Girls' Drive for Thinness: The Effects of Differing Levels of Parental Warmth and Pressure to be Thin

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Abstract

Recent research has suggested that both maternal and paternal warmth may play a role in the development of drive for thinness in girls. Our study used 134 adolescent girls' self-reports to examine the impact of the combined effect of parental warmth and pressure to be thin on adolescent girls' drive for thinness, dependent on whether or not parents had similar or differing levels of warmth. Using path analysis, we found that when parents had differing levels of warmth, the relationship between warmth and drive for thinness was fully mediated by pressure to be thin. However, when parents had similar levels of warmth, there was still a direct effect between parental warmth and girls' drive for thinness, indicating that partial mediation had occurred. These findings suggest that the combined effect of parents who are high in warmth may serve as a protective factor against poor body image in adolescent girls.

Introduction

By the age of 6, most girls report a desire to be thinner (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2004). Girls' drive for thinness may not only stem from direct pressures regarding thinness, but also from specific parenting behaviors. For instance, an authoritarian parent style associated with girls' negative body image (Haycraft & Blisset, 2010). In this study, we examined how a specific parenting behavior (warmth) was associated with adolescent girls' drive for thinness. In a previous study (Blodgett Salafia & Jones, 2014), we found separate effects of maternal and paternal warmth on girls' drive for thinness, such that higher maternal or paternal warmth led to decreases in girls' drive for thinness. In this study, we sought to examine how the combined effects of maternal and paternal warmth affected girls' drive for thinness. Specifically, we hypothesized that differences between parents in their levels of warmth would affect the strength of the relationship between warmth and girls' drive for thinness.

Method

Participants

• 134 girls (12-19; M = 14.76) in grades 7-12
• Girls were primarily White (93%)

Procedure

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

Body Mass Index (BMI)

BMI was calculated from girls' self-reported height and weight

Measure of Girls' Drive for Thinness (DFT)

• 7-item Drive for Thinness subscale of the Eating Disorders Inventory (Garner et al., 1983)

Measure of Parental Pressure to be Thin

• 6-item Perceived Sociocultural Pressure Scale (Slice et al., 1996) – adapted items separately (three questions each) for mothers and fathers

Measure of Parental Warmth

• 12-item Care subscale of the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) – completed separately for mothers and fathers

Results

Path analysis was employed to examine a mediation model with average parental warmth as the independent variable, girls' drive for thinness as the outcome variable, and parental pressure to be thin as the mediator. Furthermore, the mediation model was tested twice, once with parents who have the same levels of warmth, and again with parents who have differing levels of warmth. This allowed us to determine if there was moderation occurring in the models in addition to mediation. Because BMI was significantly related to both parental pressure to be thin and girls' drive for thinness (p’s < .001), it was included as a control variable in the model.

Group 1 (Same Warmth)

Path analysis examining the effect of parents with the same level of warmth on girls' drive for thinness, mediated by parental pressure to be thin.

Group 2 (Different Warmth)

Path analysis examining the effect of parents with differing levels of warmth on girls' drive for thinness, mediated by parental pressure to be thin.

Results continued

When the direct effects were tested, the path for parents with differing levels of warmth to girls' drive for thinness (DFT) was nonsignificant, p = .11, while the path for parents with the same levels of warmth was significant, p < .001. This indicates that moderation occurred, as the effect of parental warmth on girls' DFT changed based on group differences. The full mediation model was then tested, with the direct path for differing levels of parental warmth constrained to zero. This model had good fit, X² = 3.99, p = .26, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05.

In the first model (Figure 1), parental pressure to be thin was a significant mediator, as both the pathway from parental warmth to parental pressure to be thin (β = -.30, p = .008) and the pathway from parental pressure to girls' DFT (β = .27, p < .001) were significant. However, the direct path from parental warmth to girls' DFT remained nonsignificant (β = -.34, p = .001), indicating only partial mediation.

In the second model (Figure 2), parental pressure to be thin was also a significant mediator, as both the pathway from parental warmth to parental pressure to be thin (β = -.43, p < .001) and the pathway from parental pressure to girls' DFT (β = -.45, p < .001) were significant. Therefore, parental pressure to be thin fully mediated the relationship between parental warmth and girls' DFT, as the direct effect was nonsignificant. There is also a noticeable increase in the effect size of parental pressure to be thin on girls' DFT in this model. While pairwise comparisons initially indicated no significant differences in paths between groups, this finding suggests that the effect of combined parental warmth levels may also moderate the relationship between parental pressure and girls' DFT.

Discussion

Together, these results suggest that while parental warmth plays an active role in girls' beliefs regarding thinness, the strength of that relationship depends on the combination of maternal and paternal warmth. Specifically, the more similar the parents are in their levels of warmth, the more strongly warmth appears to impact girls' drive for thinness. Furthermore, results suggest that the combination of parental warmth may impact how parental pressure to be thin affects girls' body image. Future preventative efforts need to encourage not only warmth in general, but specifically high levels of warmth in both mothers and fathers.

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