Parental Pressure to be Thin as a Mediator of the Relation Between Parental Warmth and Adolescent Girls’ Drive for Thinness

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Abstract

Recent research has suggested that adolescent girls’ disordered eating attitudes and behaviors, such as drive for thinness, may be encouraged by particular parenting behaviors. Our study used 134 adolescent girls’ self-reports to examine the impact of maternal and paternal warmth and pressure to be thin on adolescent girls’ drive for thinness. Using mediation analyses, we found that while maternal warmth was directly associated with lower drive for thinness among girls, maternal pressure to be thin fully mediated this relationship. This means that higher warmth was associated with less pressure to be thin which, in turn, was associated with lower drive for thinness. Similar results were found for paternal factors, although the relationship between paternal warmth and girls’ drive for thinness was only partially mediated. Thus, specific parenting behaviors such as warmth as well as direct pressures to be thin can influence adolescent girls’ drive for thinness and should be targeted in prevention programs. Our findings ultimately offer support for a particular process of parenting that can serve to protect girls against unhealthy body attitudes concerns during adolescence.

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

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

Measure of Parental Pressure to be Thin
- Perceived Sociocultural Pressure Scale (Slice et al., 1996) – adapted items separately 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

Introduction

By the age of 6, most girls have reported a desire to be thinner (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2004). Such a desire can be encouraged by the media, peers, and parents. Recent research has demonstrated that a drive for thinness may not only stem from direct pressures and messages regarding thinness, but also from specific parenting behaviors. For instance, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles have been associated with increased disordered eating and body image concerns (Haycraft & Blisset, 2010). In the present study, we sought to examine how a specific parenting behavior (warmth) would be associated with adolescent girls’ drive for thinness.

Specifically, we hypothesized that mothers and fathers who use a warm parenting style would be less likely to pressure their daughters to be thin, which would thereby decrease their drive for thinness.

Results

Separate mediation analyses were conducted for mothers and fathers. Using bivariate and multiple regressions, each set began with an examination of the direct effect of parental warmth on girls’ drive for thinness, followed by testing the mediating role of parental pressure to be thin (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

First, we found that higher maternal warmth was directly associated with lower drive for thinness among girls. Results also indicated that maternal pressure to be thin was fully mediated this relationship, such that higher warmth was associated with less pressure to be thin which, in turn, was associated with lower drive for thinness. See Table 1.

Second, we found that higher paternal warmth was directly associated with lower drive for thinness among girls. Furthermore, paternal pressure to be thin partially mediated this relationship, such that higher warmth was associated with less pressure to be thin which, in turn, was associated with lower drive for thinness. However, the direct effect of paternal warmth on girls’ drive for thinness remained significant. See Table 2.

Discussion

Together, these results suggest that both mothers and fathers play an active role in their daughters’ beliefs regarding thinness, not just mothers as previous research has mostly focused on. Specific parenting behaviors such as warmth may serve as protective factors against the development of poor body image and unhealthy eating habits, whereas parenting behaviors such as pressure to be thin may influence and encourage adolescent girls’ drive for thinness.

Our findings offer support for a particular process of parenting that can serve to protect girls against unhealthy body image concerns during adolescence. Future research should examine the effectiveness of prevention programs that encourage maternal and paternal warmth, and their effects on girls’ drive for thinness, as well as overall body image and disordered eating habits.

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Predictor: Maternal Warmth</th>
<th>Outcome: Drive for Thinness</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>R²</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Maternal Warmth</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.29*</td>
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<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Maternal Pressure Predictor: Maternal Warmth</td>
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<td>-0.34*</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<td>Model 3</td>
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<td>Outcome: Drive for Thinness</td>
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<td>.18</td>
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<td>Model 4</td>
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<td>Outcome: Drive for Thinness</td>
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<td>-0.16</td>
<td>.20</td>
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</table>

Note: * p < .05.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Predictor: Paternal Warmth</th>
<th>Outcome: Drive for Thinness</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>R²</th>
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<td>0.40</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.20*</td>
<td>.26</td>
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</table>

Note: * p < .05.