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## Body-Image, Self-Esteem, and Nutrition Concerns of Parents of 6th- and 7th-Grade Students

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## Body-Image, Self-Esteem, and Nutrition Concerns of Parents of 6th- and 7th-Grade Students

### Abstract

To fully address the issues of self-esteem and body image, parents, teachers, and students must be involved in creating meaningful solutions. The study discussed here sought to ascertain concerns of parents related to their children's body image, self-esteem, and nutrition. Parents with children in the 6th or 7th grade were surveyed regarding factors that influenced their child's perception about their body, how satisfied their child was with their body, and methods to reach children and parents with body image messages. Results will be used to assist in the development of Extension programs for parents and children that address body image.

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## Introduction

Body image has been described as a combination of how accurately one perceives his/her body size, the feelings this perception creates, and the behaviors that are initiated or avoided because of these feelings (Heinberg, Wood, & Thompson, 1996).

The age at which distortions in body image develop is beginning at alarmingly younger ages than in the past (Koff & Rierdan, 1991; Maloney, McGuire, Daniels, & Specker, 1989; Mellin, Irwin, & Scully, 1992; Sands, Tricker, Sherman, Armatas, & Maschette, 1997; Thelen, Powell, Lawrence, & Kuhnert, 1992; Wardle & Marsland, 1990). In a study of pre-adolescent children aged 10 and 11, girls were already demonstrating a desire to be thinner (Sands, et al., 1997). Results from a study by Koff and Rierdan (1991) revealed that of 206 sixth grade girls, 83% responded that they diet

occasionally and 17% that they diet frequently.

To combat the rise in unhealthy eating patterns and poor body image in youth, the root of the problem must be determined. Knowledge gain alone is not enough to address these issues (Killen, et al., 1993). Body image and self-esteem are multi-faceted issues, thus a simple solution does not exist. In order to fully address the issues of self-esteem and body image, parents, teachers and youth must be involved in creating meaningful solutions. While the schools can play a role, parents have a major role to play in addressing this issue.

The purpose of the study discussed here was to ascertain concerns of parents related to their children's body image, self-esteem, and eating behaviors. This information will be used to assist Extension professionals as they work with youth and parents in these areas of concern.

## Methods

A questionnaire was developed to assess parents' opinions on children's body perceptions and self-esteem and their views on the best ways to teach children about positive body image, self-esteem, and healthy eating. Questions were based on results of four focus groups with 6th grade children, one focus group with 6th grade teachers, and input from family and consumer science Extension specialists and nutritionists. The focus groups with students and teachers provided basic information about topics of interest and concern with respect to body image and self esteem.

The parent survey included demographic information (age, gender, race, education, income, marital status, number of children living at home) and questions about parents' perceptions of their child's body image and self-esteem. The parent survey was pre-tested with 25 parents to determine its clarity as well as its appropriateness and breadth of content and was revised accordingly. The survey was distributed to Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Agents with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service across the state.

Agents were instructed to distribute the survey along with a letter explaining the purpose of the project to parents of children in either the 6th or 7th grade. Agents used a convenience sample of all parents with which they worked who had children in the targeted age range. Surveys included a memo explaining the purpose of the study and indicated that all responses would be anonymous.

Data analysis was performed using the software application, SPSSX 7.5 (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2000). Analyses included descriptive statistics, one-tailed t-tests, and Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric tests.

## Results and Discussion

A supply of surveys were mailed to 110 FCS Agents for potential distribution, and 419 of these were in fact distributed to adults who were known by the agents to have children in either the 6th or 7th grade. Two hundred eighteen respondents (return rate = 52%) returned the completed questionnaire to the investigators in a pre-addressed, stamped envelope. Respondents to the parent survey (n=218) were primarily female (90%).

Parents were asked what factors affect how their child feels about his/her body. They were allowed to select more than one answer. The number one influence as perceived by parents was peers (92% indicating that it influenced their child's attitude about their body), followed closely by parental influence (88%). Other researchers have found similar results, thus concluding that numerous factors (media, family, friends, etc.) influence a child's development of body image (Feldman, Feldman, & Goodman, 1988; Field, et al., 1999; Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994; Winn, Reif, & White, 1997).

When the gender of the child was taken into account, a significant difference was noted ( $p < .05$ ) in influence of relatives and influence of magazines, with parents of girls observing a stronger influence from both of these sources. Other researchers concur with the observation of parents in the current study. Not only do a high percentage (60%) of girls aged 10-14 turn to fashion magazines as a prime source for information on physical appearance and dieting behaviors, but a positive correlation exists between reading fashion magazines and dieting (Levine, et al., 1994; Field, et al., 1999).

When asked how satisfied their children were with their own body weight, more parents of girls indicated that their children thought they were too heavy (38% vs. 18% for boys,  $p < .05$ ). This is consistent with what was found in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey that indicated that girls were more likely than boys to try to lose weight or to think they were overweight even if they were not (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000).

Parents were asked if they were concerned about six different issues: body image, physical activity, nutrition, eating disorders, self-esteem, and depression. Parents were mostly concerned about nutrition and self-esteem (75%), followed by physical activity (65%) and body image (64%). These data are presented in Table 1. Parents were less concerned about eating disorders (48%) and depression (52%).

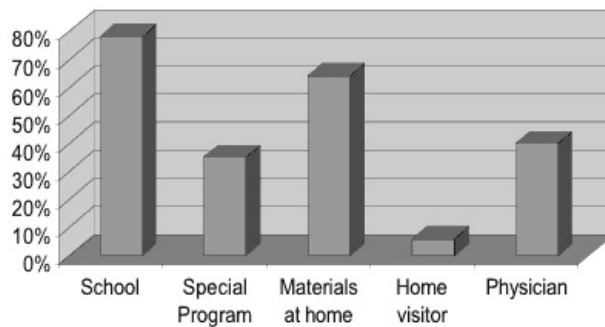
**Table 1.**  
How Concerned Are You About the Following Issues as They Relate to Your Child?

Issue	% Parents Who Are Concerned	% of Parents Who Are Not Concerned
Body Image	73%	27%
Physical Activity	65%	35%
Nutrition	75%	25%
Eating Disorders	48% <sup>1</sup>	52%
Self-esteem	75%	25%
Depression	52% <sup>1,2</sup>	48%
n=218 <sup>1</sup> African American parents more concerned than Caucasian parents (p<.0.05) <sup>2</sup> low-income parents more concerned than higher-income parents (p<0.05)		

Parents were asked what is the best way to teach your child about positive body image, self-esteem and proper nutrition? They could check as many answers as applied. Parents indicated that programs at school (78%) and materials for use at home (64%) were the best way to educate children about these issues (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

Preferred Formats for Receiving Free Programs Related to Self-Esteem, Body Image, and Nutrition for Youth



When asked what format would be of most interest for free in-home materials, video was by far the most popular (64%). None of the other possible formats were acceptable in large numbers: newsletter (19%), audiotope (1%), computer program (5%), Web site (4%), don't want or need (7%). These data indicate that there is substantial interest on the part of parents for in-home materials to inform them about body image, self-esteem, and nutrition. However, there still is the perception that this is a topic that should be addressed in the school environment.

Data were examined with respect to education, race, and income of the parents. There were no differences seen in the pattern of answers with respect to education. When race was examined, several differences were found. African American parents were more concerned about depression and eating disorders (p<.05) than other parents in the sample. This is consistent with recent data that suggests that African American young women may exhibit more eating disorder pathology than previously expected (Gustafson-Larson & Terry, 1992; Striegel-Moore, Schreiber, et al., 2000; Striegel-Moore, Wilfley, et al., 2000; Yanovski, 1993).

Historically, problems associated with poor body image were seen mostly in Caucasian youth. However, this survey revealed that both Caucasian and African American parents were concerned to a similar extent about body image. Other studies have revealed these similarities as well (Gustafson-Larson & Terry, 1992; Hill, Draper, & Stack, 1994; Mendelson & White, 1982; Robinson, et al., 1996; Wardle & Marsland, 1990). Problems with body image are no longer reserved for Caucasian females. Caucasian parents thought movies, peers, and parents had more influence on

how their child felt about their body than did African American parents ( $p < .05$ ).

To examine income, a variable was created using household income and number of children in the home. Respondents were then placed in two groups. Group 1, low-income, was classified as <20K for household income per child ( $n=93$ ); Group 2, higher-income, was classified as >20K for household income per child ( $n=113$ ). (Note: 12 respondents did not answer the income questions.) The low-income group wanted home materials and was more concerned about depression in their children ( $p < .05$ ) than the high-income group. The high-income group wanted schools to teach about positive body image, self-esteem, and proper nutrition more than did the low-income group.

## Application

Adolescence is a time of rapid change with respect to social, physical, and emotional development. Creating meaningful solutions to address body image, self esteem, and healthy eating is of great importance for parents of teens. These data indicate that parents are very interested and concerned about issues of body image and self-esteem for their children.

While parents believe that schools are the best place for children to learn about these issues, they also indicated an interest in receiving in-home materials, specifically video. Extension professionals play a vital role in working with parents and youth on self-esteem, body image, and healthy eating. Schools are often sought out to address these issues; however, if education for youth is not coupled with education for parents and other family members, it will fail to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Extension professionals can educate parents and youth, as well as begin dialog within the family, about these complicated issues, e.g., lesson plans could be developed for Junior High School teachers with follow-up materials sent home for parents that would promote such dialog. Extension professionals can be leaders in educating families about these issues. Extension programs should be created to address the influence of peers and the media on body image and self-esteem. There is a need for curricula that addresses these issues and that includes both school and family components. School materials that are already in place can be expanded to involve outreach to parents.

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