A Randomized Experiment Examining the Role of Weight-Focused Message Framing on Parental Weight Talk Among Diverse Parents

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Background & Objective

- Health messages framed within the context of controlling body weight can negatively impact motivation to make health changes.
- Parental weight talk (e.g., encouraging a child to lose weight) is associated with poor outcomes.
- It is unknown how health messages featuring childhood obesity affects parental weight talk.

This study examined the effects of exposure to parent-targeted health advice that emphasizes either a weight-framed or non-weight framed message on parental intentions to engage in weight talk and health behaviors.

Participants & Design

Randomized, controlled, online experiment in which 452 parents with a child between the ages of 6 and 17 were randomly assigned to one of three conditions:

1) Read a mock news article with health advice for parents emphasizing obesity (weight-frame)
2) Read identical health advice but framed within the context of improving children's school performance (school-frame)
3) No intervention control group

Main Effects

- Parents in the weight-frame condition were significantly more likely to report intention to engage in weight-focused conversations with their child than participants in the control group (B= 60, P= .05, p=.003), while there was no significant difference between the school-frame condition and the control group.

Results (cont.)

Moderation

- Parents in either the weight or school-frame condition only had greater intentions to adopt the healthy behaviors, relative to the control group, when WBI was low, but had similar or somewhat less intention to engage in the recommended health behaviors when WBI was high.

- Race/ethnicity, gender, or income did not moderate any of the tested relationships.

Bottom Line: Parents who have internalized negative beliefs about their own body weight may feel less inclined to adopt healthy behaviors when encouraged to do so, regardless if the encouragement references body weight or not.

Conclusion

- Parent-targeted health advice that features childhood obesity prevention may inadvertently encourage parents to engage in weight talk with their children, which can have physical and psychological consequences.
- Public health interventions should reconsider focusing on body weight in health campaigns targeting parents.