

“Mom, quit fat talking—I’m trying to eat (mindfully) here!”: Evaluating a sociocultural model of family fat talk, positive body image, and mindful eating in college women  
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Can bashing your body in front of your kids increase their risk of disordered eating and body image dissatisfaction? Prior research suggests that family members directly commenting on a child’s weight is associated with an increased risk of disordered eating. This relationship seems to be mediated by the role of negative body image. However, few studies have examined the effect of *indirect* exposure to family communications about weight and shape. For example, how does a parent talking negatively about his or her own body affect a child’s body image and eating behaviors?

Webb et al (2018) examined the impact of overhearing family “fat talk\*” (which they defined as verbalizations of self-deprecating evaluations of one’s own body) on a daughter’s body appreciation and mindful eating. They posited that hearing “fat talk” from your family may reinforce notions of a thin ideal and self-objectification (the internalization of an outside observer’s perspective in relating to one’s body), which in turn may make women less attuned to body functionality and more focused on environmental or other external cues to guide their eating instead of eating mindfully.

The researchers assessed 333 undergraduate college women (mean age=19 years old). The sample was primarily White/European American (62%) and Black/African American (21%). Participants were assessed on measures of family fat talk (self-critical body-related conversations within the family context), body appreciation (acceptance of and respect for your own body), functional body appreciation (appreciation of your body’s capabilities), and mindful eating (one’s orientation towards food intake, along with awareness of related sensory properties).

Results of the study indicated that overhearing family members participate in self-denigrating body commentary (“fat talk”) was inversely associated with mindful eating, body appreciation, and body functionality. In other words, the more that people were exposed to family “fat talk,” the less likely they were to eat mindfully or to appreciate their body either generally or in terms of functionality. In contrast, more frequent mindful eating was associated with higher levels of body appreciation and body functionality. Based on their analyses, the authors suggest that appreciation for body functionality may explain some of the relationship between exposure to family “fat talk” and mindful eating.

The authors conclude that even indirect negative body talk amongst family members can lead to less mindful eating, more disordered eating, less body appreciation, and poorer body image. Exposure to a family environment with negative self-objectifying body talk may undermine mindful eating processes as a result of decreased appreciation of the body’s functionality. They suggest that this may occur because mindful eating is an approach centered on the embodied connection with the inner workings of how the body functions, particularly in respect to hunger, fullness, and satiation cues and lower appreciation of your body’s functionality may

disconnect you from these important internal cues. This study adds to a growing body of research supporting the harmful effects of negative body talk in the family environment.

\*Note: In the research study summarized here by Webb et al (2018), they use the term “fat talk” to describe negative body talk. I think this is a problematic term as it implies that fat is a negative attribute and describing oneself as “fat” is describing oneself negatively. The Health At Every Size<sup>®</sup> and Fat Acceptance movements are working hard to neutralize the word “fat” as a general descriptor, rather than a pejorative insult. The fact that negative body talk is termed “fat talk” speaks to the weight-bias that is prevalent in our culture at large, including the eating disorder community. What do you think? Join our conversation on the iaedpny Facebook page!

Reference: Webb J, Rogers C, Etzel L, & Padro M (2018). “Mom, quit fat talking—I’m trying to eat (mindfully) here!”: Evaluating a sociocultural model of family fat talk, positive body image, and mindful eating in college women. *Appetite*, 126: 169-175