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The Relationship of Obesity and Weight Gain to Childhood Teasing



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This article examines the relationship between weight gain and childhood teasing in children. Anthropometric data and self-reported teasing experiences were collected on a sample of second and third graders at a local elementary school in a disadvantaged suburban community. The study model uses bio-ecological development theory in which child development is understood in context: the child's physical characteristics influence the social environment, which interact and influence the behaviors that result in physical development and characteristics such as weight gain. Results suggest that teasing influences BMI change and that the relationship is more complex than simply stating that obese children are teased.

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WITH THE GROWING concern about the obesity epidemic and its related consequences, there is a growing interest in the interplay of multiple biological and psychosocial factors that are associated with overweight children's development. Although more is known about antecedents such as genetics, nutrition and exercise, less is known about the behavioral determinants of conditions that produce overweight or the consequential social effects on children who are overweight such as teasing or bullying. With the most recent Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report on obesity finding that more than two thirds of adults are overweight or obese (CDC, 2014), we need to focus on the origins in childhood.

Obesity is a major health problem today affecting one third of adults and 17% of U.S. children who are obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012). Minorities disproportionately exhibit high rates of overweight and obesity with 37 and 36% for Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black females respectively, and 35% of all non-Hispanic Black children ages 2–19 years. Specifically among school children 6–11 years, 18% are obese (>95th percentile) with 26 and 22% non-Hispanic Black

males and females respectively; with 27 and 23% Hispanic males and females respectively (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). Although there is recent evidence that the rates appear to have leveled off (Ogden et al., 2012), these epidemic rates place our youth in danger of developing a myriad of diseases as well as a shortened life span. It is well understood that a diet high in fat and calories and limited physical activity are predecessors to gaining weight. However, little research to date has focused primarily on negative outcomes related to weight-based teasing and its bi-directional relationship with BMI change, particularly among racially diverse children. To understand this in a social context, the child's developmental change needs to be examined. This study examines the possible interactive relationships between childhood teasing and obesity starting in second grade students followed to third grade.

The purpose of the study is to describe the characteristics of overweight children and the influence of their BMI and BMI change on their self-reported teasing. The study also seeks to answer the extent to which children's reported peer teasing bothers them and is associated with weight gain. The children in this study were part of a community-based project in a charter school. School students (grades K-4) were

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primarily from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds and were culturally disadvantaged. The population of this community, including the children, is statistically more overweight than neighboring communities at 41% compared to 38% (Nassau County National Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey [BRFSS], 2007).

Conceptual Model

Bronfenbrenner's human ecology model defines development occurring within complex "layers" of environment, each having an effect on a child's development bi-directionally (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2001, 2005). The model emphasizes that a child's own biology and physical systems interact with the environment, which fuels development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Thus the systems and environments interact bi-directionally "making humans human." This "bio-ecological systems theory" yields a developmental model that can be used to understand change over time such as weight gain.

The study is conceptualized on this developmental model that describes four systems of human development or human ecology. These are as follows: (1) the microsystem at the center including the biology and physical characteristics of the child within the family, school, peer group, neighborhood; (2) the mesosystem comprising connections between immediate environments such as the child's home, classroom; (3) the exosystem or external environmental settings which indirectly affect the systems within such as the school system or media, and (4) the macrosystem, or larger cultural context such as cultural values. Within the interactionism of these systems, there is recognition that causes for continuity and change in the person are dependent on the dynamic interaction between the persons, environment and situations (Reynolds et al., 2010). Understanding development or individual change in context is central to Bronfenbrenner's model and suggests a framework to study how a child's physical characteristics such as obesity influence the social environment which includes classmates, and how the response of the social environment such as teasing reciprocally influences the child's behavior that lead to physical changes such as weight gain. These interactions are all within the context of family and community that play a role in the child's development (Figure 1).

Obesity in childhood should be understood within this model. With development at the center, children's family and community values of what constitutes overweight are central to how children are nurtured and fed, both physically and psychologically. Parenting and obesity literature is extensive with parenting efficacy affected by various factors (Grossklau & Marvicsin, 2014; Towns & D'Auria, 2009). Parents of some children may not see them being overweight as a problem. For example, Hackie and Bowles (2007) studied parents of overweight children who did not see their child as overweight.

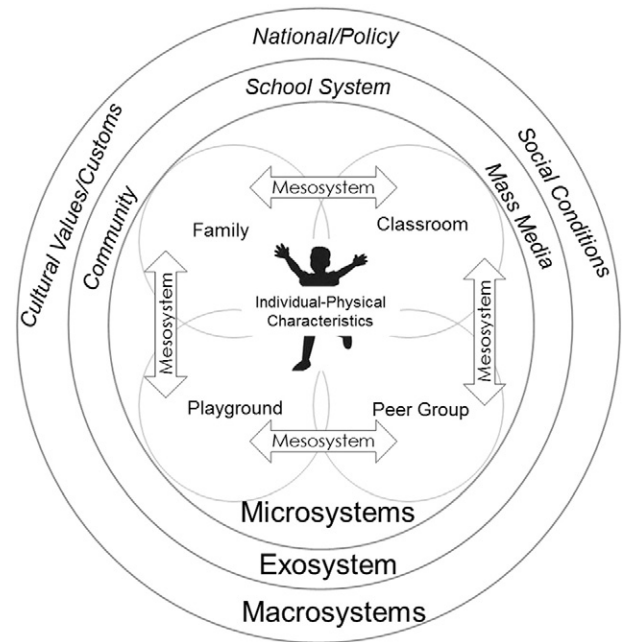


Figure 1 Bio-ecological development theory.

Garrett-Wright (2010) found that parents reported little or no concern even when their child was overweight or obese and cautioned that low levels of concern about child weight were frequently found in samples where high levels of overweight and obesity exist in children. Misperception of obesity exists because parents fail to accept the idea that their child is fat (Myers & Vargas, 2000).

As important, the school environment also plays a significant role in the child's cognitive, social and emotional development. Schools are the communities in which young children interact with peers throughout their day. Obese children are reported to suffer from weight-based teasing at schools (McCormack et al., 2011). Recognizing the context of overweight children's social interactions is critical to any efforts to prevent obesity. What precipitates teasing and bullying in school, and what are the results of these negative social interactions that are not congruent with home and family?

Such interaction between the teaser and individual being teased can lead to the transformation and emergence of self-categorization of identity that can produce a lifelong tainted self-view. According to Reynolds et al. (2010), social norms, shared values, influence and persuasion, shared emotions and shared goals are collective products, which shape social system and culture. Therefore, it can be said that group culture and behavior can influence one's sense of self as an individual. Obese youth are more likely to be found at the periphery of social networks, suggesting that the obese youth are more likely to be socially marginalized by peers (Strauss & Pollack, 2003). In addition to be at greater risk for social marginalization, children who are obese are also at an increased risk for peer victimization (Gray, Kahhan, &

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