

Fathers and Daughters: Their Relationship and Its Impact on Body Image and Mental Health

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Abstract : Objective: Our society is suffering from an epidemic of body image dissatisfaction, and related disorders appear to be increasing globally for children. There is much to indicate that children's body image and eating attitudes are being affected negatively by socio-cultural factors such as parents, peers and media. Most studies and theories, however, have focused extensively on the daughter-mother relationship. Very few studies have investigated the role of attachment to the father as an important factor in the development of girls' and women's attitudes towards themselves and their bodies. Recently, data have shown that the father's parenting style, as well as the quality of the relationship with him is crucial for the understanding of the development and persistence of body image disorders. This presentation is based on samples of participants with self-defined body image dissatisfaction, and the self-reported measures of their fathers' parental behaviours, emotional warmth, support, or protection. Attachment theory does offer support in exploring these relationships and it is used in this presentation to assist in understanding the relationship between the father and his daughter in relation to body image and mental health. Clinical implications are also offered in respect to work with body image, eating disorders and relational therapy. Methods: As awareness of the increasing frequency of body image concerns in children grows, so too does the need for a simple, valid and reliable measure of body image. The Children's Body Image Scale (CBIS) designed in Australia, depicts seven male and female figures from which children are to choose their perceived body type and ideal body type. This was compared with a range of international body mass index (BMI) reference standards. These measures together with individual one-on-one interviews were completed by 158 children aged 7-12 years. Results: A high frequency of body image dissatisfaction was indicated in the children's responses. 55% of girls and 41% of boys said they would like to be thinner, and wished for an ideal BMI figure below the 10th percentile. This is an unhealthy and unattainable level of body fatness for the majority of children when considered in relation to the reported secular trend of their increasing average body size. Thin children were generally ranked as best and perceived as kind, happy, academically skilled, and socially successful. Fat children were perceived as unintelligent, lazy, greedy, unpopular, and unable to play physical games. Conclusions: Body image ideals and fat stereotypes are well entrenched among children. There is much to indicate that children's body image and eating attitudes are being affected negatively by sociocultural factors such as parents, peers and media. Teachers and health professionals could promote intervention programs for children involving knowledge and acceptance of genetic influences on body type; the dangerous effects of weight loss dieting; the importance of physical activity and eating healthy; and scepticism and critical analysis of mass media messages.

Keywords : body image, father attachment, mental health, eating disorders

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