

Socializing Girls Whose Bodies May Not Align with Contemporary Ideals of Thinness:
An Interpretive Study of Mothers

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Existing work has established the significance of maternal socialization in contributing to daughters' body images. In turn, how mothers socialize their daughters seems to be shaped, in part, by mothers' perceptions of their daughters' bodies (e.g., Francis & Birch, 2005). What remains missing from the literature, however, is an in-depth, focused account of how mothers socialize their young daughters about the body when they perceive their daughters as overweight or at risk for becoming so *and* when their daughters' bodies may conflict with cultural ideals of slenderness, thus prompting maternal concern. With this study, we conducted an interpretive exploration of the various body-related skills, behaviors, and values that mothers attempt to transmit to young adolescent daughters (aged 10-13) who are perceived (by their mothers) as overweight or at risk for becoming so *and* whose BMIs are at the 70th percentile or higher¹. Gaining understanding about such issues could be illuminating in the contemporary Western culture context, where the prevalence of childhood obesity remains a topic of concern and where mothers may be regarded as responsible if their children's bodies violate cultural norms/ideals of thinness. Analyses were guided by theory related to socialization and fat studies.

Data were collected via in-depth interviews with 13 mothers ($\bar{x}_{\text{age}} = 41.9$ years). Eleven participants were White; two were African American. Eight were married. Of the participants' daughters, four had BMIs in the "healthy" range, four had BMIs in the "overweight" range, and five had BMIs in the "obese" range. The daughters' mean age was 10.9 years. Data were analyzed using constant comparison processes. Analyses revealed that mothers sought to achieve five different *socialization goals* as they engaged with their daughters about the body. To reach these goals, five *socialization strategies* were invoked across varied interactional situations, including mother as teacher, as model, as manager, as cautious guardian, and as comforter.

Goal 1: Deconstructing Hegemonic Ideals, Promoting Self-Acceptance. Mothers taught daughters to deconstruct hegemonic beauty ideals and nurtured within them self-acceptance by modeling comfort with their own bodies and by exposing them to body positive role models. Mothers acted as cautious guardians, avoiding overtly problematizing their daughters' bodies, for instance, by asking if clothes felt "comfortable" rather than by noting that they were too small.

Goal 2: Promoting a Healthy and Balanced Diet. Mothers endeavored to promote within their daughters an appreciation for what it means to eat a "healthy and balanced" diet by teaching

¹Although the CDC classifies children and teens with BMIs up to the 85th percentile as "healthy," for women and girls, the penalties of weight bias are levied against even those who are at the upper ends of the healthy weight range (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012).

daughters about making “good choices” and modeling healthful eating behaviors. For varied reasons, some mothers, however, doubted their capacity to model healthful eating for their daughters. As managers, mothers stocked their homes with “healthy” food. Several mothers avoided the topic of dieting, regarding dieting as ineffective/“short-term” and healthful eating as a “lifestyle commitment.” Some mothers discouraged dieting; only one mother supported her daughter’s engagement in weight-loss dieting, and she was somewhat ambivalent about this.

Goal 3: Engaging in Policing of Daughters’ Behaviors and Teaching Bodily Monitoring. Several mothers managed their daughters’ bodily practices by policing their eating behaviors and/or by teaching them to police their eating behaviors in some manner. Policing often was prompted by a desire to curb weight gain and sometimes was underpinned by a measure of guilt.

Goal 4: Promoting Engagement in and Enjoyment of Physical Activity. Mothers encouraged their daughters to participate in regular physical activity, with some mothers explicitly requiring such engagement. Physical activity was promoted as a mechanism for supporting good health and was constructed as a tool for managing weight. As managers, mothers introduced girls to varied physical activities, framed physical activity as a fun pastime, gave their daughters gifts (e.g., bikes) that would entice them to participate in physical activity, and limited girls’ screen time. Mothers also modeled regular engagement in physical activity.

Goal 5: Providing Support for Navigation of Tricky/Emotionally-Charged Body-Related Situations. Mothers took on the mantle of teacher and/or comforter to help their daughters to navigate tricky and/or emotionally-charged body-related social situations, including weight-related teasing and pressures from others to consume foods that did not comply with their daughters’ personal eating priorities.

Findings also revealed that mothers often experienced the process of socializing their daughters about the body as dilemmatic, with mothers unsure of or ambivalent about how to broach the subject of their daughters’ bodies and diets. Seemingly, this sense of conflict stemmed from the mothers’ own anxieties about their daughters’ bodies and eating and their uncertainties about how to parent these girls within a culture laden with discourses stigmatizing larger bodies.

Thus, findings suggest that daughters of participants were exposed to a complex intermingling of messages, some of which were intended to expunge girls of bodily shame and others that reinforced the notion of personal responsibility for the body and bodily maintenance. This conflicting messaging may reflect the ambivalence that mothers experienced as they interacted with their daughters around issues of body, diet, weight, and health. How girls whose bodies transgress cultural ideals of thinness experience this mélange of maternal messaging is a topic worthy of future research. However, a daunting challenge exists in developing research methods that can capture the body-related experiences of this vulnerable group of girls without jeopardizing their body image. Many mothers in our sample perceived their daughters as susceptible to poor body image and did not share the fact of their participation in this study out of concern that such knowledge could undermine their daughters’ self-esteem or body image. Fikkan, J., & Rothblum, E. (2012). Is fat a feminist issue? Exploring the gendered nature of weight bias. *Sex Roles*, 66, 575-592.

Francis, L.A., & Birch, L.L. (2005). Maternal influences on daughters' restrained eating behavior. *Health Psychology*, 24(6), 548.