



An Exploration of Body Image Perceptions and Education Needs of Military Parents of Preschool Children

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Introduction: Military service members and their families have unique environmental factors that may influence their lifestyle and healthy eating behaviors (Pedro et al., 2011). Also, available resources for food and exercise may influence their healthy behaviors and body image perceptions. Parents often have the biggest effect on their children's body image perceptions, and children of military service members may have different body image perceptions, based on their parents' standards (Goland & Crow, 2004). Therefore, this study is designed to explore the body image perceptions and communication among military family members. This study also provides insight on how to motivate positive body image perceptions among military family members.

Literature Review: Children in the military community live in different types of personal and social environments compared to children in the civilian community (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). For example, the military child may suffer from different levels of authority or experiences instability due to the frequent moves (Russo & Fallon, 2014). Therefore, they are in the unique situation when reacting to the various stresses they can receive from their environments. Military body size and weight standards are crucial requirements for military members (Pedro et al., 2011). Thus, the pressures of meeting these requirements at the time of evaluations may be stressful for military members as well as their families. Also, as parents are considered key players in preventing and treating children's weight-related problems (Golan & Crow, 2004), it is important to understand how parents interact with their children.

Significantly, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is increasing in the military (Kress et al., 2003). The requirement to be fit and healthy in the military is an additional stressor and may influence body image (Myers & Bechtel, 2004). Generally speaking, parents' concerns about children's weight impact children's body dissatisfaction (Gardner et al., 1997). Thus, it is important to understand the military service members' and their families' weight and body image perceptions in order to adequately develop intervention programs for the service members and their families. Also, preschool-age children hold negative attitudes toward peers who are overweight or obese, and these attitudes may be related to their experiences in family environments (Holub, 2008). Thus, it is important to understand children's body image perceptions to develop appropriate education programs for children and parents.

Methodology and Results: The purpose of this study is to understand body image perceptions and educational needs of military parents of preschool children. Exploratory qualitative focus group interviews were conducted at Child Development Centers on military bases. Researchers visited two military bases located in Southwestern US and conducted a total of eight focus group discussions. A total of twenty-two parents (i.e., active military members or spouses) participated in this study. Researchers asked questions about body image, weight, and shape as motivational interviewing questions to identify the education needs of military parents. These questions

included: “How do your family members talk about each other’s weight and shape?” “What would be some of the phrases or things that a preschool child of military parents might hear their parents say about weight?” “Do you encourage your spouse and children to have a positive body image?” Interviews were transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis was used to find the categories of experience shared by participants. The process began with the authors examining each transcript and then identifying the similarities and differences. Until distinctive themes emerged, this identifying process was repeated (Spiggle, 1994).

Four themes emerged from the focus group discussions. These results were based on the phenomenological interpretation of interview data suggested by van Manen (1990). The themes included: *Military Requirements*, *Partnership*, *Negative Fat Talk*, and *Encouraging Communication*. They pointed to the importance of understanding the unique military environment to better understand service members’ body image, its potential effect on the body image of their children, and education needs related to body image and nutrition/physical activity. The *Military Requirements* theme arose from participants’ discussions indicating military service members are required to meet certain weight standards and as well as to pass the physical training tests (e.g., “Like if you do it on the civilian side, it seems like it is more lenient than in the army. The Army side is ridiculously strict.”). This requirement may have a positive influence on members maintaining the required weight and shape, but it also places certain pressures on them. Second, the *Partnership* theme emerged in the discussions that the children of military families tend to be more physically active when their parents are active. This theme shows the importance of parents’ actions and partnerships with their children. The *Negative Fat Talk* theme emerged in discussions when they talked with their children at home. Some participants knew that negative verbiages (e.g., fat or chubby) were not appropriate to use for their children at home, while others used these verbiages. The *Encouraging Communication* theme explains the importance of interaction and positive discussions about healthy attitudes and behaviors (e.g., “I tried to motivate her to eat healthier and exercise a little bit more.”).

Conclusion and Implications: Military requirements and the efforts of military personnel to conform to weight and shape requirements may affect their body image perceptions and food/exercise behaviors and those of their spouses and children. Interestingly, most of the participants emphasized their partnerships with their spouses and children. Furthermore, fat talk was found as a negative influence on a healthy body image; however, most of the military family members seemed to interact with their children positively regarding their body size and weight discussions. As a distorted and negative body image can be developed at an early age, it is important to understand how these perceptions are developed in different family circumstances. Also, parents can play an important role as an influencer, or a role model, for their children. Therefore, it is important to build their own healthy body images to positively influence their children. To understand this relationship, future research about military parents’ own body perceptions is needed. Future research about the difference between military and nonmilitary family should be conducted. Also, conducting discussions with children will provide more in-depth understanding of how they perceive body image in military family circumstances.

References available upon request