samples and has focused on indirect forms of stigmatization (eg, biased attitudes, stereotyping, and behavioral intentions), rather than direct forms of stigmatization, such as weight-related teasing. Weight-related teasing includes negative commentary in the form of jokes, name-calling, and being laughed at, singled out, and/or excluded (5). Weight-related teasing of adolescents who are overweight and obese is associated with adverse behaviors and psychosocial outcomes (6), including increased risk for disordered eating (5,7-9), body dissatisfaction (10-15), low self-esteem (5,10-12,16,17), and depressive symptoms (10-12,18).

Due to the negative outcomes of weight-based teasing and the high prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States, it is important to examine the extent to which teasing occurs, particularly across different ages and racial/ethnic groups. Furthermore, given that the extent to which individuals experience negative outcomes due to weight-related teasing is related to how much they are bothered by the teasing (5), it is important to examine how youth are affected by teasing. Assessing the prevalence of weight-related teasing and its effects on youth may give insight into whether weight-related teasing in general is a problem, or if it is only a problem in individuals who are bothered by it. Finally, it is important to distinguish effects between sources of teasing. For example, are youth affected to a greater degree by teasing from family members vs peers? Peer teasing may be particu-

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larly important for certain age and sex groups, as it may be a mechanism for social acceptance (19).

Little research to date has explored these issues around weight teasing, particularly among racially diverse samples of children. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the prevalence and frequency of weight-related teasing by peers and family members in a low-income, multiracial/ethnic sample of elementary school-aged children; how bothered the children were by the teasing; if teasing varied by overweight status and sex; and if body satisfaction varied based on teasing history. It was hypothesized that weight-related teasing would be greater among overweight children and among girls, and that teasing would be associated with lower body satisfaction.

METHODS

Participants

These data were obtained from children in the Presidential Active Lifestyle Award+Peers program, a 6-week classroom intervention pilot study to increase physical activity in sixth graders in four public elementary schools in St Paul, MN, during 2006-2007. Two intervention schools were selected by the school district for participation based on the high prevalence of overweight/obesity and two control schools were matched based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language among students. These schools were racially and ethnically diverse and predominately low-income, with >80% of students attending the schools receiving free or reduced-price meals. Consent forms were sent to parents of all sixth graders ($n=196$); 177 (90%) forms were returned, including 29 refusals. Students gave written assent. Final participation included 148 students, aged 11 to 12 years. Data included in this analysis were collected before the intervention. The St Paul School District and University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Procedures

Baseline data included anthropometric measurements and a questionnaire. Trained research staff measured height without shoes using a portable stadiometer and the Frankfort Plane Technique. Weight was measured in light clothing without shoes in a private room using a calibrated portable digital scale. Body mass index (BMI) was calculated from these measurements. Sex- and age-specific cut-off points were used to classify participants as normal weight (BMI <85th percentile) and overweight/obese (BMI \geq 85th percentile) based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention growth charts (20).

The 110-item survey was completed by students in classrooms during school hours and was administered by trained research staff that could help and answer questions. Sex and age were self-reported. Race was reported as: white, black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, American Indian/Native American, or Other. Survey items assessing teasing were based on previous work in adolescents and on rigorously tested, reliable questions (11,21). To assess weight-related teasing, participants were asked, "Have you ever been teased

or made fun of by other kids because of your weight?" and, "Have you ever been teased or made fun of by family members because of your weight?" If teased, participants were asked to quantify how much the teasing bothered them: not at all, a little bit, somewhat, and very much. Responses were dichotomized into not at all/a little bit and somewhat/very much.

Teasing frequency was assessed by asking how often in the past year "you were called names," "you were teased about how you look," and "you were teased about your weight." Participants were also asked how frequently they "teased other kids about their weight." Similar to previous work where frequent teasing was associated with adverse psychological and behavioral outcomes, responses were dichotomized into infrequent teasing (never or once a year) and frequent teasing (a few times a year, a few times a month, or at least once a week) (6,21,22).

Body satisfaction questions were also adapted from previous research (23). Body satisfaction was assessed with the yes/no statements: "My weight makes me unhappy," "I like what I see when I look in the mirror," "I think I have a good body," "I'm proud of my body," and "Most people have a nicer body than me." These measures were examined as individual items and as an overall body satisfaction score, with a minimum of zero (low body satisfaction) and a maximum of five.

Statistical Analysis

Effects on the response variables were tested by analysis of variance, using SAS Proc Mixed (release 8.2, 1999-2001, SAS Institute Inc, Cary NC) so that in each analysis the independent variable, sex, ethnicity, and their interactions could all be simultaneously tested. Because no interaction approached significance, all were dropped, and the model for the tests reported here includes only the main effects. Alpha level was .05. Yes/No dichotomous variables were scored 1 and 0, respectively.

In total, 148 students participated in the study, although sample sizes for individual models vary slightly due to a small degree of missing data. The small sample size prevented comparisons among racial/ethnic groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mean age of the study sample ($N=148$) was 11.2 years. Boys comprised 47.6%. Among this sample, 54.8% were normal weight (53.6% of boys, 55.8% of girls) and 45.2% were overweight/obese (46.4% of boys, 44.2% of girls). Whites comprised only 8.2% of the sample, Asians 37.4%, African Americans 26.5%, and Hispanics 11.6%.

The proportion of study participants reporting teasing by peers was 40% (95% confidence interval 0.32 to 0.48), and those reporting teasing by family members was 36% (95% confidence interval 0.29 to 0.44). Overall 21% of the sample reported being teased by both peers and family. Differences in weight-related teasing by peers and family were seen based on weight status, but not sex, with overweight/obese children reporting that they were teased more than their normal weight counterparts (Table 1). Those children who were teased by peers or family had lower body satisfaction than those not teased, and those who were bothered by the peer teasing had lower

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