

Intergenerational Transmission of Parent Encouragement to Diet From Adolescence Into Adulthood

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Reference: Berge JM, Winkler MR, Larson N, et al. Intergenerational transmission of parent encouragement to diet from adolescence into adulthood. *Pediatrics*. 2018; 141 (1): e20172955

Did you know that nearly 40% of parents encourage their children to diet? While parents may be well intentioned, previous research suggests that encouragement to diet is associated with harmful outcomes including unhealthy weight control behaviors, dieting, binge eating, lower self-esteem, and a less favorable body image in children and adolescents. New research suggests that this harm may extend across generations.

A study by Berge et al (2018) examined 556 participants from the longitudinal Project Eating and Activity in Teens and Young Adults (Project-EAT) who completed data from both Wave 1 (1998-1999) and Wave 4 (2015-2016) of the study and were parents of 1 or more children aged 2 years or older at Wave 4. They selected parents of children aged two and older because previous research suggests that parents start to engage in diet and weight-related conversations with children as young as 2 years old.

The researchers hypothesized that adolescents who experienced parent encouragement to diet will be at higher risk for engaging in unhealthy weight-related behaviors, have higher weight status, poorer emotional health as parents, and will be more likely to carry forward this practice, along with other weight-focused communication, as parents with their own children.

Results of this study indicated that parent encouragement to diet in adolescence was associated with:

- Being female, younger in age, from lower SES households, having a BMI in the “overweight” or “obese” category, and representing an ethnic and/or racial background other than non-Hispanic white as an adolescent
- BMI in the “overweight” or “obese” categories 15 years later as parents
- Increased unhealthy weight-related behaviors, dieting, and binge eating both during adolescence and 15 years later as parents
- Negative emotional health in adolescence
- Lower body satisfaction both during adolescence and 15 years later as parents
- Increased risk of engaging in encouragement to diet with their own children
- Increased risk of talking to their own children about their children’s weight
- Complaining about their own weight in the presence of family members and family weight-talk as parents

The authors conclude that parent encouragement to diet appears to be passed down between generations. Adolescents who were encouraged to diet became parents who encouraged *their* children to diet and who had home environments with more weight-focused communication. This intergenerational transmission of encouragement to diet likely occurs through both direct communication and parent modeling. Prior research has consistently suggested harmful outcomes associated with dieting in adolescence and parent encouragement to diet including increased risk of binge eating, unhealthy weight control behaviors, dieting, lower self-esteem, and poor body image. It is likely that these harmful outcomes are being passed to future generations.

It is imperative that we educate parents about the risks of encouraging their children to diet. The American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines “Preventing Obesity and Eating Disorders in Adolescents” (2016) explicitly discourages dieting in adolescents. However, it is unclear how these recommendations are being transmitted from doctors to parents. We know that it takes time for guidelines to be implemented in clinical practice (some studies suggest as long as 17 years for research results to become common clinical practice). As eating disorder professionals, we can play a role in educating our patients about the risks of encouraging children and adolescents to diet.