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Understanding Body Image in African American and Caucasian First-Graders: A Partnership with the YMCA

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What Is the Purpose of the Study?

To examine parental influence on body image in African American and Caucasian first-graders through a CBPR partnership with the YMCA of Metropolitan Washington.

What Is the Problem?

Research suggests body dissatisfaction can develop by first-grade or 6 years of age, and may lead to eating disorders in adolescents and adulthood. Such pathology has been found to lead to severe dysfunction and even mortality. Parents seem to have significant influence on child body image. Few studies have examined the relationship between parental body image factors on child body image among this population using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach.

What Are the Findings?

- Significant body dissatisfaction among first-graders was found.
- Only 12.1% of first-graders were satisfied with their bodies.
- Of the 38 children of normal weight, 89.5% were dissatisfied with their current body size.
- Relationships did emerge between child and parent body image such that as parents' body dissatisfaction increased, so did their child's degree of dissatisfaction.
- The CBPR approach was critical to informing health-related programs across YMCA sites.

Who Should Care Most?

- Child psychologists, pediatricians, and other health professionals providing clinical services to young children.
- Health educators.
- Youth-centered community-based organizations (CBOs).
- Academic researchers.
- Parents of young children.

Recommendation for Action

- Increased research funding opportunities to explore body dissatisfaction among young children and its associated clinical implications.
- Educational and training programs for pediatric health providers about the development and contributing factors of body image disturbance in young children.
- Development of community-level programs and interventions targeting the promotion of positive body image among children and parents.
- Community-level education programs about child body image pathology for health educators and CBOs servicing youth and families.