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The Impact of Appearance-Related Communication in Families on Female Adolescent Body Image Development

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Body image is the way an individual feels or thinks about their own body (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019). Body image concerns are influenced by many factors, including but not limited to individual BMI, pubertal status, peer influence, parental influence and media influence (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020). Many of these external influences reinforce unrealistic body ideals and result in internalization of the thin ideal in adolescent girls beginning at a very young age (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016, Unikel et al., 2012). Internalization of the thin ideal refers to how strongly an individual adheres to the beauty standards that attractiveness is synonymous with being thin; and is directly associated with higher body dissatisfaction and lower body image (Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012).

Studies report between 43% to as much as 80% of adolescent girls are dissatisfied with their bodies, making the prevention and intervention of low body image essential given the negative outcomes associated with poor body image (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Dunstan et al., 2017; Hart & Chow, 2020). Having low body image

increases the likelihood of many negative outcomes including poor academic achievement, unhealthy dieting or restrictive eating, overexercising, lowered self-esteem, and poorer quality of life due to intense feelings of inadequacy and shame (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Dunstan et al., 2017; Hart & Chow, 2020). Adolescence is a critical time for the development of both positive and negative body image in girls (Dunstan et al., 2017; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Strandbu & Kvaalem, 2014). While many body image concerns in girls begin in adolescence, they persist well into adulthood, carrying negative consequences beyond the teenage years, meaning the effects are lasting (Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019).

Body talk is any communication focused on making comments regarding one's own body or the body of others and comes in many forms, including fat talk, old talk, weight talk and diet talk (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard et al., 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019; Strandbu & Kvaalem, 2014). Body talk fosters conditions that amplify negative body image (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rog-

ers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012). Repeated exposure to interpersonal discussions that focus on the female body as an object to assess and look at leads to an internalization of the female body as an object, which increases negative outcomes including negative body image, low self-esteem, and shame (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019). This discussion on body image is emphasized much more for women and girls than it is for boys and men (Dunstan et al., 2017; Lucibello et al., 2021; Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). This hyperfocus on the female body as an object has led to body talk and body dissatisfaction becoming a “normative” part of a female’s life (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021; Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014).

According to social learning theory, body image is learned through the observation of behaviors, attitudes, and communication around bodies (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hillard et al., 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019). The family environment has been deemed one of the most important factors in the socialization of children and their body image outcomes (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012). The way families communicate about bodies sends messages to their children, particularly young girls, about what bodies are “acceptable” and attractive (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hart & Chow, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019). If an adolescent girl’s

body does not match this ideal as discussed by family members, internal distress and cognitive dissonance occur, resulting in feelings of inadequacy, shame and lowered body image (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012). Much of the research conducted on family influence on female body image has focused on the mother’s influence. It is important to note that while mothers’ beliefs and behaviors are indeed related to the weight behaviors and attitudes of their daughters, this does not necessarily mean that mothers are to blame for their daughters’ negative body image. Rather, both mothers and daughters exist in a social context that hyper-focuses on the female body and its appearance (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016) and governs a complex interplay of influences that originate outside of the family but associate to within-family interactions related to body image.

Although many factors influence the development of body image concerns in adolescent girls, the way families discuss bodies, dieting, and weight with and in front of their daughters may have a significant impact on the way girls view their bodies, due to internalization of the thin ideal, objectification of women and girls, and over-emphasis on appearance. This review will seek to discuss the ways in which family communication impacts the development of body image in female adolescents through repeated exposure to parental attitudes of

weight bias and the thin-ideal and frequent exposure to various forms of body talk.

The Role of Family in Female Adolescent Body Image

Weight Bias, the Thin-Ideal, and Self-Objectification

Weight bias is the assumptions that people make about others based on the appearance of their weight, and manifests through the thin ideal. Weight bias is the negative attitudes toward those who are of higher weight which assumes them to be less attractive, less disciplined, with lower self-control, and less capable and ambitious than lower-weight individuals (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020). When adolescent girls witness various forms of body talk, including displays of weight bias and praising thin female bodies, girls can begin to internalize being thin with positive outcomes (Arroyo & Anderson, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020;).

Parents' attitudes around weight have a significant impact on weight bias in children and their attitudes toward people of varying weights (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021). If parents display these attitudes, their children are likely to harbor them as well; these biases can be seen in children as young as three years old. (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hart & Chow, 2020). Examples of weight

bias could include a father making a comment about his single sister who "would probably be married if she just dropped some weight." Or parents attending a soccer game for their daughter where the mother vocalizes an assumption about a player of heavier weight as being more aggressive, rude, and less feminine. Unfortunately, these attitudes also assume that those who are of lower weight are inherently superior to those of higher weight. This weight bias impacts career success, romantic pursuits, and individual self-esteem (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020). Limiting focus on weight and appearance in family conversations, especially among adolescent girls, can lower individual weight bias (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hart & Chow, 2020).

Mothers play a key role in displaying attitudes and behaviors of weight bias towards their daughters, often in the form of expressing anxiety about gaining weight, making concerted efforts towards maintaining a thin appearance, and placing emphasis on praising thin bodies as "looking good;"; this leads young girls to have critical opinions and bias towards others of higher weight—including themselves (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hillard et al., 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021). Weight bias attitudes lead girls, boys, women, and men to make value judgments based on one's weight or BMI and lead to hyper-awareness of one's own weight or the weight of others as being a reliable source of character judgment, beauty, and worth (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard

et al., 2020). This preoccupation with weight is associated with negative outcomes including unhealthy dieting and restriction, over-exercising, and lowered sense of self-worth—as worth, value, and beauty are taught to be connected to weight (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hillard et al., 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021). Children who are exposed to attitudes of weight bias in the form of feelings of anxiety and intense concern around the status of one’s weight, particularly a mother’s attitude towards her own body, are more likely to associate weight gain with negative outcomes and decreased value (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hillard et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019). Unfortunately, these displays of overemphasis on weight socialize young girls to associate weight with one’s self-worth and value which further internalizes the pursuit of the thin-ideal (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020).

The Thin-Ideal and Self-Objectification

These attitudes highlight a fabricated significance on the importance of an individual’s weight, emphasize the thin-ideal, and hyper-focus on the appearance of the female body. This emphasis results in the female body being labeled as an object, of which the family system plays an important role in how developing adolescents view desirable and undesirable bodies (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012). Through the lens of the thin-ideal, girls associate being

skinny with higher degrees of happiness, self-esteem, success and romantic satisfaction (Gagnon Girouard et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2019). The internalization of the thin-ideal and its impacts often occur through media’s portrayal of women and through influences in the family environment (Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Unikel et al., 2012). While the impact of the media has proven to be significant, the emphasis here will be on the family environment and its interactions with media and how families perpetuate problematic perspectives and ideals.

While weight bias perpetuates negative ideas about those in larger bodies, the thin ideal praises and assigns positive attributes to those in thinner bodies. When girls continually hear praise for thin bodies and criticism for larger bodies, girls internalize the idea that being thin is an important and critical pursuit. Hearing family members and other adults praise weight loss and criticize weight gain heightens self-scrutiny that girls feel towards themselves and increases pressure to seek after thinness (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012). This could look like a mother saying, “have you seen Julie lately? She lost some weight and looks so much better!” Or a father noticing some recent weight gain of a neighbor and saying, “wow she’s really letting herself go.” Hearing clear messages that glorify thinness at key developmental periods of a girls’ life from trusted adults shapes her perceptions of

herself and others (Gagnon Girouard et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2019). Internalizing the message of the thin ideal increases self-objectification; self-objectification lowers levels of body appreciation, understanding of the body for its abilities and mindful eating (Hart & Chow, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019).

Family systems theory is centered on the idea that the family is an open system that receives information from outside systems, including the media (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016). The media plays a significant role in influencing the body image development in young girls and research shows the way that families interact with media also plays a critical part in this development (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020). The more that girls are taught that being sexually desired by the male population, through media portrayals and family interactions, the more likely that girls will develop low self-esteem, higher levels of self-consciousness, higher levels of self-objectification, unstable sense of worth, and result in poorer body image (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019). This is often perpetuated through viewing media that glamorizes the “male gaze” with a lack of media literacy discussed in the home (Oliver, 2017). The way that families react and respond to messages perpetuating the objectification of women in media has an impact on the way girls see and value themselves, particularly in key stages of development (Golden, et al., 2016; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al.,

2019; Sharpe, et al., 2013) If a daughter hears a family member, particularly if they are male, comment on a television show or movie about a female character “wow she is so ugly” or “that girl has such a sexy body,” this message of objectification is further emphasized. Families should teach girls and boys to be critical of the media and its portrayal of women in order to reduce self-objectification and body image concerns and limit the tendency to objectify other girls and women, particularly boys (Golden, et al., 2016; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019; Sharpe, et al., 2013).

Body Talk in Families

Attitudes and biases surrounding weight are often perpetuated by various forms of body talk within the family context. Body talk most often appears in the context of evaluating the value of one’s body or another body based on its aesthetic and appearance, rather than function or ability (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019; Strandbu & Kvaem, 2014). While there is a host of research on peer-centered body talk, research indicates that parental body talk can send strong messages to daughters that some body types are better than others, further pushing the agenda of beauty ideals and the unachievable thin-ideal (Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021).

Weight talk and fat talk are highly prevalent in families, with 2/3 of households with adolescents engaging in

weight-related conversations daily (Hart & Chow, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019). Some of these conversations include parental criticism and teasing on the subject of body type and shape. Appearance-based teasing and criticism from parents is associated with even more negative outcomes than teasing from peers, resulting in higher rates of lower body dissatisfaction and increased internalization of the thin ideal (Lucibello et al., 2021; Unikel et al., 2012). The more adolescent girls are exposed to these appearance-related messages in the home, the more likely girls are to develop body dissatisfaction due to the constant stream of messages about the importance of looking a certain way or maintaining a thin appearance (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Unikel et al., 2012).

Mothers are considered as one of the strongest influences on the development of body image in adolescent girls through comments and modeling behaviors (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Gagnon-Girouard et al., 2020; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard, et al., 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021;) If daughters repeatedly witness their mother engage in fat-talk and weight-talk conversations, this type of conversation is not only seen as acceptable, but desirable as well. If phrases such as “I am so fat” or “I really need to lose weight” are heard over and over, girls learn how they think they should feel about their bodies and what goals they believe they should focus on. Through social learning theory, girls are more likely

to engage in body talk conversations because of perceived positive outcomes, such as social acceptance (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hillard, et al., 2016; et al., 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019) . These conversations are so common among girls and women that it has become socially acceptable to express dissatisfaction with one’s own body which often results in one receiving compliments, which behavior is often modeled by mothers (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021; Unikel et al., 2012).

Body talk in the home can come in both covert and overt messages around weight. Negative body talk explicitly said towards children and adolescents is said to be a form of emotional abuse due to the association with multiple negative pathological and behavioral outcomes associated with criticism from family (Rogers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012). This could be overt messages such as “you’re fat and need to lose weight” or “you should try to get thin before the summer so you can wear whatever swimsuit you want.” Research shows that even if parents do not directly comment on their child’s weight, hearing a parent make self-disparaging comments about their appearance and weight or negative comments regarding another’s weight is associated with increased body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and a drive for thinness (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016). Covert messages can come in subtle forms, what actions parents might view as harmless, such as merely mentioning a daughter’s weight and restrict-

ing food availability, are associated with lowered body image, dieting and a higher likelihood of developing an eating disorder (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019; Unikel et al., 2012). This could look like a mother positively reinforcing weight loss, “I’m so glad we signed you up for the swim team! You’re looking smaller.” It could also be more negative, including a suggestion that “We are all going off sugar,” upon noticing a weight shift in their daughter. Subtle comparisons between multiple children’s appearances are also detrimental to positive body image and sense of self, such as, “Your sister has much longer legs than you.” Frequent discussions about bodies and appearances from parents have lasting implications, being linked with binge eating, dieting, and low body image even 15 years later. (Hart & Chow, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019).

Positive vs Negative Body Talk

Body talk can be both negative and positive, differing between comments such as “that outfit makes her legs look fat” and “I am looking so pudgy today” to “you have such great legs,” and “you have such a nice body” or a combination of the two “I am so fat, promise me you lose your skinny figure when you get my age.” Negative body talk is nearly always associated with negative outcomes, but the research on positive body talk is less clear (Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021). Some studies have pointed to positive body talk being associated with lower body satisfaction and

self-esteem due to the overemphasis on appearance and higher levels of body surveillance (Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021). Body talk can increase the notion that a girl’s body is an object to be viewed, valued, and assessed by others, particularly from boys through the “male gaze,” through self-objectification, especially when these attitudes are taught and mirrored within the home (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Strandbu & Kvaem, 2014; Lucibello et al., 2021; Oliver, 2017).

Some research has shown that positive body talk is associated with positive body image, while others find the opposite, that even positive body talk can be detrimental to adolescent girls’ body image (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019). Due to the mixed research around positive body talk that is purely focused on appearance, body image, and eating disorders, researchers advise against appearance-related comments, even if such comments are positive in nature (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019). This is due to the negative implications that could result from these conversations that potentially teach girls their value stems from their appearance (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019). Experts suggest reframing our body talk to stem from a context of gratitude for the function and ability of bodies and what bodies enable us to do (Hart & Chow, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019). If parents talked about bodies in positive ways about what amazing things bodies can do and allow girls to do,

research shows that this inspires health and wellness in physical, emotional, and mental aspects (Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019). These types of body-appreciation-based comments promote a stronger sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, and higher body image (Hart & Chow, 2020; Hillard, et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2019).

Conclusion: The Importance of the Family Environment

When looking at the development of body image in adolescent girls, it is essential to look at the family environment. While the family environment is not the only influence on the development of body image, it is clear that it still plays a significant role. The way families talk about bodies matters and has a significant and lasting impact on the way observing daughters think and feel about their bodies, for good and for bad (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019; Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014). While this research focused on the negative outcomes caused by discussing body image and weight, the same can be said for empowering girls through a true sense of self-worth and delineating the focus from appearance to ability and potential (Rogers et al., 2019). Overall, experts strongly advise families

against discussing bodies due to the negative implications it has for the development of girls' body image and sense of self both in their teenage years and well into adulthood (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019; Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014).

While much research has been done on the influence of mothers on girls' body image development, more research needs to be done on fatherly influences. Among the mixed conclusions on positive appearance-related body comments, more research should be done to evaluate the implications of comments such as these. And while this review focused on parental influences, more work is to be done on body-focused conversations made by extended family members and siblings. Other areas of future exploration include other factors and influences on body image in the home including family hobbies, family discussions about food, and family discussions on modesty. Overall, it is clear the family environment plays a significant role in how girls think and feel about their bodies and has lasting implications (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Hart & Chow, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2019; Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014).

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