



Social comparisons and negative affect as indicators of problem eating and muscle preoccupation among children

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Abstract

The present study examined the utilization of social comparison practices and the role of negative affect in predicting body dissatisfaction, problem eating, and muscle preoccupation among young children. Participants were 236 children aged between 8 and 10 years. Children's eating, exercising, and muscle concerns were examined using a modified version of the Children's Eating Attitudes Test (ChEAT), which included additional items pertaining to muscle bulk and exercising. Consistent with past findings, body mass index (BMI) was found to be the sole unique indicator of body dissatisfaction for both boys and girls. Utilization of social comparison practices with adults was the main unique indicator of the modified ChEAT factors for boys, while BMI was the main unique indicator of the modified ChEAT factors for girls. In addition, negative affect was associated with bingeing, food preoccupation, and social pressure to eat for boys and dieting and muscle preoccupation for girls. Findings are discussed in relation to previous studies with adolescents and adults. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Problem eating; Muscle preoccupation; Body dissatisfaction; Negative affect; Social comparisons; Children

1. Introduction

An increasing number of studies have shown that children as young as 7 and 8 years of age are engaging in problem eating attitudes and behaviors (Collins, 1991; Edlund, Halvarsson, & Sjoden, 1996; Kelly, Ricciardelli, & Clarke, 1999; Rolland, Farnill, & Griffiths, 1997;

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Thelen, Powell, Lawrence, & Kuhnert, 1992). Problem eating attitudes and behaviors include body dissatisfaction, concerns and behaviors pertaining to dieting, exercising to lose weight, binge eating, preoccupation with food, and purging (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). In recent years, it has been suggested that a growing number of children are engaging in these problem eating attitudes and behaviors that may lead to the development of more serious eating disorders in adolescence (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Shisslak et al., 1998). In a study on body dissatisfaction and dieting practices in young children, Schur, Sanders, and Steiner (2000) reported that 48.3% of boys and 51.7% of girls wanted to weigh less and 41.9% and 12.9%, respectively, had engaged in some form of activity, in the past, in an attempt to alter their weight.

The early detection of body dissatisfaction and problem eating attitudes and behaviors is of great importance as children who engage in these practices may later develop more serious disorders, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, and may, consequently, develop unhealthy eating practices that threaten their physical and mental well-being (Shisslak et al., 1998). Therefore, it is important to investigate the development and prevalence of body dissatisfaction and problem eating attitudes and behaviors among children and the factors that promote these practices so that appropriate educational programs addressing the issues of body dissatisfaction and problem eating attitudes and behaviors in young children can be developed and implemented. The variables studied in preadolescent populations in relation to body dissatisfaction and engaging in problem eating attitudes and behaviors parallel those studied in adolescent and adult populations. The variables studied to date include: gender, age, body mass index (BMI), race, sociocultural pressures, self-concept, and gender traits (Cusumano & Thompson, 2001; Kelly et al., 1999; Lawrence & Thelen, 1995; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Rolland et al., 1997; Smolak, Levine, & Thompson, 2001; Thelen et al., 1992; Thomas, Ricciardelli, & Williams, 2000).

Two other factors found to be related to problem eating attitudes and behaviors in adolescent and adult populations, but which have yet to be examined in young children, are social comparisons and negative affect (Leon, Fulkerson, Perry, & Early-Zald, 1995; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999; Schutz, Paxton, & Wertheim, 1999; Stormer & Thompson, 1996). Social comparisons refer to the process whereby individuals compare their own attributes, behavior, achievements, and understanding with those of other individuals (Durkin, 1995). Negative affect, comprising both depression and anxiety, is viewed as a general factor of emotional distress encompassing moods such as, sadness, anger, fear, and guilt (Joiner, Catanzaro, & Laurent, 1996; Watson & Clark, 1984; Watson & Tellegen, 1985).

In recent years, the importance of social comparisons has received increasing attention with the finding that social comparisons are related to body dissatisfaction and dieting practices in adolescent and adult populations (Paxton et al., 1999; Schutz et al., 1999; Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Thompson & Heinberg, 1993). The findings from a study by Stormer and Thompson (1996) with a group of female college students indicated that engaging in social comparison practices and awareness of societal factors regarding thinness and the internalization of these beliefs were significant indicators of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. In another study, Schutz et al. (1999) investigated

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