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Familial influences on Mexican American and Euro-American preadolescent boys' and girls' body dissatisfaction

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Abstract

This study examines multiple influences on preadolescent boys' and girls' body dissatisfaction over time. Mexican American and Euro-American preadolescents ($n = 105$) completed measures addressing their body dissatisfaction. In addition, preadolescents' parents completed a measure assessing their own body dissatisfaction. Results indicate that boys' body dissatisfaction was related to their body size (body mass index, BMI) and their fathers' own body dissatisfaction; girls' body dissatisfaction was related primarily to their own body size. Findings are discussed in terms of the importance of understanding boys' increasing susceptibility to body dissatisfaction and the role fathers play in shaping boys' feelings about their bodies as they approach adolescence.

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1. Introduction

Body image disturbances have become increasingly common among children in recent decades and are frequently conceptualized as normative among preadolescent and adolescent girls (Koff & Rierdan, 1991; Thompson, Corwin, & Sargent, 1997). Even young girls (as young as 5 years of age) express body image and weight concerns (Davison, Markey, &

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Birch, 2000). Although previous research indicates that girls are more likely than boys to report body dissatisfaction and weight concerns, recent reports suggest that these concerns are also prevalent among males (Braun, Sunday, Huang, & Halmi, 1999; Cohane & Pope, 2001; Field et al., 2001).

Approximately 30–40% of preadolescent boys express body dissatisfaction with a desire to be thinner (Collins, 1991; Gustafson-Larson & Terry, 1992) compared with about 50% of their female counterparts who demonstrate similar concerns (Ericksen, Tinsley, & Markey, 2002; Schur, Sanders, & Steiner, 2000; Thompson et al., 1997). Recent reports further suggest that among adolescent boys, body image concerns are influenced by both intrapersonal and sociocultural factors, including their body mass index (BMI) and parental influences (Field et al., 2001). Specifically, researchers have highlighted fathers' beliefs about the importance of thinness and dieting as a factor affecting adolescent boys' body image concerns (Field et al., 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). For example, studies indicate that fathers influence their sons' body dissatisfaction and dieting strategies through comments about their bodies, encouragement to lose weight, discussions about dieting, and modeling paternal dieting strategies (Schur et al., 2000; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). However, these studies examined youths' perceptions of their fathers' body image concerns and did not examine the relation between fathers' own body dissatisfaction and the development of their sons' body image concerns.

While most research suggests that girls' body dissatisfaction continues to increase with age, the developmental patterns of boys' body dissatisfaction are not as clear (Smolak & Levine, 2001). Studies with preadolescent youth have been inconsistent, with some studies suggesting that many young boys prefer body ideals that are thinner than their own (Collins, 1991). Other studies, however, suggest that many young boys are satisfied with their bodies (Gardner, Friedman, & Jackson, 1999; Wood, Becker, & Thompson, 1996). Research examining older adolescent boys' body dissatisfaction suggests that boys are either satisfied with their bodies or desire to be heavier, preferring ideal figures that are bigger than their current bodies (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Because findings from these studies regarding the prevalence and direction of boys' body dissatisfaction have been conflicting, a developmental approach examining the prevalence and early patterns of body image concerns among young boys is critical for understanding and preventing the negative developmental consequences associated with body dissatisfaction.

One of the primary consequences of negative body image among youth is disordered eating, which is increasingly problematic among U.S. girls of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Crago, Shisslak, & Estes, 1996; Markey, 2003; Pike & Walsh, 1996; Schur et al., 2000). Additionally, body dissatisfaction has been associated with unhealthy dieting strategies (French, Perry, Leon, & Fulkerson, 1995) and males' use of physically damaging drugs such as anabolic steroids (Epperley, 1993), which render youth at risk for various growth disturbances (National Institute of Health, 1992). Due to these documented negative implications of body image concerns on girls' health and the increasing acknowledgement of the prevalence of boys' body image concerns, it is important to explore the differential and unique influences involved in the etiology of body dissatisfaction among preadolescent boys and girls.

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