



Mothers' and daughters' beliefs about factors affecting preadolescent girls' body satisfaction



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 March 2014
Received in revised form
20 November 2014
Accepted 24 November 2014

Keywords:

Body image
Body dissatisfaction
Preadolescence
Mother
Qualitative

ABSTRACT

Body dissatisfaction is common in preadolescent girls. In this qualitative study, preadolescent girls ($N = 145$) wrote descriptions of factors that made them feel good and bad about their bodies. Their mothers ($N = 145$) also wrote about factors they believed made their daughters feel good and bad about their bodies. Statements were coded using thematic analysis. Chi-square analyses examined mother–daughter dyad agreement, and differences in influential factors based on ethnic identity. Despite general agreement in overall themes, results indicated limited agreement *within* mother–daughter dyads. Specifically, one significant result was detected: mothers and their daughters agreed on the importance of teasing as a negative influence on body satisfaction. There was one significant difference based on ethnic identity, with Hispanic girls mentioning more frequently than White girls that physical activity/exercise helped them feel good about their bodies. Recommendations are made for family-based interventions to support the body image of preadolescent girls.

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Introduction

Though adolescence is often thought of as the time when body image problems arise, research suggests that these types of concerns actually start in childhood. Evidence shows that 28–55% of girls ages 6 to 11 desire a thinner body size (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001), and 40% of girls in the 4th and 5th grade report body dissatisfaction (Smolak, 2004). Paralleling a relationship seen in adults, body dissatisfaction and overvaluation of shape and weight predict restrained eating in preadolescent girls (Allen, Byrne, McLean, & Davis, 2008; Evans, Tovée, Boothroyd, & Drewett, 2013). Importantly, evidence shows that the relationship between body dissatisfaction and restrained eating is weaker in children than in adults (Smolak & Levine, 2001), suggesting that preadolescence could be an ideal period for intervention and prevention.

Several known factors impact the development of body image problems in children. For example, appearance-related teasing by peers is associated with increased body dissatisfaction, bulimic symptomatology, drive for thinness, and decreased body esteem in preadolescent girls (Lunde, Frisén, & Hwang, 2006; Steinberg, Phares, & Thompson, 2004). The findings are less consistent among girls whose peers are simply *concerned* with eating and appearance

themselves. Some studies detected a positive association between having eating-concerned peers and body dissatisfaction in preadolescent girls (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007; Steinberg et al., 2004), yet other research showed no correlation between having eating-concerned peers and children's development of weight concerns (Field et al., 2001). Research also links media exposure to girls' concerns about their bodies. Children who endorsed making a significant effort to look like same-sex figures in television, movies, and magazines reported increased weight and/or body concern, and knew more about dieting than their peers (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Field et al., 2001). Body mass index (BMI; weight in kg/height in m^2), participation in esthetic sports (dance and gymnastics), and sexual harassment were each positively related to children's body dissatisfaction as well (Smolak, 2004).

In terms of factors that help preadolescent girls feel good about their bodies, research points to several prominent influences. Children who worried less about what their peers thought of them reported more positive body esteem (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007). Placing less importance on physical appearance may also protect girls against body dissatisfaction. Specifically, preadolescent girls who rated themselves as unattractive reported more disordered eating, and yet those girls who *also* said they placed less importance on physical appearance reported lower levels of disordered eating behaviors (McVey, Pepler, Davis, Flett, & Abdoellil, 2002). Finally, girls who reacted to media images of women in provocative clothing with consistent rejection responses, such as saying that

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they disliked the images, endorsed higher body esteem (Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003). Taken together, these results suggest that preadolescent girls who reject societal or peer-group standards of the importance of physical appearance tend to feel better about their bodies.

Certain family dynamics may also protect girls against body dissatisfaction. For instance, higher identification with mothers was associated with lower body dissatisfaction in preadolescent girls (Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2001). Familism, a “family comes first” commitment, was negatively associated with internalization of harmful thin ideals in overweight preadolescent Mexican girls (Austin & Smith, 2008). Studies of *adolescents* suggest a protective influence of family support (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003), such as a sense of acceptance from mothers (Barker & Galambos, 2003). Although researchers have identified several factors influencing preadolescents’ body image, research has not asked *children* to describe factors that affect their body satisfaction.

Mothers’ Influence and Perceptions

Mothers can be influential in their daughters’ body image development. Among adolescent and preadolescent girls, perceived good relationships with mothers are associated with body satisfaction (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2001; Littleton & Ollendick, 2003). In terms of negative influences, modeling of weight concerns and comments to children about their weight are related to elevated body image concerns in children (Anschutz, Kanters, Van Strien, Vermulst, & Engels, 2009; Smolak, Levine, & Schermer, 1999; Striegel-Moore & Kearney-Cooke, 1994; Vander Wal & Thelen, 2000). Though both mothers and fathers report that their children’s appearance is of moderate importance, mothers are significantly more likely to try to influence their children’s appearance by, for example, providing acne or orthodontic treatment (Striegel-Moore & Kearney-Cooke, 1994). In sum, since mothers’ behaviors have the potential to impact daughters’ body image, it may be useful to know precisely which factors mothers believe influence their daughters’ body satisfaction.

Studies of adolescents indicate that mothers’ perceptions of their daughters’ body esteem may not correspond with their daughters’ reports. One study found that the parents of daughters with the lowest body esteem were more likely to overestimate their daughters’ body esteem than the parents of daughters with higher body esteem (Geller, Srikaneswaran, Zaitsoff, Cockell, & Poole, 2003). Two studies determined that parents rated their adolescent children as more attractive than the adolescents rated themselves (Bledsoe & Wiggins, 1973; Offer, Ostrov, & Howard, 1982). Parents of adolescents seem to have a variety of inaccurate perceptions regarding how their adolescents experience their bodies. Interestingly, mothers with lower levels of knowledge about their daughters’ daily lives were more likely to have adolescent girls with weight concerns (May, Kim, McHale, & Crouter, 2006). Furthermore, mothers tend to hold inaccurate beliefs about their children’s weights, with mothers of both under- and overweight children often believing their children’s weights are normal (Doolen, Alpert, & Miller, 2009; Eckstein et al., 2006; Huang et al., 2007; Maynard, Galuska, Blanck, & Serdula, 2003).

Interestingly, many mothers hold inaccurate beliefs regarding their children’s emotional experiences more generally. Mothers of children with asthma were unaware of their children’s self-reported health-related quality of life, though they knew their children’s symptoms (Guyatt, Juniper, Griffith, Feeny, & Ferrie, 1997). In a study of childhood depression, parents (primarily mothers) were highly inaccurate regarding their children’s self-reported levels of depression, especially their daughters’ (Angold et al., 1987). However, other research indicated that parents’ awareness of children’s overall daily activities and preferences increases

during middle childhood, defined as ages 5–12 (Collins, Madsen, & Susman-Stillman, 2002). Given that mothers generally have limited awareness of their children’s feelings, and parents of adolescents have inaccurate pictures of how their children experience their bodies, the current study aimed to provide more information on mothers’ knowledge of how preadolescent children experience their bodies.

The Present Study

This study used qualitative and quantitative methods to examine preadolescent girls’ and their mothers’ perceptions of factors influencing how the daughters feel about their bodies. No standardized measure was available for examining the range of factors that could influence body image in preadolescents (and mothers’ perceptions of these), and thus an exploratory framework utilizing qualitative methods was chosen. Only preadolescent girls were included, as girls experience more concerns about their weight than boys, and boys’ concerns are often of a different nature (i.e., boys wish to gain while girls wish to lose weight; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Steinberg et al., 2004). The study included mothers only, as mothers appear to have more influence on their children’s body image than fathers (Kluck, 2010; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Because of this influence, and because more maternal knowledge about daughters’ daily experiences is linked with lower body dissatisfaction (but paternal knowledge is not; May et al., 2006), it was of interest to learn what mothers knew about the body image experiences of their daughters.

The objectives of the study were to: (a) examine the factors that preadolescent girls (ages 8–12) identify as affecting how they feel (both positively and negatively) about their bodies; (b) examine the factors these preadolescent girls’ mothers believe affect their daughters’ body satisfaction (both positively and negatively); (c) investigate broad agreement between the group of mothers and group of daughters regarding factors which influence daughters; and (d) statistically test dyadic levels of agreement between daughters and their own mothers regarding factors which influence daughters. Exploratory analyses tested differences in rates of mentioning specific factors based on ethnic identity.

Method

Participants

The teachers of grades three through six at 14 rural and urban public schools in the southwest were invited to distribute notices about the study to the girls in their classes. The girls were asked to give the notices to their guardians, who could then indicate their interest in participating by returning a signed form with their telephone number on it. No guardians other than mothers indicated interest. Though it was not possible to know how many daughters actually brought the notices home to their guardians, of the mother–daughter pairs who expressed interest, 83% completed the study. The sample initially consisted of 163 girls (ages 8–12) and 153 mothers. Families with daughters with learning or developmental disabilities which prevented them from completing the study questionnaires were not included ($n = 1$). Furthermore, if mothers or daughters provided no responses on the qualitative questionnaire to the two body image questions, both the mother and daughter were removed from this study. This occurred for seven mother–daughter dyads, with two mothers and five daughters providing no responses. In any family with more than one daughter participating, the responses of one randomly chosen daughter were used ($n = 10$). Therefore, the final sample consisted of 145 mothers and 145 daughters.

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