

# Comparison of Child Obesity Prevention and Control Content in Mainstream and Spanish-Language US Parenting Magazines

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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

Mass media coverage of child obesity is rising, paralleling the child obesity epidemic's growth, and there is evidence that parents seek parenting advice from media sources. Yet little to no research has examined the coverage of child obesity in parenting magazines or Spanish-language media. The purpose of this study was to use qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods to identify, quantify, and compare strategies for child obesity prevention and control presented in mainstream and Spanish-language US parenting magazines. Child obesity–related editorial content in 68 mainstream and 20 Spanish-language magazine issues published over 32 months was gathered. Magazine content was coded with a manual developed by refining themes from the sample and from an evidence-based child obesity prevention action plan. Seventy-three articles related to child obesity prevention and control were identified. Most focused on parental behavior change rather than environmental change, and only 3 in 10 articles referred to the social context in which parental behavior change takes place. Child obesity–focused articles were not given high prominence; only one in four articles in the entire sample referred to child obesity as a growing problem or epidemic. Key differences between genres reflect culturally important Latino themes, including family focus and changing health beliefs around child weight status. Given mass media's potential influence on parenting practices and public perceptions, nutrition communication professionals and registered dietitians need to work to reframe media coverage of childhood obesity as an environmental problem that requires broad-based policy solutions. Spanish-speaking media can be an ally in helping Latina women change cultural health beliefs around child weight status.

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CHILD OBESITY RATES IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE more than tripled in the past 30 years, and today roughly one in six children ages 2 to 19 years is obese.<sup>1-3</sup> Ethnic disparities remain, with higher prevalence in Hispanic and African-American children than non-Hispanic white children.<sup>3-5</sup> These trends have been accompanied by a rise in mass media coverage of the adult and child obesity epidemics.<sup>6,7</sup> Such media attention is understandable because childhood obesity confers a higher risk of cardiometabolic risk factors, as well as pulmonary, gastrointestinal, renal, musculoskeletal, and endocrine complications,<sup>8</sup> and it tracks to increased adult obesity and chronic disease risk,<sup>9,10</sup> making prevention of the utmost importance.<sup>11</sup>

Parents, through their control of the home environment, have a significant influence on children's food and physical activity choices and are key factors in any obesity prevention effort.<sup>11,12</sup> However, parents' ability to change their own behavior and, in turn, the home environment is determined by numerous individual and environmental factors.<sup>13-16</sup> Drawing on ecological models,<sup>17</sup> researchers have explored how

social context—everything from the neighborhood a person lives in to the friends they keep and the stress they encounter at work to financial pressures they face at home—influences health-related behavior at multiple levels and can underlie racial/ethnic and socioeconomic health disparities.<sup>18-21</sup> To date, however, there is little evidence that the media's coverage of obesity has adequately acknowledged the role of environment or social context in obesity's cause and control.<sup>6,7,22-28</sup>

Mass media have been hypothesized to play a role in parenting education.<sup>29</sup> A recent nationally representative survey finds that 60% of new parents seek parenting advice from magazines at least once a month<sup>30</sup>; there is also evidence that parents turn to magazines and other media for child feeding information.<sup>31</sup> Yet to our knowledge, no peer-reviewed research has exclusively examined child obesity prevention coverage in parenting-related media content. Despite the heightened risk of obesity in Latino youth<sup>3-5</sup> and qualitative evidence that Latino parents might not share health professionals' perceptions of or concerns about child obesity,<sup>32-38</sup> no research, to our knowledge, has explored the potential dif-

ferences in media coverage of obesity or child obesity between US mainstream and Spanish-language media genres.

Therefore, child obesity–related editorial content in parenting magazines aimed at mainstream and Spanish-speaking groups was analyzed to determine what strategies parenting magazines offered for child obesity prevention and control, whether the editorial content acknowledged the role of social context in shaping parental actions, how prominent the coverage was, and whether there were differences between genres (mainstream and Spanish-language) in coverage. The purpose of this study was to use qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods to identify, quantify, and compare child obesity prevention topics in mainstream and Spanish-language parenting magazines.

## METHODS

### Content Selection

Content was examined from two mainstream parenting magazines, *Parenting* (The Parenting Group, Inc, New York, NY, circulation 2.2 million) and *Parents* (Meredith Corp, Des Moines, IA, circulation 2.2 million), and one Spanish-language parenting magazine, *Ser Padres* (Meredith Corp, circulation 700,000), which represent the leading US parenting publications in their respective genres.<sup>39–41</sup> The readership of all three magazines is primarily female. *Ser Padres*, a sister publication to *Parents*, was selected because it is a nationally distributed, US-based, Spanish-language parenting magazine, and it most resembles *Parents* magazine in its publishing frequency (eight times a year) and distribution reach. *Ser Padres* has its own editorial staff and content mix, but some *Ser Padres* content has been translated from *Parents*.<sup>39,40</sup> Most of the *Ser Padres* audience was born outside the United States (90%) and speaks primarily Spanish at home (81%),<sup>39</sup> and has an average household income (\$38,192) that is about one third lower than that of readers of the mainstream publications.<sup>40,41</sup>

Hard copies of magazines published during a 32-month period (February 2007 to September 2009) were obtained and hand-searched to identify articles about child obesity causal factors and prevention strategies. The lead author reviewed mainstream magazines to identify articles to be included in the analysis. *Ser Padres* magazine issues were reviewed by the lead author and two bilingual advanced undergraduate nutrition students who are native Spanish speakers, to identify candidate articles for inclusion. The students orally translated and audiotaped all articles on child obesity and related topics; the lead author listened to the tape recordings to identify articles to be included in the analysis, and then transcribed the relevant audiotapes.

An *article* was defined as a “unique editorial content item.” The articles ranged in length and treatment of childhood obesity and included factoids (one-sentence stand-alone items), briefs (one to two paragraph stand-alone pieces), expert questions and answers, first-person columns, tips stories (one to two pages), long feature stories (two to six pages), and reader letters (one to two sentences). All articles that had child obesity prevention and control as a major theme were included in the analysis. Articles on topics related to child obesity—healthy eating, physical activity, television watching, government policy, and other obesity prevention factors—were included only if they contained the term *child obe-*

*sity* or a synonym for child obesity (eg, *overweight*, *fattening*, *gordito* [*chubby*], *problemas de peso* [*weight problems*] used in reference to children). Articles that focused solely on diseases and conditions caused or exacerbated by child obesity were not included in the analysis.

### Content Coding

The lead author gathered strategies for child obesity prevention and control from each article, generating an initial strategy list. Child obesity causal factors were also included in the list because causal attributions can offer implicit strategies for prevention and control. Strategies gathered from magazine content were combined with evidence-based strategies identified by the Institute of Medicine.<sup>11</sup> Strategies were collapsed into broader categories to develop the final coding sheet.

Both authors reviewed and coded each article and each transcript of the translated Spanish articles. The coding scheme was as follows: For every article, the authors coded whether each strategy was offered (yes [1], no [0]), and whether the article mentioned social contextual factors that could influence parents' ability to change health behaviors (mentioned [1], not mentioned [0]).

To determine prominence of child obesity coverage, the authors coded articles for presence on the cover and inclusion in the cover text of the words *child obesity* or a synonym; strong obesity focus (yes [1], if the article mentioned child obesity or a synonym in the headline, deck [secondary headline], or first sentence, and maintained obesity focus throughout the article, no [0] if it did not); description of child obesity as an epidemic/growing problem (yes [1], no [0]); and identification that Hispanic children are at a higher risk of obesity (yes [1], no [0]). The authors also recorded article length.

The authors completed coding independently, discussing, and resolving any differences through consensus.

### Statistical Analysis

Child obesity control strategies were ranked according to percentage of articles offering them, as follows: The rank of 1 was awarded to the strategy appearing in the greatest percentage of articles, 2 to the strategy appearing in the next greatest percentage of articles, and so on; duplicate values were given the same rank. The strategies were also ranked separately for each genre. Spearman correlation was used to compare strategy rank order in the mainstream articles with that in the Spanish articles, following a methodology used by Campo and Mastin.<sup>25</sup> The purpose of ranking the strategies separately for each genre and comparing the rankings was to identify whether the mainstream and Spanish magazines had similarities in the rank order of strategies presented—that is, were the most (or least) frequently presented strategies in the mainstream magazines also the most (or least) frequently presented in the Spanish magazines, or were there differences in the rank order that would merit further exploration.

Once the highest-ranking strategies in each genre were identified,  $\chi^2$  tests were used to examine differences between mainstream and Spanish-language articles in the percentage that offered each strategy.  $\chi^2$  tests were also used to examine differences between mainstream and Spanish-language articles in the percentage of articles that described specific social contextual factors, that had a strong obesity focus, and that described child obesity as a growing problem/epidemic. The

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