Parental Relationship Quality as a Predictor of Adolescent Girls’ and Boys’ Bulimic Symptoms

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Abstract
Both parental eating-related behaviors and parent-adolescent relationship quality is important in the development of adolescents’ bulimic symptoms. Our study used adolescents’ self-reports to examine the impacts of maternal and paternal eating-related behaviors and relationship quality on the bulimic symptoms of 90 boys and 134 girls in middle school and high school. We conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses and found that both maternal and paternal relationship quality was significant as a predictor of bulimic symptoms above and beyond eating-related behaviors. Similarly for boys, both maternal and paternal relationship quality was still significant. This suggests that factors such as overall parental involvement should be considered when developing prevention strategies.

Introduction
The factors leading to the development of bulimia nervosa, which affects approximately 1.3% of females and 0.5% of males (Swanson et al., 2011), are gaining increasing attention from the research community. Parents are one of the largest influences on a child’s eating habits; studies suggest that parental pressure to lose or to not gain weight is related to the development of adolescent disordered eating patterns (Eisenberg et al., 2011; Helfert & Warschburger, 2011). Similarly, studies show that the type of relationship that children have with their parents can affect whether or not the children develop eating-related problems (Goossens, Brazil, & Durme, 2012). In this study, we wanted to determine if parental relationship quality (warmth, psychological control, knowledge) was still a significant factor in the development of bulimic symptoms above and beyond parental eating-related behaviors (encouragement to lose weight, teasing about weight, pressure to be thin).

Method
Participants
• 134 girls (12-19; M = 14.75) and 90 boys (12-18; M = 13.86) in grades 7-12
• Girls and boys were primarily White (83% and 89%)

Procedure
• Self-report questionnaires were administered before or after school
• Compensation was a $25 gift card to the local mall

Measures of Adolescent Disordered eating
• Bulimic behaviors
• Bulimia subscale of the Eating Disorders Inventory (Garner et al., 1983)

Measures of Parent Eating Behaviors
• Parental Encouragement to Lose Weight and Teasing about Weight
• Perceived Sociostructural Influences on Body Image and Body Change Questionnaire (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001)
• Parental Pressure to be Thin
• Perceived Sociostructural Pressure Scale (Slote et al., 1996), with additional items

Measures of Parent-Adolescent Relationship Quality
• Parental Warmth
• Care subscale of the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979)
• Parental Psychological Control
• Psychological Control Scale (Barber, 1996)
• Parental Knowledge
• Knowledge Scale (Grundy et al., 2007)

Results
Analyses were separated by gender and parent. Four separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if parental relationship quality was still a significant factor for adolescents’ bulimic symptoms once parental eating-related behaviors were controlled for.

For girls, both maternal (F(6,70) = 8.700, p < .001) and paternal (F(6,106) = 9.747, p < .001) relationship quality was significant as a predictor of bulimic symptoms above and beyond eating-related behaviors. See Table 1.

For boys, both maternal (F(6,70) = 4.455, p < .01) and paternal (F(6,74) = 4.672, p < .001) relationship quality was still significant. See Table 1.

These results indicate that parental relationship quality is an important factor in the development of adolescents’ bulimic symptoms, regardless of eating-related parental behaviors.

Discussion
Because adolescent’s bulimic symptoms are related to both parent eating-related behaviors (encouragement to lose weight, teasing about weight, pressure to be thin) and parent-adolescent relationship quality (warmth, psychological control, knowledge), we examined the relationship between adolescent-relationship quality above and beyond eating-related behaviors. We found that relationship quality is still a significant factor in the development of adolescents’ bulimic symptoms even when parental eating-related behaviors are controlled for. This was true for both girls and boys, and for their relationships with both their mothers and their fathers. A significant contribution of our study is the inclusion of both boys and girls, as well as both mothers and fathers.

Our findings offer support for the need for prevention and intervention programs to address not only behaviors related to eating, weight, exercise, body image, etc., but the relationship between the adolescent and the parent as well. Future disordered eating prevention and intervention research with parents and children or adolescents should include the development of a healthy parent-child relationship. Programs striving to prevent disordered eating should examine the effectiveness of group learning that encourages the health of positive communication and increasing parental knowledge of the child or adolescent’s life, and by decreasing weight-related teasing and parental pressure to lose weight. The development of a secure attachment to a parent early on in a child’s life could serve as a protective factor for bulimia nervosa, and potentially for other disordered eating habits as well.

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