Published in final edited form as:

Body Image. 2015 September ; 15: 8–15. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2015.04.006.

A Qualitative Analysis of Parents' Perceptions of Weight Talk and Weight Teasing in the Home Environments of Diverse Low-income Children

Jerica M. Berge, PhD, MPH, LMFT, CFLE¹, Amanda Trofholz, MPH, RD¹, Sherri Fong, MPH¹, Laura Blue, BS², and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD³

¹University of Minnesota Medical School, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, Minneapolis, MN

²University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL

³University of Minnesota, Division of Epidemiology and Community Health, Minneapolis, MN

Abstract

Research has shown that family weight talk and teasing are associated with child overweight status and unhealthy weight control behaviors. However, little is known about how weight talk and teasing are experienced in the home, how parents respond, and what factors influence whether weight talk and teasing occur. The main objective of this study is to qualitatively examine weight talk and teasing in the home environments of diverse low-income children. Parents (N = 118) from a mixed-methods cross-sectional study were interviewed in their home. The majority of parents (90% female; mean age = 35yrs.) were from minority (65% African American) and low income (< \$25,000/year) households. A grounded theory analysis found the following themes: weight talk contradictions, overt and covert weight talk/teasing, reciprocal teasing, and cultural factors related to weight talk/teasing. These themes should be addressed when developing family-based interventions to reduce weight talk and teasing in the home environment.

Keywords

Family; Weight Talk; Weight Teasing; Childhood Obesity; Diverse Families; Low-income

Prior research has shown that weight talk and weight teasing are associated with the onset of obesity, disordered eating behaviors (e.g., binge eating, fasting), early dieting, and psychosocial problems (e.g., depression, low self-esteem) in children (Balantekin, Savage,

Address for correspondence: Jerica M. Berge, PhD, LMFT Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, 717 Delaware Street SE, Room 424, Minneapolis, MN 55414, Voice: 612-626-3693, jberge@umn.edu.

Publisher's Disclaimer: This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final citable form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

Disclosures

Jerica M. Berge, Amanda Trofholz, Sherri Fong, Laura Blue, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Marini, & Birch, 2014; Bauer, Bucchianeri, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Berge, 2009; Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013, in press; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Haines, & Wall, 2006; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003; Fulkerson, Strauss, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Boutelle, 2007; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002, 2010; van den Berg, 2008). Of concern, many children report that family members are a main source of the weight talk or weight teasing (Balantekin et al., 2014; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). However, little is known about what weight talk and weight teasing actually sound like in the home environment. Given the negative consequences of weight talk and teasing (Balantekin et al., 2014; Bauer et al., 2013; Berge, 2009; Berge et al., 2013, in press; Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Fulkerson et al., 2007; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002, 2010; van den Berg, 2008), it is important to know more about the specifics regarding weight talk or teasing in the home such as, what types of weight talk and teasing occur in the home environment, why do families engage in weight talk or teasing, and how is weight talk and teasing handled in the home when it occurs? Additionally, knowing how parents view and respond to weight talk or teasing in the home environment may inform public health interventions regarding how to intervene with families to reduce these behaviors.

Previous research on weight talk and teasing in the home environment has focused on examining the consequences of family weight talk and teasing on children's weight and weight-related behaviors. Results of these studies have shown that higher amounts of parental encouragement to diet, parental encouragement to be physically active for weight loss, family-level weight teasing, or parent-to-child conversations about the child's weight, shape or size were associated with early dieting, unhealthy weight control behaviors, lower body satisfaction, and higher body mass index (BMI) in children and adolescents (Balantekin et al., 2014; Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013; Berge et al., 2014; Davison & Deanne, 2010; Fulkerson et al., 2007; Hanna & Bond, 2006; McCormack et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Another study examined the sources of negative weight-based talk for children (Hanson, Rowley, Maclehose, Neumark-Sztainer, & Berge, in press). Results showed that children experienced negative weight-based talk from at least one or more family members, which was twice as much as they heard from non-family members (e.g., friends, peers, teachers, other adults), and that siblings were more likely to be the source of negative weight-based talk. Furthermore, older brothers were the most common source of sibling negative weight-based talk, followed by younger sisters, younger brothers, and older sisters. Participants who endorsed hearing negative weight-based comments by a parent reported that mothers were the source almost twice as often as fathers. Additionally, exploratory results showed that negative weight-based talk by a family member was associated with higher unhealthy weight control behaviors in 9–12 year old children (Hanson et al., in press). Overall, previous quantitative research has shown that weight talk and teasing by family members and parents is common and is associated with higher weight status and unhealthy weight control behaviors in children. However, we are not aware of any studies that have specifically examined parents' own views of weight talk or teasing in the home environment. Qualitative research is needed in order to provide a more in-depth picture of how weight talk and teasing operate in the home environment in order to create

interventions that can reduce these conversations in the home (Pocock, Trivedi, Wills, Bunn, & Magnusson, 2010).

Additionally, it is important to understand more about weight talk and teasing in the homes of African American youth who are at high-risk for childhood obesity (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012; Ogden, Lamb, Carroll, & Flegal, 2010). This population is particularly important to investigate because there have been conflicting results regarding the effects of weight talk and teasing on African American youth. For example, some previous research has suggested that weight talk and weight teasing is less stigmatizing in the African American culture (Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson, 2005; Young-Hyman, Herman, Scott, & Schlundt, 2000), whereas other research has shown that weight talk and teasing is associated with unhealthy weight control behaviors and overweight status in African American adolescents at similar levels as youth from other diverse cultures (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010; van den Berg, 2008; Witherspoon, Latta, Wang, & Black, 2013).

Thus, to address the gaps in the field related to weight talk and teasing in the home environment, a qualitative approach was used in the present study in order to gather an in-depth understanding from parents regarding how weight talk and teasing are experienced in the home, how parents respond to weight talk and teasing when it occurs, and what factors may influence whether and how weight talk and teasing occur in the home environment. The following four research questions are examined in this paper: (a) What types of weight talk and weight teasing are occurring in the home environment?; (b) Why do families engage, or not engage, in weight talk and teasing?; (c) How is weight talk and teasing handled when it occurs?; and (d) How does one's culture influence weight talk and teasing in the home environment?

Method

Sample and Study Design

The Family Meals, LIVE! study is a 2-year, mixed methods, cross-sectional study designed to identify key risk and protective factors for childhood obesity in the home environment, such as eating family meals, parent feeding practices, family functioning, and family weight talk and/or teasing (Berge, Rowley, et al., 2014). The Family Meals, LIVE! study was guided by Family Systems Theory, which recognizes multiple levels of familial influences (i.e., parent-, sibling-, family-level) on a child's eating behaviors (Berge, Wall, Larson, Loth, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Bertalanffy, 1952; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Direct observational methods (i.e., family meal video-recordings) used in the study are described elsewhere (see Berge, Rowley, et al., 2014). Qualitative interviews conducted with parents in Family Meals, LIVE! were utilized in the current study. All participating family members provided consent or were assented into the study. All study protocols were approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board.

Children ($N = 120$) and their families from four primary care clinics serving primarily diverse and low income families in Minneapolis/St. Paul participated in Family Meals, LIVE! in 2012–2013. A recruitment letter from the primary care doctor was sent to the

child's primary caregiver inviting participation in the Family Meals, LIVE! study. Children and their families were eligible to participate if the child was between the ages of 6–12 years old and family members spoke and read English.

Parents/guardians ($N = 120$) were mostly mothers or other female guardians (90%) and were approximately 35 years old ($SD = 7.5$; range = 25–65 years). The racial/ethnic backgrounds of parents were as follows: 65% African American, 23% White, 5% American Indian, 5% Asian, and 2% mixed or other race/ethnicity; children were similarly diverse. Over 50% of parents were from very low socioeconomic status households ($< \$25,000$). The majority of parents had finished high school but had not attended college, and about 50% of parents were working full-or part-time.

Procedures

Families participated in two home visits, 2 weeks apart (Berge, Rowley, et al., 2014). In the second visit, a qualitative interview was conducted with the primary caregiver. Parents were interviewed by research staff who had been trained in conducting qualitative individual interviews (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). The qualitative interview guide was created to elicit parents' perspectives regarding several home environment factors that are potential risk or protective factors for childhood obesity (e.g., family meals, healthful eating, sedentary behavior). Weight talk and teasing were a main focus of the interviews because of the limited prior research examining specifics related to weight talk and teasing in the home environment such as, how and why families engage in weight talk and teasing, how parents respond to weight talk and teasing and whether culture influences weight talk and teasing in the home environment? The interview questions (see Table 1 for specific questions asked) allowed for an in-depth exploration of these key issues surrounding weight talk and teasing in the home environment.

Research team—Research team members included research faculty, full-time research staff, and research assistants who were graduate students. The research faculty were between the ages of 30–40 years, the full-time staff were between the ages of 25–35 years, and the research assistants were between the ages of 20–40 years. The team members represent a combination of Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Asian racial/ethnic groups. Before conducting any home visits or analyses, there was a series of research team meetings where cultural competence and sensitivity was discussed. During these meetings, presentations on cultural aspects of research and potential biases when conducting research with racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse participants were delivered by community members and our own research team members from the representative cultures of the participants in our study. Research staff and research assistants conducted all of the in-home visits in sets of two. Each set included one member who was Caucasian and one who was African American. They also conducted the interviews.

Analysis

Tape-recorded interviews ($N = 118$; two families did not complete the interview) were transcribed verbatim and a grounded hermeneutic approach was used to analyze the data, which is described below (Addison, 1999; Miller & Crabtree, 1999). All parent transcripts

were analyzed and coded to ensure saturation of themes occurred. During the coding process, the first 20 transcripts were coded by both coders (second and third authors of this paper) and then consensed. Once the coders reached 95% inter-coder reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994), every fifth interview was double coded and consensed. During consensus, both coders discussed questions in-person regarding quotes or placement of quotes in theme categories until 100% agreement was reached (Addison, 1999). NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software was used to organize and code the data.

Transcripts were coded using the three stages of grounded theory analysis, including: open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding stage, constant comparison using line-by-line coding was conducted to identify broad response themes based on the five specific questions participants were asked in the study (see Table 1). The broad themes were broken into sub-themes during the axial coding stage to organize participant responses across all content areas discussed by participants. Through selective coding, major overarching themes were identified across content areas and sub-categories were collapsed where appropriate.

Results

Results are presented according to the four main research questions examined in this paper. There were four main themes (i.e., none, overt weight talk/teasing, covert weight talk/teasing, and weight talk/teasing contradictions) found related to the first research question, “What types of weight talk or weight teasing are occurring in the home environment?” There were several sub-themes found related to the second research question focusing on why families do (i.e., doctor’s opinion, health concern, protection against teasing by others), or do not (i.e., own personal past experience, manners/respect for others) engage in weight talk and teasing. Three main themes (i.e., not acceptable/have rules, reciprocal teasing, no rules/acceptable) found related to the third research question, “How is weight talk and weight teasing handled when it occurs?” There were two main themes found related to the fourth research question focusing on whether cultural factors influenced weight talk or weight teasing in the home environment (i.e., culture does promote weight talk/teasing, culture does not promote weight talk/teasing). Frequency counts and percents for each theme or sub-theme represent the number of parents who endorsed each theme category or sub-category. In some instances parents could be coded in more than one theme category or sub-category.

It is important to note that parents used examples of weight talk and teasing interchangeably throughout the interviews. Thus, all findings are discussed in regards to both weight talk and teasing being seen as interchangeable. Table 1 includes additional quotes under each research question and theme that are not discussed below. All names in quotations in the text and in Table 1 have been changed.

Research Question 1: What Types of Weight Talk or Teasing are Occurring in the Home Environment?

There were four main themes found of relevance to the first research question regarding the types of weight talk or teasing occurring in the home environment: (a) weight talk/teasing

not occurring, (b) weight talk/teasing overtly occurring, (c) weight talk/teasing covertly occurring, and (d) weight talk/teasing contradictions.

Not occurring—About 29% ($n = 34$) of parents said that weight talk/teasing was not occurring in the home environment. Parents said, “No, we don’t do that [tease] here. We don’t tease each other, none of that.” and “No, that’s not even allowed here.”

Overtly occurring—About 17% ($n = 20$) of parents said that weight talk/teasing were overtly, or directly, occurring in their homes. For example, one parent said,

The perfect example is when I might say, ‘Oh, look at Susan with the big booty’ or ‘Chunky’. When I say those things to her, I don’t say it in a mean way, but someone who doesn’t live in our home would be like, ‘Oh, my gosh. She just called her daughter fat.’ You know, ‘Oh, my gosh.’ But, I tell her I would never call her heifer, or those names that you don’t want your children to hear, so I always clarify that to her. [African American, female, 35 years old]

Another parent said, “with my daughter I might say, ‘If you want to show your legs, then you got to stop eating’” [African American, male, 40 years old]. Another parent stated,

When my daughter first started to go to school, she’s telling me, ‘Mom, they’re calling me fat.’ And I’m like, ‘Well, there’s only really two things you can be, fat or skinny...everybody don’t look the same, we all different. So, you know, you’re just a little bigger than the other kids...if you don’t want to be bigger, then we’re going to have to work on your weight’. [African American, female, 33 years old]

Covertly occurring—Twenty percent ($n = 24$) of parents indicated that weight talk/teasing was occurring, but qualified that these comments were not outright or intentional to hurt someone’s feelings. Consistently families used the words “joking” or “playing around” as a way to describe how they used weight talk/teasing covertly in their family. One parent said,

We crack jokes, you know, amongst each other, and...they’re not to be hurtful. You know, I tell Timothy, ‘Well, those pants are getting kind of tight. You know, you’re getting a little big there.’ [African American, female, 27 years old]

Another parent said,

Oh, we just laugh and joke around...like someone might say, ‘Hey, you can’t even fit into those [clothes] anymore’ and they’re like, ‘Yeah, I know, if I wouldn’t ate those tacos...’ You know, always joking. [African American, female, 42 years old]

Weight talk/teasing contradictions—Eighteen percent ($n = 22$) of parents reported that weight talk/teasing was not occurring in the home, but within the same sentence or two they contradicted themselves by using weight talk/teasing in their description. For example, one parent said,

I don’t get on either one of my kids about their weight, although this past year, we did call Anthony bubble butt (laughs) just because he’s growing...and his butt is

getting bigger, but other than that, I don't think I've ever been on either one of my kids about their weight. [African American, female, 27 years old]

Another parent said,

I don't think we really have issues [with weight talk/teasing]. Sometimes we'll say something like, 'You need to do something; your chin's doubling.' You know, stuff like that. But other than that, it's never really been an issue. [African American, female, 36 years old]

Research Question #2: Why do Families Engage or not Engage in Weight Talk and Teasing?

Parents gave reasons both for and against engaging in weight talk/teasing. Within these reasons there were five sub-themes, as discussed below.

Reasons for engaging in weight talk/teasing—Parents (40%; $n = 47$) gave three reasons regarding why they engaged in weight talk or teasing in the home environment. The first reason was related to a *doctor's or professional's opinion* about their child's health. One parent said,

I tell her...she has to lose a little bit of weight...because the doctor talked to her about it [her weight]...she heard it from her physician, somebody that I feel she will trust...when it comes to her health. [Asian, female, 35 years old]

Another reason parents reported engaging in weight talk/teasing was because of their own *concern for their child's health*. One parent stated,

I told my kids how concerned I am about their weight. I've struggled with my weight all my life...I'll tell them, 'Well, the reason why I want us to do this stuff [lose weight] is because we have so many people in our family who are suffering and overweight.' [White, female, 33 years old]

Lastly, parents reported that they intentionally brought up weight talk/teasing with their children because they *wanted to protect their children from being teased by others*. One parent said,

...if it don't bother him when I say something like that [teasing], and I'm his mother, and I care more about him than anybody else in this world, it shouldn't bother him on the street when somebody else says it...so yeah, we tease each other like that, but it's to build character and to strengthen the skin so when you get into the outside world and somebody says, 'Oh you fat', 'Oh you skinny,' or 'Oh you ugly.' 'Okay, my mama called me worse. What else you got besides that? My mama done say it worse already so.' [African American, female, 30 years old]

Reasons for not engaging in weight talk/teasing—Many parents (50%; $n = 59$) reported that they did not engage in weight teasing with two reasons emerging as subthemes. The first reason for not engaging in weight talk/teasing was because parents had their *own past personal experience with weight talk/teasing from family or friends* and they didn't want their children to have the same negative experience. One parent said,

I recall being harassed by my family because I was a chubby girl, you know, and so I know that that's not how I want my daughter to feel, especially from somebody in her family. You know, so just from what I was taught influenced me how I live today. [Native American, female, 28 years old]

Another parent stated,

When I was growing up, if you were fat you were called on it...my brothers were not the nicest people to be around an issue like that, because they would tease and talk about me. They would be like, 'You need to not put that in your mouth because you can't afford to put on no more pounds' like it was kind of harsh...it influenced me to not go about it that way...[African American, female, 51 years old]

Another parent said,

Weight was a huge factor in my family my whole life growing up...my mom was always on a diet, and my dad was always saying she's never thin enough, and it was just always like everything centered around food and what you ate and how much you ate and if it would make you [kids] fat...and how important it was for us [kids] not to get fat...[African American, female, 37 years old]

Another reason parents gave for not engaging in weight talk or teasing in the home was because they wanted their children to have *good manners or respect for other people*. One parent said,

You know, from the female side of it...you never want to talk to a lady about her weight, or tell her, you know, she's got a big belly, you don't even want to mistake the big belly for a baby versus cookies. [African American, female, 43 years old]

Another parent stated,

Well, this is getting into my religious belief, I guess, but we're all children of God so we should be seeing God in everyone and so when you look at the faults in a person, that's not seeing a person as a child of God, it's seeing somebody with deformities. [African American, female, 65 years old]

One parent said, "I don't allow my kids to tease each other about their weight. I think that causes some self-esteem problems." [African American, female, 44 years old]

Research Question #3: How is Weight Talk and Teasing Handled in the Family When it Occurs?

There were three main themes found: not acceptable/have rules, reciprocal teasing, or acceptable/no rules about weight talk and teasing.

Not acceptable—Several parents (25%; $n = 30$) stated that weight talk and teasing were not acceptable in their household and that they would give consequences or punishment if it occurred. One parent stated,

I am really strict about it because, I know how it feels, and I know it's a very hurtful thing. It's not fun or funny and I know it can hurt so I be really strict about it, get on the person, punish them, and make them apologize and then explain how

that hurts by comparing it to another situation that would probably hurt their feelings...now you wouldn't like it if someone did something like that to you.
[White, female, 38 years old]

Another parent said, "Oh, her brothers will tease her [daughter] and she gets really mad and she'll cry. I punish them when that happens." [Asian, female, 45 years old]

Reciprocal teasing—About 36% ($n = 42$) of parents reported that weight talk/teasing was reciprocal in their household, that is, after someone got teased, they would tease the person who just teased them back. In addition, it was implied from parents' responses that this was how weight talk and teasing were handled, instead of pointing out the weight talk/teasing and then disciplining their child, they would allow family members to tease each other back-and-forth to "make it even." One parent stated, "In my household, they're just teased back, that's about it. They're just teased back." [Native American, female, 25 years old]

No rules/acceptable—Some parents (21%; $n = 25$) reported that they did not have any rules about weight talk/teasing in the home environment and that it was acceptable because "no one took it personal." One parent stated,

We don't really have any rules. You know, it's never been a negative thing in the household, you know like where Mark has told me that, you know, I'm fat, and now I'm in the bathroom throwing up. [African American, female, 36 years old]

Another parent said, "Well, most of the teasing is [directed] at me, so I kind of laugh it off. Just because it's them [children, husband], I can accept it better coming from family..." [White, female, 29 years old].

Research Question #4: How Does One's Culture Influence Weight Talk and Teasing in the Home Environment?

About two-thirds (65%; $n = 77$) of parents thought their culture emphasized weight and appearance to the point of promoting weight talk and teasing in their current home environments and almost one-third (31%; $n = 36$) of parents thought their culture did not focus on weight and appearance and thus did not think it influenced the occurrence of weight talk or teasing in their own homes.

Culture promotes weight talk and teasing—Parents identified specific cultural factors that influenced the occurrence of weight talk and teasing in their own homes. One parent stated the following,

I would say that being African American, a lot of people put a lot of emphasis on having a curvaceous body, like you know big breasts, big butt, wide hips, and stuff like that, and I try *not* to have my children continuously seeing those images on TV or magazines, or hear people talk about that girl's breasts and hips...I think those conversations can promote the teasing about someone's body or weight...[African American, female, 57 years old]

Another parent said of her culture,

Because you know, in our culture most African Americans are pretty you know big, obese or what have you...we just talk about it in a joking manner. Just poke fun...if you make everything fun, it won't seem so bad. [African American, female, 31 years old]

Culture does not promote weight talk and teasing—Some parents thought that their culture did not really influence their use of weight talk or teasing in the home environment. One parent explained,

“I don't know a lot of African American families in general that make weight a big deal. It's not a big deal, you know. I hear all these crazy stories: well, they forced a 10-year old on a diet; that's crazy to me. We don't do that. It's not a big thing, as far as ‘Oh, you're getting a bit thick. You need to lose some weight...but you don't make it a big thing as far as ‘Oh, you're going to be overweight. This is going to mess up your life. It could hurt your heart...you need to go run around the block eight times a day and keep your heart healthy and groove your body 20’—No, it just doesn't make sense. If you teach your kids to be well-rounded, and you teach them to like everything, and you don't down-talk anything that they try to do, they'll be well-rounded adults and they'll turn out just fine...no matter what culture they are.” [African American, female, 30 years old]

Discussion

Results from this qualitative study provide important insights to previously unaddressed questions about what weight talk/teasing sound like in the home environment, how weight talk/teasing are handled when they occur, and whether culture plays a part in whether families engage in weight talk/teasing in their own home environments. First, results indicated that weight talk/teasing was not occurring in about a quarter of households, but that it was occurring, either overtly, covertly, or as a contradiction, in almost two-thirds of families. For example, when weight talk/teasing was covertly occurring in the home it was often thought of as a “joke” or as “being playful.” Given the negative outcomes associated with family weight talk/teasing found in previous studies (Balantekin et al., 2014; Bauer et al., 2013; Berge, 2009; Berge, Maclehose, et al., in press; Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Fulkerson et al., 2007; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002, 2010; van den Berg, 2008), this finding may be key in helping interventionists to target joking or playing around as a form of weight talk or teasing in African American households.

Additionally, several parents contradicted themselves regarding whether weight talk/teasing were actually occurring in their households. This finding goes hand-in-hand with the earlier-mentioned phenomenon that parents used examples of weight talk/teasing interchangeably throughout the interviews. These findings suggest that many parents may not be aware that they are engaging in weight talk/teasing even when they are. This may be an important issue to consider when developing family-based weight talk/teasing interventions for children from African American and low-income households. For example, if interventions focus only on “weight teasing” families may think the intervention is not applicable to them

because they do not interpret their behaviors as teasing or being hurtful. Instead, family-based interventions may want to aim at helping parents and other family members become aware of when they are unintentionally using weight talk/teasing.

Results also indicated that parents reported engaging in weight talk/teasing in the home environment because of a professional's concern or their own concern for their child's health. Previous studies have shown that parent-child conversations about weight, shape, or size are associated with increased prevalence of disordered eating behaviors and weight status, whereas language promoting healthy eating is associated with fewer of these problems (Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013; Berge et al., 2014). Thus, it would be important for professionals working with parents, or family-based interventions, to focus on educating parents about how to talk with their child about eating healthy rather than engaging in weight talk/teasing.

Additionally, the finding that parents teased their children in order to protect them from being hurt by teasing from others outside of the family is a new finding that would be important to explore further and to address when creating family-based interventions to reduce weight talk and teasing in the home environments of African American children. It is expected that this type of teasing may backfire on parents and in fact, increase the weight status of their child, given prior research showing that weight talk and teasing are associated with overweight and obesity (Balantekin et al., 2014; Bauer et al., 2013; Berge, 2009; Berge, Maclehose, et al., in press; Berge, 2009; Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Fulkerson et al., 2007; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002, 2010; van den Berg, 2008).

In addition, parents reported not engaging in weight talk/teasing because of their own past negative experiences with weight talk/teasing from family or friends, or because it was not good manners/respectful and hurt other people's feelings. These findings are also potentially useful for interventions targeting weight talk/teasing in the home environment. For example, being able to address parents' concerns for their child's health, while reinforcing manners and respect for other human beings may provide intervention strategies that will resonate with African American families regarding why weight talk/teasing may not be the most useful way to address a child's weight. Additionally, having parents talk about their own past negative experiences with weight talk/teasing, especially intergenerational familial weight talk/teasing that may be particularly harmful (Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013; Berge et al., 2014), may help them find reasons for why they should not engage in weight talk/teasing with their own children.

Findings also suggested that parents had differing opinions about how weight talk/teasing should be handled in the home when it occurs. About one-third of parents endorsed that they allowed reciprocal teasing to occur (e.g., family members would tease each other back-and-forth as a way of getting even). Other parents stated that either consequences or punishment were given when weight talk/teasing occurred or that nothing was done because weight talk/teasing were acceptable. These findings suggest that interventions targeting weight talk/teasing need to include parental guidance regarding how parents should appropriately respond to weight talk/teasing when it occurs in the home. For example, it would be

important, based on previous findings showing negative outcomes of weight talk/teasing (Balantekin et al., 2014; Bauer et al., 2013; Berge, 2009; Berge, Maclehose, et al., in press; Berge, Maclehose, et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Fulkerson et al., 2007; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002, 2010; van den Berg, 2008) to educate parents about the importance of not engaging in weight talk/teasing and modeling these behaviors to their children. Furthermore, teaching parents how to set appropriate limits with their children in order to prevent teasing by other family members would be key.

Findings also indicated that over two-thirds of parents thought that cultural factors influenced whether they engaged in weight talk/teasing. These findings suggest the importance of identifying parents' perceptions regarding how cultural patterns of weight talk/teasing influence their own use of these tactics so that interventions can be tailored to African American families depending on whether they believe these factors are influential. This is a new finding given that previous research has been mixed regarding whether African American youth are affected by weight talk and teasing to the same degree as youth from other race/ethnicities.

Study results may also have implications for future research in regards to measurement. Themes generated from the current study can guide the development of quantitative measures of weight talk and teasing to be used with larger samples of racially/ethnically diverse groups of children. For example, when measuring weight talk and teasing in the home environment, it would be important to ask on surveys about (a) whether overt and/or covert teasing is occurring, (b) whether weight talk contradictions are used, (c) whether and how reciprocal teasing is used in the home, and (d) whether the parents/family members use teasing as a way to "toughen their child up for the real world." Additionally, measuring cultural influences on the use of weight talk and teasing would be important.

There are many strengths of this mixed methods study including a large sample ($N = 118$) for conducting qualitative analysis. The sample (low-income and minority) was also a strength because it allowed for addressing previous mixed findings regarding weight talk/teasing in the home environments of African American children. Additionally, the focus on weight talk/teasing is an important area in the field that has been understudied qualitatively. There are also limitations to the study that need to be taken into consideration. One limitation includes the lack of generalizability to other diverse populations, given that the majority of the sample was African American. Also, since interviews were limited to parents, we do not know if other family members' perspectives would match parents' perspectives of weight talk and teasing in the home environment. Future research including other family members would be important. Additionally, further examinations of intergenerational familial patterns of weight talk/teasing would be another important area of research to move the field forward.

Conclusions

This study provided an in-depth examination of weight talk/teasing in the home environments of children from minority and low-income households. Specific findings such as parents engaging in weight talk contradiction, overt and covert weight talk and teasing,

reciprocal teasing among family members, and cultural factors influencing weight talk/teasing in the home environment are important themes that should be addressed in the creation of family-based interventions to reduce weight talk and teasing in the home environment.

Acknowledgments

Funding Source: Research is supported by grant number R21DK091619 from the National Institute of Diabetes, Digestive and Kidney Disease (PI: Jerica Berge). Content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development or the National Institutes of Health.

References

- Addison, R. A grounded hermeneutic editing approach. In: Miller, W.; Crabtree, B., editors. *Doing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1999. p. 179-226.
- Balantekin KN, Savage JS, Marini ME, Birch LL. Parental encouragement of dieting promotes daughters' early dieting. *Appetite*. 2014; 80:190–196. [PubMed: 24858835]
- Bauer K, Bucchianeri M, Neumark-Sztainer D. Mother-reported parental weight talk and adolescent girls' emotional health, weight control attempts, and disordered eating behaviors. *Journal of Eating Disorders*. 2013; 1(1):45. [PubMed: 24999423]
- Berge JM. A review of familial correlates of child and adolescent obesity: what has the 21st century taught us so far? *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*. 2009; 21:457–483. [PubMed: 20306760]
- Berge J, MacLehose R, Loth K, Eisenberg M, Fulkerson J, Neumark-Sztainer D. Parent-adolescent conversations about eating, physical activity and weight: Prevalences across sociodemographic characteristics and associations with adolescent weight and weight-related behaviors. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. in press.
- Berge JM, MacLehose R, Loth KA, Eisenberg M, Bucchianeri MM, Neumark-Sztainer D. Parent conversations about healthful eating and weight: associations with adolescent disordered eating behaviors. *Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics*. 2013; 167:746–753. [PubMed: 23797808]
- Berge JM, MacLehose RF, Loth KA, Eisenberg ME, Fulkerson JA, Neumark-Sztainer D. Parent-adolescent conversations about eating, physical activity and weight: Prevalence across sociodemographic characteristics and associations with adolescent weight and weight-related behaviors. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. 2014:122–135. [PubMed: 24997555]
- Berge J, Rowley S, Trofholz A, Hanson C, Rueter M, MacLehose R, Neumark-Sztainer D. Childhood obesity and interpersonal dynamics during family meals. *Pediatrics*. in press.
- Berge JM, Wall M, Larson N, Loth KA, Neumark-Sztainer D. Family functioning: associations with weight status, eating behaviors, and physical activity in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2013; 52:351–357. [PubMed: 23299010]
- Bertalanffy, LV. Theoretical models in biology and psychology. In: Krech, D.; Klein, GS., editors. *Theoretical models and personality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 1952. p. 24-38.
- Crabtree, B.; Miller, W. *Doing qualitative research*. Vol. 3. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications; 1992.
- Davison KK, Deanne GD. The consequence of encouraging girls to be active for weight loss. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2010; 70:518–525. [PubMed: 19944507]
- Eisenberg ME, Neumark-Sztainer D, Haines J, Wall M. Weight-teasing and emotional well-being in adolescents: Longitudinal findings from Project EAT. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2006; 38:675–683. [PubMed: 16730595]
- Eisenberg ME, Neumark-Sztainer D, Story M. Associations of weight-based teasing and emotional well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. 2003; 157:733–738. [PubMed: 12912777]

- Fulkerson JA, Strauss J, Neumark-Sztainer D, Story M, Boutelle KN. Correlates of psychosocial well-being among overweight adolescents: The role of the family. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 2007; 75:181–186. [PubMed: 17295578]
- Hanna AC, Bond MJ. Relationships between family conflict, perceived maternal verbal messages, and daughters' disturbed eating symptomatology. *Appetite*. 2006; 47:205–211. [PubMed: 16701919]
- Hanson C, Rowley S, Maclehose R, Neumark-Sztainer D, Berge JM. Look who's talking: An exploratory study of negative weight-based talk and teasing among parents, siblings and non-family members of school-aged youth. *Journal of Youth Studies*. in press.
- Latner JD, Stunkard AJ, Wilson GT. Stigmatized students: Age, sex, and ethnicity effects in the stigmatization of obesity. *Obesity Research*. 2005; 13:1226–1231. [PubMed: 16076992]
- McCormack LA, Laska MN, Gray C, Veblen-Mortenson S, Barr-Anderson D, Story M. Weight-related teasing in a racially diverse sample of sixth grade children. *Journal of the American Dietetics Association*. 2011; 111:431–436.
- Miles, M.; Huberman, AM. *Qualitative data analysis*. 2nd ed.. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1994.
- Miller, W.; Crabtree, B. *Doing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1999.
- Neumark-Sztainer D, Bauer KW, Friend S, Hannan PJ, Story M, Berge JM. Family weight talk and dieting: how much do they matter for body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors in adolescent girls? *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2010; 47:270–276. [PubMed: 20708566]
- Neumark-Sztainer D, Falkner N, Story M, Perry C, Hannan P, Mulert S. Weight-teasing among adolescents: Correlations with weight status and disordered eating behaviors. *International Journal of Obesity*. 2002; 26:123–131. [PubMed: 11791157]
- Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Kit BK, Flegal KM. Prevalence of obesity and trends in body mass index among US children and adolescents, 1999–2010. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 2012; 307:483–490. [PubMed: 22253364]
- Ogden CL, Lamb MM, Carroll MD, Flegal KM. Obesity and socioeconomic status in children and adolescents: United States, 2005–2008. *NCHS Data Brief*. 2010; (51):1–8.
- Pocock M, Trivedi D, Wills W, Bunn F, Magnusson J. Parental perceptions regarding healthy behaviours for preventing overweight and obesity in young children: a systematic review of qualitative studies. *Obesity Reviews*. 2010; 11:338–353. [PubMed: 19780989]
- van den Berg P, Neumark-Sztainer D, Eisenberg ME, Haines J. Racial/ethnic differences in weight-related teasing in adolescents. *Obesity*. 2008; 16(Suppl 2):S3–S10. [PubMed: 18978760]
- Whitchurch, GG.; Constantine, LL. Systems theory. In: Boss, PG.; Doherty, WJ.; LaRossa, R.; Schumm, WR.; Steinmetz, SK., editors. *Sourcebook on family theories and methods: A contextual approach*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; 1993. p. 325–381.
- Witherspoon D, Latta L, Wang Y, Black MM. Do depression, self-esteem, body-esteem, and eating attitudes vary by BMI among African American adolescents? *J Pediatric Psychology*. 2013; 38:1112–1120.
- Young-Hyman D, Herman LJ, Scott DL, Schlundt DG. Caregiver perception of children's obesity-related health risk: A study of African American families. *Obesity Research*. 2000; 8:241–248. [PubMed: 10832767]

Highlights

- Qualitative research on weight talk/teasing in diverse low-income households is limited
- Parents engaged in overt and covert weight talk/teasing and weight talk contradictions
- Parents reported reciprocal teasing among family members
- Parents reported cultural factors relating to weight talk/teasing
- Themes are tied to family-based interventions to reduce weight talk/teasing at home

Table 1

Additional Quotes from Themes and Sub-themes of Qualitative Analysis*

THEME or SUB-THEME	QUOTE
Research Question #1: What types of weight talk or teasing are occurring in the home Environment?	
Theme: Weight Talk/Teasing Not Occurring	
	I'm not down with any kind of teasing, especially about weight or appearance, that's not right. [African American, female, 31 years old]
	Well, we don't tease them about their weight or appearance or anything because we know how hurtful that is by me being heavy all my life. [White, female, 33 years old]
	Um, that never happens. We don't tease nobody...nobody, don't talk about nobody's weight or none of that. [African American, female, 29 years old]
Theme: Weight Talk/Teasing Occurring	
Sub-Theme: Overt Weight Talk/Teasing	I say, 'You're fat.' (laughs) 'You're fat, and you need to do something to lose that weight.' I'll say... 'Well, you're going to have this, this, and this if you don't get rid of the weight. I'm having all these health problems because I didn't do this, this, and that. I'm telling you right now [to lose weight].' I'm, pretty straightforward. [African American, female, 43 years old]
	We're like, 'Matt' you gained a few pounds... you've got to stop eating all that junk.' [White, female, 37 years old]
	I tell my daughter all the time, you have to dress for your weight. The tighter the clothes, the bigger you look. Or you need to wear them comfortable. You don't want them snug, it shows more. You want them comfortable loose it hides everything, you know, just different stuff like that or if that shirt's too snug put a jacket or a sweater over it. [African American, female, 38 years old]
	...he [son] eats a lot and the first thing we do is like, 'Dang, fat boy! You just eating up all the food!' [African American, male, 43 years old]
Sub-theme: Covert Weight Talk/Teasing: Joking or Playing Around	...he [husband] knows it's a touchy subject for me, and so like when he wants to bother me, of course, still on a joking level, if I'm ignoring him, like if I'm reading my book, and he's trying to get my attention, he'll know to come up and grab my belly. (laughs) You know what I mean? And then that will have my attention. [African American, female, 34 years old]
	It's always a joking matter, never nothing like oh, I'm going to hurt your feelings, stuff like that...and the weight thing, we tell Jason he has a big belly, because he has always been a chunky baby, and he does this little sexy not sexy thing with his stomach, so it's just so funny when he does that... [African American, female, 26 years old]
	...we use it [weight talk/teasing] like comedy, like 'Aw, you're chunky...so we just joke about it and never use the word 'fat'. [African American, female, 30 years old]
	It comes up in jokes, just literally, not just ten minutes before you all walked in Jennie's like 'Your butt looks huge in those pants' (laughs) I was like 'Well, thank you.' You know, she was like 'No, I'm just telling you, it looks Ginormous' (laughs) and I'm just like, well, dang. Here I am working out 6 days a week, and it's not working. (laughs) So, that's how it comes up and it wasn't hurtful, you know...that's just how you express it. If you take it personal, it probably needed to be taken personal, but we don't, it doesn't bother us, I mean, we just, just let it roll. [African American, female, 26 years old]

THEME or SUB-THEME	QUOTE
Sub-theme: Weight Talk/Teasing Contradictions	Nobody really gets teased. I mean, Nathan and his brother, you know, they'll call each other fat or whatever. [White, female, years old]
	We don't really discuss weight that much, I mean these guys always say I need to lose some weight... [Native American, female, 42 years old]
	We don't tease about weight....I tease Tim about his ears, saying 'Tim has big ears' but he says I have big ears too (laughs)...and the weight thing, we tell Jay he has a fat belly, because James always been a chunky baby. [African American, female, 26 years old]
Research Question #2: Why do families engage or not engage in weight talk and teasing?	
Theme: Reasons for Engaging in Weight Talk/Teasing:	
Sub-theme: Doctor or Professional Opinion	The doctor told me he was worried about her weight...now I tell her to 'not have seconds' or 'no dessert for you because you need to lose weight'. [Asian, female, 34 years old]
	...his teacher said I need to tell him to not eat so much at lunch, 'no seconds for him' because he is 'going to get fatter'. [Mixed race, female, 31 years old]
Sub-theme: Health Concern for Child	I don't want them to be like my uncle, who has diabetes, and my mom, who has diabetes, and my cousins who have diabetes, and just all of these people in our family who are affected by it. And I do believe obesity affects their lives, and I don't want them to grow up that way. [African American, female, 35 years old]
Sub-Theme: Parental Intentional Decision; To protect their child from being teased by others	I do tease them sometimes...and their Dad does too...I'll say, 'You know you're kind of chunky you need to push back from the table a little bit' (laughs) or something like that...and they don't like it. But I tell them, 'you got to slow down a bit'...I don't want others to tease them about it first. [African American, female, 36 years old]
	...I try to bring it up, you know, gently, but sometimes it may not be very gentle because I'm concerned, I'm truly concerned...that he'll get teased by others. And I remember being there, I was the fattest kid in the classroom. You know, and I don't want them to be, fat...to be teased. [White, female, 32 years old]
Theme: Reasons for not Engaging in Weight Talk/Teasing:	
Sub-Theme: Own Personal Past Experiences with Weight Talk/Teasing from Family or Friends	Well, we don't tease them about their weight or appearance or anything because I know how hurtful it is and I let the boys know that I have been heavy like that all my life and I've heard everything that a person could say about a fat person. I said, 'I've heard it all and I don't want to hear it from you.' You know, if you have to say something, say something good, so that's what they do. [White, female, 35 years old]
	As a result of being an overweight child, I received a lot of negative—'You need to lose weight' 'This is not good for you' and kind of put-downs and criticism. So I try to take a lighter approach just be encouraging the healthier snacks and healthier foods. [White, female, 44 years old]
	I guess I'm a little sensitive about it because I was big, and I'm still big (laughs) you know what I'm saying? My whole life, my dad was real mean to me and I wouldn't never do that to my kids, you know, so I'm very sensitive to it.
	...there are things that you just say...I'm going to work really hard not to do that...and that [weight talk] was one. Physical appearance was really important to my mother, so that was kind of hard...I have football shoulders according to my mother. [African American, female, 40 years old]

THEME or SUB-THEME	QUOTE
Sub-theme: Manners/Respect for Others	I want them to have manners, you know, like not teasing nobody. Things that I wasn't able to receive in my household when I was growing up I want them to have...I try to teach them the opposite way of how I was brought up. [African American, female, 35 years old]
	We don't do that in my household, because personally, I don't think I would like anybody to tell me 'You're fat.' [Asian, female, 39 years old]
	...We try not to talk about anybody that's overweight or obese or whatever, because it's not nice. I have a granddaughter that's really obese. Her name is Jennifer and she is like about maybe 5 foot 4 and weighs like almost 300 pounds. So they don't say nothing to her because it would hurt her feelings...they just run to her and hug her. And we never talk about her weight. [African American, female, 60 years old]
Research Questions #3: How is weight talk and teasing handled in the family when it occurs?	
Theme: Not Acceptable/Have Rules	...it's not acceptable, so it's addressed right away...there's no teasing about weight or they get punished. [White, female, 43 years old]
	We just tell her not to do that because she does it a lot with her little cousin...she's a little obese, she's 7, and she weighs 100 and something pounds right now...I'll just tell her, 'that's not nice, don't do that, you're being a bully to your cousin'. [African American, female, 42 years old]
	It's not okay for them to do it [tease] to each other, it's not okay for them to do it to other people, and it's not okay for other people to do it to them. [African American, female, 31 years old]
Theme: Reciprocal Teasing	Everyone just teases everyone else...you know, back and forth teasing about weight...especially between the kids. [Mixed race, female, 35 years old]
	...they just kind of go back and forth with the teasing...if he [son] says something like, 'Oh, wow. You are getting big.' She'll [daughter] say something like, 'those pants are getting a little tight, you know' and they're used to messing with one another about it. [African American, female, 37 years old]
Theme: No Rules/Acceptable	There's no rules because it's [weight teasing] not a big deal. [Native American, female, 33 years old]
	They don't take it personal. [African American, female, 29 years old]
Research Question #4: How does one's culture influence weight talk and teasing in the home environment?	
Theme: Culture Does Influence Weight Talk/Teasing	The African way is, it's not politically correct—like people will be like 'Oh, you're fat.' It's not like taboo to say that. And the person who's fat, is usually not like sensitive—they won't be like 'Oh, my God. You just said that to me? That hurt me.' [African American, male, 38 years old]
	We have a culture that is just so rude sometimes...it's like a lot of times people are so bold and say it [weight teasing] and don't care if it hurts someone's feelings or not so...[African American, female, 30 years old]
	I'm very conscious of...the way that I talk to my daughter...in my culture, it's commonplace to kid or joke in a very unfriendly way where I don't think it's kidding. I think that there's like a lot of people say what they're feeling, but they disguise it as kidding. [African American, female, 32 years old]
Theme: Culture Does Not Influence Weight Talk/Teasing	I don't think it really matters, because, I mean as far as the cultural aspect, everybody's different whether they're in the same culture or not...in my household I don't think the culture part matters, because my kids are going to be who they are regardless of their culture or whatever background people think they have. So whether their weight is an issue or not, it's not going to affect them or me because

THEME or SUB-THEME	QUOTE
	of our culture. [Mixed race, female, 35 years old]
	No, culture doesn't matter...if people tease or joke about someone's weight it's just because they would do it anyways. [African American, female, 46 years old]

*
All names have been changed.