

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Children's Preferences and Self-Perceptions of Weight in a Rural Hispanic Community

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Although studies have documented parents' misperceptions regarding their children's weight, studies examining preadolescent children's self-perceptions of weight—in particular, Hispanic children's self-perceptions of weight—are limited.

Method: A convenience sample of 424 children from a rural community, aged 8 to 11 years and in grades 3 through 5,

participated in this cross-sectional, descriptive, nonexperimental study. Using the Children's Body Image Scale, the children were asked to select a figure representing their actual body perception and a figure representing their ideal body perception. The children were weighed and measured, body mass index (BMI) was calculated, and each child was assigned to one of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention weight categories: underweight, normal or healthy weight, overweight, or obese.

Results: Only BMI category was found to be significantly associated with accurate perception, $\chi^2(3) = 201.4$, $p < .001$, with only 9% of overweight or obese children selecting figures representing their actual BMI category. Actual BMI category, $\chi^2(3) = 8.8$, $p = .032$, and grade level, $\chi^2(2) = 6.7$, $p = .036$, had a significant association with selection of an underweight ideal. Overall, 32% of children selected an underweight figure as ideal.

Discussion: Prepubertal children who are either overweight or obese do not accurately perceive their weight status. Rather than focusing solely on weight reduction programs, emphasis should be placed on promoting healthy lifestyles and choices. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2016) ■, ■-■.

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KEY WORDS

Child, self-concept, rural health, obesity, overweight, Hispanic Americans

Although the latest prevalence data on obesity trends among children and adolescents in the United States indicate that obesity rates may have reached a plateau, childhood obesity remains a significant problem, with a prevalence rate of 17% (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014; Skinner & Skelton, 2014). Hispanic children are disproportionately affected, with a prevalence rate of 22% (Ogden et al., 2014). Several studies also indicate that children living in rural areas are at greater risk for

obesity than are their nonrural counterparts (Conway, Haller, & Lutfiyya, 2012; Davis, Bennett, Befort, & Nollen, 2011; Joens-Matre et al., 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Liu, Bennett, Harun, & Probst, 2008; Wickrama, Elder, & Abraham, 2007). Although several studies have documented Hispanic parents' misperceptions regarding their children's weight status (Bayles, 2010; Crawford et al., 2004; De La et al., 2009; Duncan, Hanse, Wang, Yan, & Zhang, 2015; Figueroa, Ip, Gesell, & Barkin, 2008; Glassman, Figueroa, & Irigoyen, 2011; Killion, Hughes, Wendt, Pease, & Nicklas, 2006; Reifsnider et al., 2006; Ward, 2008), studies examining preadolescent Hispanic children's self-perception of weight are limited.

Figueroa and colleagues (2008) used a figural scale to assess body image perception in Hispanic children between the ages of 8 and 11 years (123 parent/child dyads) and found that the children did not accurately identify their own body size. Fisher, Lange, Young-Cureton, and Canham (2005) used Collins' (1991) pictorial instrument scale to examine the relationship between perceived and actual body size and body mass index (BMI) in 43 Hispanic third graders. The authors found a positive correlation between the children's perceived and actual self-image and their BMI. Although 30% of the children in this study were classified as overweight, the majority (75%) perceived themselves as having a healthy body weight.

Snethen and Broome (2007) and Snethen, Hewitt, and Petering (2007) used a phenomenological approach and focus groups, respectively, to identify themes among children regarding their weight perceptions. Although both studies were small ($N = 17$ and $N = 12$, respectively), they did include Hispanic children. The children included in the phenomenological study all had a BMI $\geq 95\%$ (parent-reported heights and weights), yet 30% identified themselves as being of normal weight, and 12% identified themselves as being underweight (Snethen & Broome, 2007). Children who participated in the focus group study were not targeted based on their weight status, and heights and weights were not obtained (Snethen et al., 2007). These children perceived overweight children as not being active.

Taken together, the literature in this review was mixed in both its results and its ability to advance understanding of children's self-perception. Figueroa and colleagues (2008) found that children did not accurately identify their own body size, whereas the results obtained by Fisher and colleagues (2005) indicated that the majority of children perceived themselves as having a healthy body weight. The studies by Snethen and Broome (2007) and Snethen and colleagues (2007) provided limited insight into children's perceptions regarding weight. Accurate weight perception by children should be considered an essential part of developing prevention and intervention strategies for

overweight and obese children. Given that Hispanic children have a greater prevalence of obesity (Ogden et al., 2014), it is particularly important to understand their perceptions related to weight. However, it is difficult to make recommendations related to weight perception, particularly in Hispanic children, given the paucity of studies and the fact that existing studies of school-age Hispanic children had small sample sizes. This study was designed to describe school-aged children's self-perceptions regarding weight in a predominantly Hispanic, rural community. The specific aims were to determine whether there are differences in the accuracy of children's selection of BMI category versus their actual BMI and their perceptions of ideal BMI category, based on age, gender, grade, actual BMI category, and ethnicity.

METHODS

Sample

This cross-sectional, descriptive, nonexperimental study was approved by the appropriate institutional review board. It was conducted in a nonmetropolitan rural community in central New Mexico. New Mexico has a population of about 2 million people, with 46% identifying themselves as Hispanic and 40% identifying themselves as non-Hispanic White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The majority of the population in the county where the study was conducted identified themselves as Hispanic (58%). A convenience sample of children between the ages of 8 and 11 years from seven elementary schools were included in the study. In this district, 75% of students aged 8 to 11 years are Hispanic.

The children needed to be able to speak, read, and understand English (self-identified), and parents had to be able to read and understand either English or Spanish. Children with the following conditions or treatments were excluded from the study: a medical condition affecting weight or the ability to eat independently; treatment with long-term steroids, chemotherapy, or immune suppressants; and treatment for obesity. At the time of this study, 1,014 children were enrolled in grades 3 through 5 in this district. A total of 436 children participated in the study; however, 5 participants were eliminated because they did not meet the age criteria, and 7 were noted to have missing data and were therefore eliminated, resulting in a final sample of 424. The response rate from the available population was 42%. All participants received a \$10 gift card to a national retail chain located in the community. Parents received a results letter containing an explanation of their child's measurements and the primary investigator's contact information in case they had any questions.

Measures

A study packet was distributed in each of the appropriate grade levels in the seven schools, with

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