

Connection to racial identity may boost body image in Black youth

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Adolescence can be a time filled with anxiety and insecurity about body shape and size, but a new Penn State study found that for Black youth, having a strong racial identity may help stave off these worries.

The researchers found that among Black youth between the ages of 11 and 19 with high body mass indexes (BMI), those who reported a strong sense of [racial identity](#) also reported fewer [weight](#) concerns. This was true for both girls and boys.

The participants' sense of racial identity was measured by how much they agreed with statements like "I am happy that I am Black/African American/ part Black/African American."

Anna Hochgraf, graduate student in the department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) at Penn State, said the findings provide insights into how race may affect body image.

"Compared to individuals from other [racial groups](#) in the U.S., some evidence suggests that Black girls and women have an ideal of beauty that features curvy body shapes and larger body sizes," Hochgraf said. "For Black youth with overweight, racial identity may be protective against weight concerns because it promotes appreciation of larger body size and corresponding pride in appearance."

The researchers also found that the more fathers were involved in teaching their daughters about Black culture, the less likely their daughters were to report harmful weight concerns.

Adenique Lisse, research assistant at the Child Mind Institute and a former HDFS undergraduate and Schreyer Honors student at Penn State, said that taken together, results could inform prevention and intervention strategies designed to address weight concerns.

"Services that incorporate strategies for strengthening youth racial identity and promoting parents' racial socialization may be beneficial for Black youth," Lisse said. "Additionally, our findings about racial socialization suggest the importance of involving fathers of daughters as

much as possible."

The results were recently published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

According to previous research, concerns about weight often emerge during adolescence and affect approximately 78% of [adolescent girls](#) and 60% of adolescent boys. Other research found that these concerns can lead to poorer mental and physical health, such as low self-esteem, depressive symptoms and eating disorders.

"The term 'weight concerns' is used by researchers to refer to worries about [body shape](#) and weight, perceptions of having overweight, overemphasis of the importance of body weight and shape, and dieting behaviors," Hochgraf said. "Weight concerns are not healthy—they can lead to eating disorders and other psychological and physical health problems."

But, as Lisse noted, the majority of prior research on weight concerns focused on white adolescents and less was known about weight concerns among Black youth. Because racial orientations such as cultural values and racial identity can help shape beauty ideals, the researchers decided to explore how these factors might affect Black adolescents.

"Parents encouraging their children to embrace their culture and promote their pride in being Black may help them become resilient against majority culture messages about the 'thin ideal' of beauty," Lisse said, "Such parenting may also protect heavier Black youth from developing unhealthy feelings about weight. Plus, racial socialization may help form Black youths' body images and foster appreciation of [body](#) sizes that do not conform to the 'thin ideal.'"

For the study, the researchers recruited 132 two-parent families who self-

identified as Black or African American. The participants—mothers, fathers and youth—were interviewed at the beginning of the study and again a year later.

At both points in time, the researchers measured adolescents' BMIs and asked them about their weight concerns, such as "how afraid are you of gaining three pounds?" They also asked questions about their racial identities—for example, "I have a clear sense of being Black, African American, or part Black/African American and what that means for me."

The researchers also asked parents about how often they engaged in cultural socialization with their child, for example, "I've read or provided Black history books to my child."

Hochgraf noted that although they found that fathers' but not mothers' racial socialization was associated with fewer weight concerns among girls, mothers' racial socialization may still provide benefits for Black adolescents' psychological adjustment.

"Mothers' racial socialization may promote development of strong racial identity earlier in adolescence, setting the stage for the protective effects of youth racial identity that we observed in mid-adolescence," Hochgraf said. "There is, however, mounting evidence that girls' interactions and relationships with their fathers during adolescence have distinct implications for their weight concerns."

Hochgraf said that in addition to having implications for creating new prevention programs, the findings also suggest new directions for research.

"The field may have overlooked sociocultural risk and protective factors of relevance to youth of color that may help explain why some of these

youth develop weight concerns and others do not," Hochgraf said. "It's important to consider the distinct strengths and competencies of [youth](#) and families of color, and study how these may shape youths' psychological development and adjustment."

More information: Adenique A. Lisse et al, Weight Concerns in Black Youth: The Role of Body Mass Index, Gender, and Sociocultural Factors, *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/jora.12692](#)

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