IS OBESITY IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE RELATED TO SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND PHYSICAL COMPETENCE? FINDINGS FROM THE 4-H STUDY OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The burgeoning epidemic of obesity among young Americans suggests the need for research to explore the links between height and weight status and self-perceptions. Using the 4-H Study of PYD, this research did so, investigating gender and weight trajectory differences to understand how weight relates to academic, social, and physical competence evaluations. It will be discussed in regard to implications for further research and to program and policy applications.

INTRODUCTION

• The prevalence of child and adolescent obesity is alarming. Approximately 30% of youth in the U.S. aged 12 to 19 are classified as overweight (Kuczmarski, et al., 1999), with 11% being classified as obese (Huang & Taylor, 2001). Healthy adolescents need to represent the average body weight for their age and sex. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of understanding the social and cultural components that influence weight and self-perceptions.

• To date, research in this field has been limited. Although dietary practices and exercise have been shown to be associated with obesity, the mechanisms underlying these interactions have not been well documented. In addition, studies do not consistently find an association between childhood weight status and later obesity. While research suggests that obese youth are more at risk for later obesity, this relationship has not been well documented. Furthermore, the role of self-perceptions in the development of obesity is not well documented.

• While many studies have attempted to look at whether weight status impacts self-perceptions, few have attempted to look at whether self-perceptions are associated with weight status. For example, studies have shown that self-perceptions are associated with weight status and self-perceptions may be better predictors of weight status than weight status is of self-perceptions.

• In the current study, gender and weight trajectory differences will be investigated to understand how weight relates to academic, social, and physical competence evaluations.

• The findings will be discussed in regard to implications for further research and to program and policy applications.

MEASURES

Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPC; Harter, 1991) was developed to assess competence in five domains: academic, social, physical, and self-worth. The SPC consists of 156 items, with 32 items for males and 38 items for females that assess how well children describe themselves in each of the five domains. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from Strongly False (1) to Strongly True (5).

RESULTS

At Wave 1, participants were 1,721 fifth grade adolescents (47.2% males; mean age = 11.1 years, SD = .8 years). The sample was selected to represent the population of adolescents in schools and 5 after-school programs in 20 states across the nation. Participation rates were 97% for males and 98% for females. Parental height and weight were collected at Wave 1. At Wave 2, participants were 1,293 adolescents (46.9% males; mean age = 12.2 years, SD = .8 years) of the 1,721 participants at Wave 1. In addition, to control for the influence of meeting an ideal body weight, the sample was stratified by weight status and sex. At Wave 1, 98% of the participants met the criteria for Wave 2. Approximately 55% of the participants met the criteria for Wave 2 at both waves.

The findings revealed gender differences in early childhood (i.e., age 10) with respect to psychosocial functioning. At Wave 1, boys reported higher perceptions of their academic self-concept and of their physical attractiveness. In contrast, girls reported higher perceptions of their social self-concept and of their conduct behavior. While relatively little data exist regarding adolescents who change their weight status (e.g., move from overweight to normal weight), the findings revealed gender differences in early childhood (i.e., age 10) with respect to psychosocial functioning. At Wave 1, boys reported higher perceptions of their academic self-concept and of their physical attractiveness. In contrast, girls reported higher perceptions of their social self-concept and of their conduct behavior.

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In sixth grade, 983 youth who were in the fifth grade during Wave 1 were retested. In addition, 184 youth who were not in the fifth grade during Wave 1 were also retested. The subsample used in the current investigation included only those participants who had data available at both waves. The sample was stratified by weight trajectory at Wave 1 and sex. The sample included 482 girls (48.8%) and 501 boys (51.2%).

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