

Preschoolers form body images—but parents are unaware, study says

October 5 2016, by Sharita L Forrest



Young children develop body image much earlier than parents believe, suggests a new study led by Janet Liechty, a professor of social work and of medicine at the University of Illinois. Co-authors of the paper were Julie P. Birky, a clinical counselor at the Counseling Center, and social work graduate student Samantha Clarke, both of the U. of I.; and University of Michigan communication studies professor Kristen Harrison. Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

Preschoolers may express awareness about body-image issues - but their parents may miss opportunities to promote positive body-image formation in their children because parents believe them to be too young to have these concerns, new research suggests.

University of Illinois eating disorders and [body-image](#) expert Janet Liechty, who led the study, said young children are forming their body images - positive or negative - far earlier than many parents expect and largely outside of parental awareness.

"Parents view early childhood as the 'age of innocence,' a time when children are free from body-image awareness or self-consciousness," said Liechty, a professor of social work and of medicine at Illinois.

"However, aspects of body-related self-concept such as healthy sexuality, body confidence, body acceptance and early signs of body size preference are all influenced by family socialization processes beginning as early as preschool."

While parents anticipate peer pressures and body comparisons when their children reach school age or adolescence, they may not recognize that their preschoolers are already exhibiting these behaviors or mimicking their parents' attitudes about size or weight, Liechty said.

Liechty and her co-authors interviewed 30 parents - 29 mothers and one father - to explore parental perceptions of body image in preschoolers. Each of the parents was the primary caregiver for their children, who ranged in age from just over 2 to nearly 4 years.

While a majority of the parents said they did nothing to influence their children's body image, the communication patterns they described to the research team revealed that they were conveying messages about body image routinely, albeit unconsciously. Despite most of the parents' beliefs that their preschoolers were too young to be concerned about

body image, 40 percent of the parents described their child exhibiting at least one body-related behavior, such as discussing weight, imitating comments about size or weight, or seeking praise for their appearance or clothing,

"Without greater awareness, parents may be missing opportunities to foster body confidence and acceptance in the early years so that kids are better protected from [negative body image](#) in adolescence," said co-author Julie Birky, a clinical counselor with the campus Counseling Center and an adjunct faculty member. "As a parent of preschoolers, it was empowering for me to realize that body image is being formed in these early years and to know that I can create a positive environment in my home to help my sons develop positive body image."

The researchers hypothesized that parents' rejection of the notion that preschoolers have body images may represent a protective rejection of the early sexualization of girls and the objectification of bodies that are prevalent in U.S. society. These parents also may be - wisely - shifting their children's focus away from their weight or shape as the basis for self-esteem, the researchers suggested.

While frequent commentary about children's physical appearance has been shown to be detrimental, and families should refrain from teasing or criticizing children about their appearance, avoiding discussions of body image altogether is not likely to be helpful either, Liechty said.

"This approach is reactive, rather than proactive - anticipating dealing with body image only if it becomes a problem," Liechty said. "This belief also may cause parents to miss opportunities to create a positive body-image climate within the family and foster resilience by reinforcing their child's confidence in their physical capacities - which is an important dimension of positive body image."

Emphasizing and affirming what children can do, rather than focusing on their body appearance or weight, has been associated with better body image among adolescents, according to at least one study.

Liechty added that strategies such as constantly telling a daughter she's beautiful or cuter than other children, as some parents in the study reported, may have the opposite of the intended effect - increasing a child's dissatisfaction with their body, priming the child to focus on external validation and promoting an unhealthy preoccupation with attractiveness.

The researchers suggest that a first step toward helping [children](#) develop positive body image may be teaching [parents](#) how to cultivate it within themselves - by focusing on what their body can do rather than how it looks, by learning to appreciate their body and fostering compassion for themselves when negative body thoughts occur.

Kristen Harrison, a professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan, and U. of I. [social work](#) graduate student Samantha Clarke were co-authors on the paper. The study was released online recently by the journal *Body Image*.

More information: Janet M. Liechty et al, Perceptions of early body image socialization in families: Exploring knowledge, beliefs, and strategies among mothers of preschoolers, *Body Image* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.08.010](#)

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