



Perceptions of early body image socialization in families: Exploring knowledge, beliefs, and strategies among mothers of preschoolers



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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore parental perceptions of body image in preschoolers. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 primary caregivers of preschoolers to examine knowledge, beliefs, and strategies regarding early body image socialization in families. Thematic Analysis yielded three themes highlighting knowledge gaps, belief discrepancies, and limited awareness of strategies. Findings regarding knowledge: Most participants defined body image as objective attractiveness rather than subjective self-assessment (53%) and focused on negative body image. Beliefs: Although 97% of participants believed weight and shape impact children's self-esteem, 63% believed preschoolers too young to have a body image. Strategies: Most participants (53%) said family was a primary influence on body image, but identified few effective strategies and 63% said they did not do anything to influence children's body image. Findings suggested family body image socialization in preschoolers is occurring outside the awareness of parents and the concept of positive body image is underdeveloped.

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Introduction

Families provide the primary context for self-concept formation among young children, which includes how children perceive their bodies and those of their peers (Hart, Damiano, Chittleborough, Paxton, & Jorm, 2014). We know aspects of body-related self-concept such as sexuality (Martin & Torres, 2014) and early signs of body size preference (Ruffman, O'Brien, Taumoepeau, Latner, & Hunter, 2016) are influenced by family socialization processes beginning as early as preschool. Also, family communication patterns such as body teasing and weight commentary are associated with negative body image during adolescence (Keery, Boutelle, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2005; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Less is known, however, about how family processes affect the formation of body image in early childhood.

Body image has been described as “the psychological experience of embodiment” (Cash & Smolak, 2011, p. xiii) and is a broad construct with cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. For

example, body image can encompass global satisfaction with one's body, body awareness, physical competence, appearance evaluation, body surveillance, and perceptual accuracy of one's body size (Menzel, Krawczyk, & Thompson, 2011; Smolak, 2004). Increasingly, researchers have aimed to characterize and measure positive body image (Halliwell, 2015; Smolak & Cash, 2011; Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015), a distinct construct and not simply the absence of negative body image (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). An important aspect of positive body image is attention to physical capability and appreciation of body functionality over appearance alone (Abbott & Barber, 2010; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Webb et al., 2015). Body self-assessment that is based more on physical capability and less on external appearance has been linked with better psychosocial outcomes among youth (Armitage, 2012), yet little is known about this phenomenon among young children, or how parents might deliberately or inadvertently nurture one type of body self-concept over another.

Studies indicate that young children are aware of body image (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Smolak, 2011; Tremblay, Lovsin, Zecevic, & Lariviere, 2011). For example, 3- and 4-year-olds display bias against overweight children (Margulies, Floyd, & Hojniski,

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2008; Rich et al., 2008), assign them negative attributes (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Miller, Goldstein, & Edwards-Leeper, 2004), and view body size as within a child's control (Rees, Oliver, Woodman, & Thomas, 2011). Body dissatisfaction has been found in children ages 5–11 (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001) and among girls as young as 3 years old (Tremblay et al., 2011). One study found a broad preference for thin over larger body sizes among preschool girls ages 3–5 ($n = 40$) who were shown the same Barbie doll in three different body sizes (thin, average, large; Worobey & Worobey, 2014). The girls more frequently paired positive adjectives with thinner dolls and negative adjectives with larger bodied dolls; and 70% of girls preferred to play with the thin doll over the average (20%) or larger bodied doll (10%; Worobey & Worobey, 2014).

A systematic review of parenting interventions found that parents can play an active role in preventing body dissatisfaction among school-aged children and adolescents (Hart, Cornelli, Damiano, & Paxton, 2015). Another study – based on a Delphi method to identify parenting strategies to prevent or reduce body dissatisfaction among preschool aged children (Hart et al., 2014) – suggested that experts in the fields of body image and eating disorders view parents as a primary influence on child body satisfaction. However, body image and family processes related to its socialization in children under eight remain understudied.

Family Influences on Body Image

To date, most investigations of maternal influences on body image formation have been among adolescent and college aged students. Such investigations have found a number of familial risk and protective factors associated with body image in adolescents. Risk factors include: criticism of a child's weight or shape (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000; Taylor et al., 2006), negative comments about weight (Fulkerson, Strauss, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Boutelle, 2007), maternal behavioral modeling (Smolak, 2009), and body teasing (Eisenberg, Berge, Fulkerson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). In addition, researchers have found that family members may unwittingly transmit society's bias against individuals with obesity (Rosen, Orosan-Weine, & Tang, 1997; Ruffman et al., 2016) and doing so can be harmful to a child's self-concept and body image (Puhl & Latner, 2007). One longitudinal study found that adolescent girls ($n = 219$) who reported few family social supports and who were exposed to fashion magazines exhibited heightened vulnerability to body dissatisfaction, dieting, and bulimic symptoms (Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001).

Familial factors that may buffer the development of poor body image and weight concerns include positive family relationships and regular family mealtimes (Burgess-Champoux, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Story, 2009; Fulkerson et al., 2007). Littleton and Ollendick (2003) proposed several ways in which families can help guard against poor body image in their children: (a) provide family support that buffers stress and enhances coping, (b) cultivate family interactions that improve emotion regulation, and (c) promote positive parenting that facilitates the development of a complex self-concept and identity, thereby lessening the power of society's emphasis on appearance. Though not developed specifically with families in mind, Piran's Developmental Theory of Embodiment (Piran, 2015) provides a sophisticated account of both putative and observed protective factors, and may help chart further exploration of the family's role in promoting positive embodiment in children across developmental stages. Building capacity among families to foster positive body image among young children remains an underutilized strategy in prevention of a range of weight-related health problems. Although family influences on body image during adolescence have been widely studied, little is known about early precursors to body image development or about

parents' perceptions of how families influence young children's body image development.

A child's early experiences of embodiment occur in the context of the family. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1999) posits that social learning occurs within families through direct reinforcement, indirect observation, and modeling (Bandura, 1986). For example, certain types of foods may be used to reward "good" behavior or to unwittingly reinforce "bad" behavior, such as candy to quell a tantrum in a store. Parents select toys, activities, playmates, and social settings that reflect their values and family norms, and these choices are relevant to the formation of body image. For example, exposure to Barbie dolls was found to increase body dissatisfaction in girls ages 5–8 (Dittmar et al., 2006). Children observe how people of various weight statuses are treated and discussed by their family (Ruffman et al., 2016), and they are exposed to family discussions about current events such as the obesity epidemic. Thus, children have on-going exposure to the meanings and values families assign to differences in weight status and body shape, but little is known about how family environments contribute to body image formation in very young children, or parents' understanding of how families may contribute to body image formation in their child.

Family socialization and body image development are distinct but interrelated processes. Schema theory is relevant to both processes and helps explain how family processes shape self-image (Markus, Hamill, & Sentis, 1987; Pace, 1988; Van den Berg & Thompson, 2007). Central to the theory is the concept of self-schema: coherent cognitive structures used to organize, attend to, and interpret information in the environment that guide generalizations about the self over time (Markus et al., 1987; Pace, 1988; Van den Berg & Thompson, 2007). Schema theory would suggest that the gradual accumulation of body-related experiences are interpreted and reinterpreted in interpersonal contexts until they coalesce into a set of relatively stable beliefs about oneself (Markus et al., 1987; Smolak, 2004; Van den Berg & Thompson, 2007). Although puberty heralds a period of heightened body awareness and concerns over appearance, body image does not suddenly appear in adolescence. Instead, schema theory suggests that heightened body image awareness during adolescence stems from an accumulation of a child's life experiences and appraisals of those experiences up to that point. Schema theory suggests that these early experiences shape the development of body image schemas, which may become activated during adolescence and influence self-perception (body image) and behaviors (eating, dieting) related to self-care (Markus et al., 1987; Smolak, 2004).

Purpose of Study

This exploratory qualitative study sought to understand family influences on body image formation in early childhood. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions among a sample of primary caregivers made up of predominately mothers: (a) What perceptions, attitudes and knowledge do parents of preschoolers hold about the concept and definition of body image? (b) What beliefs do parents have about family and other influences on body image formation in young children? (c) What strategies, if any, do parents employ to cultivate positive body image formation in young children?

Method

Participants

We conducted semi-structured interviews with primary caregivers of preschoolers as part of the Family Health Awareness (FHA)

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