

# In it together: Mother talk of weight concerns moderates negative outcomes of encouragement to lose weight on daughter body dissatisfaction and disordered eating



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## ABSTRACT

Mothers' influence on their daughters is important for understanding girls' disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. Direct maternal encouragement of daughters to lose weight is linked to daughters' development of bulimic symptoms, and additional findings indicate that daughters whose mothers merely talk about dieting and body dissatisfaction are more likely to be diagnosed with an eating disorder. The current study extends such research by examining the interactive contributions of maternal encouragement to lose weight and maternal dieting discussions to the prediction of early adolescent daughters' body dissatisfaction and disordered eating over the middle school period. Participants were 89 adolescent girls who were in the 6th grade at Time 1. Regression analyses were conducted to examine interactive effects of mother encouragement to diet and talk of weight concerns on daughter body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and dieting behavior. Results suggest an interactive effect in which mothers' dieting talk may act as a buffer against the negative effects of direct encouragement to lose weight.

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## Introduction

Of particular interest in the area of parent influence on body image are relations between mother–daughter weight-related interactions and daughters' unhealthy body image behaviors. Associations between mother and daughter body-related variables suggest that mothers may serve as primary models of body regard and eating practices for their daughters (Cooley, Toray, Wange, & Valdez, 2008; Snoek, van Strien, Janssens, & Engels, 2009; Wertheim, Mee, & Paxton, 1999). More specifically, two mechanisms linking maternal behavior to daughter outcomes have been examined: mother direct encouragement of daughter to change weight or shape, and mother indirect encouragement of daughter weight loss through discussion of maternal weight concerns and maternal dieting behavior.

A number of studies have found support for both mechanisms of maternal influence. First, mother encouragement to lose weight has been linked in cross-sectional studies to eating-related problems among adolescent girls, including unhealthy restriction (e.g., Armstrong & Janicke, 2012) and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Francis

& Birch, 2005). Maternal influence in this regard appears quite powerful; even subtle maternal encouragement, via mere mention of daughter weight, predicts young adolescent girls' greater dieting and lower body esteem (Smolak, Levine, & Schermer, 1999). Although longitudinal studies of maternal encouragement are rare, one effort revealed that a composite of mother and father encouragement to lose weight predicted increased body dissatisfaction among adolescent daughters one year later (Helfert & Warschburger, 2011). These particular longitudinal findings are important because they suggest effects of direct encouragement are lasting. However, they should be replicated with separate measures of mother and father encouragement and with expanded assessment of daughter body-related outcomes.

Mother indirect encouragement, via talk of personal weight concerns and overt dieting behavior, also has been linked to daughters' body concerns and restrictive eating (Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998; Levine, Smolak, Moodey, Shuman, & Hessen, 1994; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010; Wertheim et al., 1999). By sharing weight concerns and openly dieting, mothers may be teaching daughters how women should feel about their bodies and how to implement restrictive weight management. For example, Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues (2010) studied the effects of mother dieting-related behaviors on daughter restrictive eating in a cross-sectional study of overweight adolescent girls. Results of their analyses showed that maternal talk of weight concerns and dieting, as well as

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engagement in dieting behavior, predicted extreme weight control measures and binge eating among daughters, even after controlling for daughter BMI. Although such findings are compelling, it is important to note that studies indicating significant relations between indirect sources of encouragement and daughter outcomes have been cross-sectional (e.g., Benedikt et al., 1998; Levine et al., 1994; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010; Wertheim et al., 1999); longitudinal evidence for such associations is mixed, with some studies finding null associations over time (e.g., Snoek et al., 2009) and others finding at least some support (Linville, Stice, Gau, & O'Neil, 2011). Given the inconsistencies in the literature, additional study of longitudinal associations between mothers' own weight- and body concerns and daughter outcomes is warranted.

Furthermore, potential interactions between maternal direct and indirect forms of encouragement have been largely neglected in previous analyses. In one exception, Cooley and colleagues (2008) examined associations between both forms of mother encouragement and body dissatisfaction and eating behaviors among college-age daughters. Analyses revealed an interaction between maternal criticism of daughter weight and expression of mothers' own weight concerns, such that maternal weight concerns were more strongly related to daughter body dissatisfaction when mothers simultaneously made negative comments about daughters' weight. The findings suggest that a mother's own concerns may become more powerful influences when paired with concern about a daughter's weight. In addition, such results raise the possibility that the combination of mother direct and indirect encouragement may foster greater body concern and unhealthy restriction among daughters than would either factor alone. However, findings concerning interaction between sources of influence are preliminary at this point and require replication. Furthermore, given the importance of adolescence for the development of body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight management (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006; Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013), such patterns should be explored in younger samples.

Moreover, although unfavorable multiplicative effects of direct and indirect sources of influence are sensible, it is also possible that mothers discussing their own dieting and body concerns may lessen the impact of directly encouraging daughters to lose weight. That is, when a mother encourages her daughter to become slimmer but does not talk about her own dieting, the daughter may perceive encouragement alone as criticism, and may therefore develop greater body dissatisfaction. However, if a mother is also sharing her own weight concerns and struggles, the daughter may view maternal encouragement to lose weight as less personal, and may therefore be somewhat buffered from loss of body esteem. Mother dieting talk may serve as a form of social support when the daughter is being encouraged to lose weight (Stanton, Green, & Fries, 2007). Mother dieting talk may also occur in an environment in which mother and daughter are openly communicating and sharing vulnerabilities, and thus may lessen a daughter's negative feelings about her body specifically, especially if a mother is not projecting her feelings about her body onto her daughter (Ogden & Steward, 2000; Ogle & Damhorst, 2003).

In sum, although there is consistent evidence that direct maternal encouragement to lose weight is associated with daughters' body concern and unhealthy restriction, more study is needed on the potential impact of relatively indirect forms of maternal encouragement. Furthermore, few analyses of potential interactions between direct and indirect sources of maternal encouragement exist. In addition, most research in this area is cross-sectional, and longitudinal replication of findings is necessary.

In the present research, we examined the individual and combined effects of maternal encouragement to lose weight and communication of own weight concerns on young adolescent

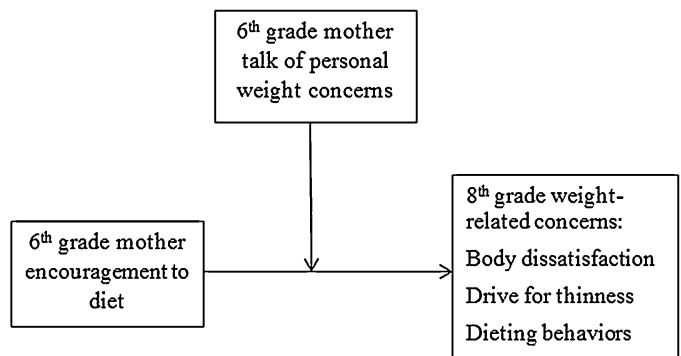


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework for the current analyses.

daughters' body- and eating-related outcomes. We hypothesized that mothers' direct encouragement to lose weight and communication of own weight concerns would predict daughters' greater body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and dieting over time. Furthermore, we examined whether mother encouragement of daughter weight loss, when combined with mother communication of own weight concerns (including unhappiness with current weight and dieting), was associated with daughter body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and dieting above and beyond the main effects of each predictor. A possibility is that the two sources of maternal influence combined result in greater body concern for daughters (Cooley et al., 2008). Alternatively, maternal discussion of own body concerns might buffer daughters from the negative effects of direct maternal encouragement to lose weight. The conceptual model for testing such interactions is illustrated in Fig. 1.

## Method

### Participants

Data from adolescent girls were collected as part of a longitudinal study focused on parenting and child adjustment during the transition to adolescence. Approximately 2500 initial contact letters briefly describing the study were mailed to the parents of girls and boys enrolled in 4th grade in schools in a medium-sized, Midwestern city and surrounding suburban and rural communities. Parents were informed that the purpose of the study was to better understand adjustment during the transition to adolescence; body image and eating issues were not mentioned as foci of the study. Parents were instructed to call the research office if interested. To control for prior parenting experience within families, children were eligible if they were the oldest child in the family. In addition, children from remarried families were not enrolled because of the added complexity of step-family structures.

The present analyses focused on the perceptions of 89 adolescent girls as they completed 6th and 8th grade. Although boys participated in the larger project, we did not include them in the present analyses because the measures of body dissatisfaction and dieting behaviors used in this study are not appropriate for boys (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). In the first year of the study, 102 girls participated. However, due to attrition over the course of the study (e.g., relocation and refusal to continue participation), 89 girls' data were available for the present analyses. According to analysis of variance and chi-square procedures, the 89 participating girls did not differ significantly on any demographic variables during the first year of the study (e.g., ethnicity, race, family income) from the 13 girls who discontinued participation (all  $ps \geq .05$ ). However, due to limited sample sizes, the lack of significant differences between those continuing versus discontinuing should be interpreted with caution.

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