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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Impact of Teasing on Children's Body Image

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Abstract Being teased about one's physical appearance in childhood has been found to have a strong impact on the way in which adolescent and adult women perceive their bodies. Teasing is also strongly related to self-esteem in children. However, little is known about the impact of teasing on the development of body image in childhood. Through a quantitative study of the experience of being teased and body image satisfaction in a group of 431 primary aged children, we examined the prevalence, type and impact of teasing on children's perceived body image satisfaction. The results of our study indicated that many children, especially those who are over or underweight experience being teased. This experience does have a negative impact on children's body image. This is especially significant for young girls and boys who are overweight. Underweight young boys also suffer negatively from this experience. It is important for parents and others to understand that what may be perceived as friendly banter with their children may not necessarily be innocuous. Further research exploring the concept and construct of teasing in childhood is warranted.

Keywords Teasing · Body image · Perceived body image satisfaction · Weight

Undeniably, teasing is something we have all experienced and can relate to. The act of teasing and the experience of being teased are common occurrences throughout the developmental years. Ranging from the positively experienced games of "peek-a-boo!" in infancy through to sometimes very malevolent teasing experienced during adolescence (Warm, 1997), teasing in varying guises can play an important role during development; particularly in the teaching of social rules and roles (Keltner et al., 2001).

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One important normative social value, which appears to be associated with developmental issues, is that of body image (Croll, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Ireland, 2002; Grogan & Wainwright, 1996). Whilst previously believed to be a particular concern primarily in adolescent and young adult females, more recent research has shown that body image, in particular negative attitudes towards one's body is also prevalent amongst males (Grogan & Richards, 2002; Kostanski, Fisher, & Gullone, 2004; McCreary & Sasse, 2000) and pre-adolescent populations (Grogan, 1999; Kostanski & Gullone, 1999). Of concern, elevated levels of body image dissatisfaction amongst children and adolescents have been found to be strongly related to a reduction in self-esteem, depression, restrictive and other forms of unhealthy eating, and exercise addiction.

Given the prevalence of teasing related to appearance that has been found be quite high amongst young children and adolescents (i.e., Rieves & Cash, 1996; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003; Shapiro, Buameister, & Keisler, 1991; Thompson, Fabian, Moulton, Dunn, & Altabe, 1991), it is interesting that to date little research has been conducted into examining the relationship between this experience and the development of negative body image attitudes in pre-adolescence. As noted by Keltner et al. (2001) and others (e.g., Shapiro et al., 1991), although much of the behaviour and intentions associated with teasing can result in it being a benign experience, for some it can have an extremely negative impact. Thompson et al. (1991) argued that this is particularly so when the teasing is derisive and relates to sensitive topics such as shape or weight. Such an argument has been supported by others (i.e., Wertheim & colleagues, 1997), who have found that whilst adolescents' experiences of being teasing about their weight by their friends was recognized as a form of being taunted, the adolescents frequently took these taunts as reflecting a truth about themselves. Similarly, others have indicated that whilst teasing may be considered a component of normal developmental behaviour, it is also a strongly identified component within victimization and bullying processes (i.e., Neufeld, 2002; Roberts & Courosol, 1996; Roberts & Morotti, 2000).

In his investigation of the role of teasing in development, Warm (1997) found that the style and act of teasing changed throughout development from early childhood to adolescence. His research indicated that teasing behaviours by children were predominantly motivated by a sense of sadistic pleasure. However motivations did vary and also included playful and benign forms of teasing in adolescence. In addition, Warm (1997) found that teasing could be categorized into three independent types, including hurtful; mean; and symbolic. "Hurtful" teasing, identified as acts of physical aggression such as pinching and pulling away one's chair, was found to be quite prominent in the earlier school age years, representing 40% of all teasing. However, this form of teasing declined by grade three and remained quite low thereafter, representing only approximately 10% of all teasing in the older child and adolescent groups. "Mean" teasing was described by Warm as calling others aversive names. Such names were typically associated with actual physical defects or disfigurement in the target of the teasing. This type of teasing was found to be less prevalent in the earlier years but increased as the hurtful teasing rescinded in 3rd grade, finally peaking at around 40% in sixth grade children. By adolescence, this form of teasing decreased such that by eighth grade it was only slightly more prevalent than hurtful teasing. By 11th grade, it represented less than 20% of all teasing.

The third form, "symbolic teasing," was described by Warm as the form of teasing associated with playful games, abstract thought processes, physical gestures and derision. Therefore, symbolic teasing ranged from the benign games associated with development and playfulness through to derisive actions and words associated with put-downs, rejection and humiliation. Symbolic teasing was relatively common in middle childhood, and increased

dramatically from sixth grade into adolescence. By eighth grade, symbolic teasing had increased so that it now represented over 70% of teasing, further increasing to 80% of all teasing by 11th grade. This form of teasing was most commonly associated with aspects of the target's appearance, such as weight.

Research within the area of body image attitudes and dysfunctional eating behaviours has indicated that retrospective accounts of appearance related (mean) teasing in childhood is strongly associated with current negative body image attitudes in older females. The recall of experiences of being teased in childhood has also been found to be a significant predictor of subsequent eating pathology in older adolescent girls and adult women. For example, in a study of teasing and body image amongst a sample of 111 college women, Cash (1995) found that 72% of the women reported having experienced appearance-related teasing/criticism throughout their middle childhood and early adolescent years, with a duration spanning two to six years. Over 70% of those who reported teasing experiences recalled this experience to be moderately (29%) or severely (42%) upsetting. According to Cash (1995), facial characteristics (41%) and weight (31%) were the most frequently cited foci of the teasing, with 45% of respondents recalling one or more nicknames with which they had been labeled. The recalled severity of teasing amongst these women was significantly correlated with negative body image evaluations and negative affect.

In a subsequent study, Rieves and Cash (1996), found that appearance-related teasing, sibling social comparisons and perceived maternal modeling of body image attitudes and behaviours independently, as well as additively, explained variance in current body image amongst a sample of 152 college women, aged 17–35 years. Teasing was found to account for 15% of the variance in appearance self-evaluation and 16% of appearance schemata. The most common attributes subjected to teasing were features of the head and face (45%) and weight (36%). Friends in general were reported to be the most prevalent perpetrators of teasing (62%), closely followed by family members, especially brothers.

Although these studies have demonstrated a strong positive relationship between teasing and negative body image attitudes in older adolescent females, most have been based on participants' retrospective accounts of events and relationships. As noted by Willet et al. (1998), and others (e.g., Henry, Moffit, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994; Lin, Ensel, & Lai, 1997), retrospective recall of both psychological status and social events is confounded by the simple passage of time, present affective state and the individual's current relationship with the previous event. Therefore, such data are not necessarily reliable.

In order to address this limitation, Thompson, Coovert et al. (1995), conducted a longitudinal investigation into the impact of current teasing on the development of body image satisfaction and subsequent eating disturbance. Within a sample of adolescent girls ($n = 87$, age range 13 to 18 years) and over a three-year period, their study examined the potential covariance of identified latent variables including maturational status, body weight and teasing experiences in predicting body image dissatisfaction, subsequent dieting and global psychological functioning. These authors found that teasing and level of obesity at time one predicted levels of weight and appearance dissatisfaction at time two. More importantly, Thompson and colleagues found that the level of obesity alone had no independent effect on body image. Rather, being overweight was a risk factor for being teased about weight, size and overall appearance. Teasing was found to be a mediating factor for subsequent negative body image attitudes.

The above study provides strong support for the premise that appearance-related teasing can have damaging outcomes; in particular negative body image attitudes. However, their research, although prospective, remains reliant on a simple linear causal model between two stages of development in adolescence (Willet et al., 1998). As such, whilst it does demonstrate

that there is a strong indication of teasing being a predictor of body image dissatisfaction in adolescence, it does not address the issue of whether these experiences are also prevalent within young populations. That is, whether the association between teasing and body image attitudes occurs much earlier in one's development.

There remains a paucity of research investigating these relationships in childhood. Similarly, aside from Warm's (1997) research, there is limited understanding of the actual structure of mean teasing amongst children. The purpose of our study was to address this major gap in the literature. The primary aim of the study was to explore the extent to which children perceive they are being teased about their weight in childhood, and the relationship between these perceptions of weight-related teasing and body image dissatisfaction in a pre-adolescent population. Second, the study examines the form that this teasing takes.

On the basis of children's self-reports relating to weight related teasing, global body image dissatisfaction, and restrictive dieting behaviours, our study provides an understanding of the prevalence and structure of teasing associated with weight issues in childhood. We hypothesized that children who are outside of the 'normal' weight for height range will be more likely to report being teased about their weight than 'normal' weight children. Moreover, we proposed that children who report being teased would have a higher level of body image dissatisfaction than those who do not. Finally, we hypothesized that mean teasing, such as calling one derogatory names associated with their weight, will be a significant factor in predicting dieting behaviour in middle childhood.

Method

Participants

The data were drawn from the first stage of a prospective study examining body image and eating behaviours amongst pre-adolescent children. A sample of 431 school children in grades two, three and four, drawn from 10 primary schools (6 public and 4 private) across the Melbourne metropolitan region, participated in the study. The participating schools and classes were selected on a stratified random basis to represent a broad section of socio-demographic and economic sectors of Australian urban school children. Of those persons invited to participate, only three did not receive parental/guardian consent, and two were absent from school on the days of data collection. The final sample consisted 199 boys and 232 girls, within the age range of 7 to 10 years ($M = 8.8$ years, $SD = 0.92$). An independent samples t-test indicated no significant differences in age distribution between boys and girls ($t = -.49$, df $= 429$, $p > .05$).

Procedure

Following university and state educational ethics approval, school principals were approached regarding the study. Through those principals who were agreeable to the research being conducted in their schools, parental consent was sought. An outline of the study, incorporating a proviso of confidentiality, was distributed to all children in classes nominated by the school principal. The children were required to take these forms home to their guardians for consent. For those children who received guardian approval and personally indicated a desire to participate, administration of the questionnaires was conducted in a small group format within a quiet classroom provided by the school.

The researcher (first author) read out the instructions for each component of the questionnaire to the students, then assisted with reading the items of each questionnaire to the group as they worked through the set. Each set of questionnaires was administered in counterbalanced order to control for potential response set bias. Height and weight were also measured. Children removed both their shoes and jackets in order to accurately assess their height and weight.

Once all the data had been collected for each class, the researcher facilitated a brief, in class, discussion of the study, and invited the children to ask any questions they had in relation to the questionnaires. The children were also provided with the name and contact details of their school welfare teacher or coordinator, in the event that they desired to discuss any personal issues arising from the survey.

Instruments

Body mass index (BMI)

BMI is the currently one of the most popular methods for assessing the individuals body mass distribution, and provides a normative measure for determining malnourishment or obesity in child and adult populations. Mean BMI (weight/height^2) in the current study was found to be 16.7 ($SD = 2.3$) for boys and 16.5 ($SD = 2.3$) for girls. Based on current Australian norms for children (Harvey & Althuas, 1993), 19% ($n = 37$) of boys and 24% ($n = 53$) of girls in the sample were classified as being overweight whilst 21% ($n = 40$) of boys and 28% ($n = 62$) of girls were classified as underweight.

Teasing

Given the paucity of research conducted in this area, for the purposes of the current study a self-report questionnaire comprising three items was developed. The items assessed teasing experiences. Students were required to answer 'yes' or 'no' to each item. The items were: "My friends tease me about my weight"; "My mother teases me about my weight." and "My father teases me about my weight." The form of teasing was assessed by asking the children that responded with a 'yes' to any of the items to specify the name-calling that they experienced (i.e., my friends call me ..., my father calls me ..., my mother calls me ...). Test-retest reliability of the measure was found to be adequate, with $r = .34, p < .001$ over an 18-month period (refer to Anastassi & Urbina, 1997). The measure provided a section for obtaining pertinent demographic information from the children, such as age, date of birth, and sex. Weight and height were also recorded on this form.

Figure rating scale (FRS: Collins, 1991)

This scale comprises a set of seven pre-adolescent figure drawings (male or female) ranging from very thin to obese, scored from 1 through to 7 respectively. Participants are required to nominate which figure they *think* looks most like them in the present (actual), and which figure looks most like they would like to be (ideal). The discrepancy between the actual and ideal measures on these two sets of ratings provides an indication of level of body image dissatisfaction. Collins (1991) reported three-day test-retest correlation coefficients of .71 for current self and .59 for ideal self. Tiggemann and Wilson-Barrett (1998), found a significant correlation between ratings of current figure and BMI (girls: $r = .53, p < .001$; boys: $r = .46, p < .001$). Similarly, amongst a group of young pre-adolescent children,

Kostanski, Fisher, and Gullone (2004) reported significant correlations between ratings of body image dissatisfaction and actual weight (boys $r = .43$, $p < .001$; girls $r = .50$, $p < .001$).

Children's version of the eating attitudes test: (ChEAT: Maloney et al., 1989)

The ChEAT is a modified version of the Eating Attitude Test (EAT-26) developed by Garner and Garfinkel (1979). It is a children's measure of dieting behaviours, food preoccupation, bulimia and weight concerns. The ChEAT is a 26-item self-report inventory based on a 6-point Likert scaling system ranging from "always" to "never." Examples of items include "I have been dieting . . ." and "I am scared about being overweight . . .." The most extreme responses (always, very often, often) are scored from 3 to 1, with the other three responses (sometimes, rarely, never) being scored 0. The ChEAT has been reported to have high internal reliability (alpha =.76) and test-retest reliability of $r = .81$. (Maloney, McGuire, & Daniels, 1988). For the purposes of our study, only the dieting scale was used to assess the pathological avoidance of fattening foods (as identified by Garner, Olmstead, Bohr, & Garfinkel, 1982). This subscale has been reported to be highly reliable (alpha = 0.90) and to correlate strongly with the total EAT-26 scale ($r = 0.93$) (Garner et al., 1982). Internal reliability for the current sample was found to be .70.

Results

For the purposes of analyses, categorical variables (i.e., teasing) were converted to dummy variables, whilst actual Body Mass Index (BMI) was divided into three groups (underweight, normal weight, overweight). In order to examine any additive effect of teasing, individual items were summed so that a cumulative or total teasing score (e.g., friends ± father ± mother) could be obtained. Non-parametric analyses were used to examine the relationship between sex, body mass and teasing experience. Inferential analyses, including univariate ANOVA and hierarchical regression were employed to examine the relationships between teasing, body image dissatisfaction and dieting behaviours.

Teasing

An examination of the children's reported experiences of being teased indicated that they were called a variety of names associated with their physical weight. These names ranged from skinny bones and spaghetti sticks through to fatso, pig and pumba (refer Table 1).

Overall, 15.3% of children experienced some teasing about their weight. As shown in Table 2, friends were reported to be the greatest perpetrators of teasing followed by fathers then mothers. A Cochran test indicated that these differences were significant ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 10.32$, $p = .006$). McNemar's pairwise post hoc test indicated that the differences between being teased by friends and fathers ($\chi^2 = 4.35$, $p = .04$) and friends and mothers ($\chi^2 = 7.22$, $p = .01$) were significant. There was no significant difference between being teased by mother and by father ($\chi^2 = .52$, $p = .47$).

As shown in Table 2, a higher percentage of boys reported being teased about their weight compared to girls. In relation to source of teasing, boys were more likely to report being teased by friends compared to girls. Experiences of being teased were also greater for those boys who were under- or overweight compared to boys of normal weight. The same was true for girls who were overweight compared to normal or underweight.

Table 1 Names used to tease children about their weight

Name	*n*	Name	*n*	Name	*n*
chicken legs	2	chubba/y	3	pumba	1
toothpick	1	fat/ty	13	fatty boomba	1
skinny	13	fat boy	3	fatso	6
skinny minny	5	fat mumma	1	pumpkin	1
boney bottom	1	dodo	2	(big) pig	3
(you're) too thin	5	(you're)too fat	2	plech	1
skinny bones	3	big boy/man	2	chucki	1
little skinny	1	fat girl	1	fat pet	1
spaghetti sticks	1	wombat	1	fat man	1
Total *n*	32		28		16

Note. Frequency of teasing is marginally higher than total teasing reported due to some children reporting two or more names being used.

Logistic regression analyses, with teasing as the dependent variable, and sex and BMI as the categorical predictor variables, indicated that both sex and BMI were significant predictors of being teased by friends ($\chi^2 = 18.52$, df $= 3$, $p = .00$, sex: $\beta = -.714$, df $= 1$, wald $= 4.103$, $p = .04$; bmi: $\beta = -1.58$, df $= 1$, wald $= 15.32$, $p = .00$). Neither sex nor BMI were found to significantly predict reports of being teased by father ($\chi^2 = 6.50$, df $= 2$, $p = .56$) or mother ($\chi^2 = 0.66$ df $= 2$, $p = .72$).

Relationship between teasing and body image dissatisfaction

To examine the prediction that children's reported levels of body image dissatisfaction would be significantly associated with their experience of being teased, further inferential analysis was conducted between these two variables. Given that the literature has indicated that both BMI and sex are significant predictors of body image dissatisfaction, these factors were also included in the analysis. As shown in Table 3, for children within normal body weight range, mean body image dissatisfaction levels differed marginally between those who reported being teased and those who did not. In contrast, for children within either the overweight or underweight ranges, mean body image dissatisfaction was consistently higher among those children who reported being teased compared to those who did not. Mean body image

Table 2 Percentage of children reporting being teased by parents and friends about their weight by sex

		Teasing			
	n	friends	father	mother	total*
Boys					
Underweight	40	17	5	8	20
Normal weight	115	8	7	5	14
Overweight	37	19	11	5	22
Total	192	13	8	6	17
Girls					
Underweight	62	3	11	11	18
Normal weight	109	3	2	1	5
Overweight	53	21	6	4	25
Total	224	7	5	5	14
Total					
Underweight	102	9	9	10	19
Normal weight	224	5	5	3	10
Overweight	90	20	8	5	23
Total	416	10	6	5	15

*Percentage total scores vary due to the cumulative effect of teasing (i.e., some children were teased by only one person, others by all three).

Table 3 Means and standard deviations for body image dissatisfaction by source of teasing, sex and BMI

	Boys				Girls				Total			
	Not teased		Teased		Not teased		Teased		Not teased		Teased	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Friends												
Underweight	0.15	0.67	0.38	0.85	0.04	0.65	1.00	0.00	0.08	0.66	0.50	0.79
Normal	0.18	0.69	0.05	0.81	0.23	0.62	0.00	0.00	0.21	0.66	0.04	0.68
Overweight	0.35	0.68	1.36	0.85	0.78	0.89	1.65	0.96	0.60	0.83	1.53	0.90
Total	0.15	0.69	0.34	1.11	0.26	0.74	1.01	1.24	0.21	0.72	0.61	1.20
Father												
Underweight	0.17	0.70	0.50	0.71	0.07	0.67	0.14	0.69	0.11	0.68	0.22	0.67
Normal	0.20	0.69	0.25	0.76	0.22	0.61	0.50	0.71	0.21	0.65	0.10	0.77
Overweight	0.35	0.62	2.13	0.25	0.92	0.97	1.67	0.58	0.69	0.89	1.92	0.45
Total	0.16	0.71	0.30	1.29	0.31	0.79	0.42	0.99	0.25	0.76	0.35	1.15
Mother												
Underweight	0.18	0.71	0.34	0.58	0.12	0.69	0.14	0.38	0.13	0.69	0.00	0.47
Normal	0.14	0.69	0.67	0.82	0.22	0.61	1.00	0.00	0.18	0.65	0.71	0.76
Overweight	0.44	0.72	2.25	0.35	0.96	0.98	1.00	0.00	0.75	0.91	1.63	0.75
Total	0.14	0.73	0.68	1.10	0.32	0.82	0.36	0.50	0.23	0.78	0.52	0.85
Cumulative												
Underweight	0.16	0.68	0.31	0.79	0.01	0.68	0.19	0.65	0.00	0.68	0.24	0.67
Normal	0.17	0.68	0.18	0.85	0.22	0.62	0.33	0.52	0.19	0.65	0.23	0.77
Overweight	0.29	0.62	1.44	0.82	0.75	0.89	1.60	0.89	0.56	0.82	1.55	0.85
Total	0.12	0.67	0.38	1.00	0.23	0.50	0.70	1.10	0.20	0.72	0.53	1.07

dissatisfaction was also shown to be greater for girls who reported being teased than for boys. However, for girls in the overweight BMI category dissatisfaction was highest even in those girls who did not report experiencing teasing. In contrast, for boys, dissatisfaction was markedly higher in the overweight category only for those who reported being teased.

In order to incorporate these observed differences into an exploration of the distribution of mean body image dissatisfaction amongst children of varying weight categories and sex, an interaction score between BMI and teasing was calculated. A hierarchical regression analysis, with the factors sex, BMI, teasing and the interaction score entered as the predictor variables and body image dissatisfaction as the dependent variable was conducted. The analysis indicated that these variables significantly predicted 22% of the variance in body image dissatisfaction scores (adj $R^2 = .22$, $F_{(4,411)} = 30.54$, $p < .001$). Independently, sex was not found to significantly contribute to the explained variance of body image dissatisfaction scores. However BMI significantly contributed over 18% to the variance in scores, and teasing significantly contributed a further 2% to the variance. The interaction score between teasing and BMI was found to contribute a further significant 2% of the explained variance in body image dissatisfaction scores (refer Table 4 for inferential data)

Given the significant interaction effect between BMI and teasing on body image dissatisfaction, the participants were reclassified according to their body mass groupings (i.e., normal, under—overweight) and two additional regression analyses were conducted. First, a hierarchical regression analysis conducted within the classified 'normal weight' group, indicated that sex, BMI, teasing were neither cumulatively, nor independently significant predictors of variance in body image dissatisfaction scores ($F_{(4,219)} = 1.11, p = .35$). Conversely, for those children categorised as 'outside normal weight,' the factors sex, bmi, and teasing were found to significantly predict 35% of the variance in body image dissatisfaction

Table 4 Regression analysis for variance in body image dissatisfaction and ChEAT scores by BMI and teasing

	Adj R^2	F	df	ß	t	p
Total population						
BMI	0.18	47.81	3,413	0.42	9.54	.001
teasing	0.20	35.75	3,412	0.14	3.10	.001
interaction	0.22	30.54	4,411	0.79	3.47	.001
Outside 'normal' weight						
BMI	0.29	40.58	2,189	0.54	2.86	.001
Teasing	0.35	32.66	3,188	0.21	3.47	.001
ChEAT						
BMI	0.09	42.18	1,414	0.30	6.49	.000
Body diss	0.11	26.26	5,413	0.16	3.08	.002

scores (adj $R^2 = .35$, $F_{(3,187)} = 27.84$, $p < .001$). BMI was found to independently contribute 29% of the explained variance in body image dissatisfaction scores for this group of children. Teasing uniquely contributed a further 4% of the explained variance in body image dissatisfaction (refer Table 4 for inferential data).

Teasing as a predictor of dieting behaviours

Dieting behaviours as measured by the ChEAT indicated that boys reported a mean score of 5.21 ($SD = 4.9$), whilst girls reported a mean score of 5.86 ($SD = 5.4$) (Total Sample: $M = 5.52$, $SD = 5.2$). An independent samples t test indicated that the difference in self-reported dieting behaviour between the two sexes was not significant ($t = -1.49$, $p = .14$).

To evaluate the predictive value of teasing in relation to dieting behaviour, a multivariate regression analysis was conducted with ChEAT scores as the dependent variable, and BMI, sex, body image dissatisfaction and source of teasing as the predictor variables. This analysis indicated that in total the predictor variables significantly explained 11% of the variance in ChEAT scores (Adj $R^2 = .11$, $F_{(5,412)} = 11.68$, $p = .000$). BMI and body image dissatisfaction independently contributed 9% and 2% to the variance in this equation. Neither sex nor teasing was found to contribute significantly to the equation.

Discussion

The primary objective of our study was to explore the extent to which children perceived they were teased about their weight, and its association with body image dissatisfaction in a pre-adolescent population. Given the limited knowledge that is available regarding this construct within the childhood literature, prior to examining this relationship it was also necessary to investigate the prevalence and form of weight related (i.e., mean) teasing within this population.

As with Warm (1997), our findings indicated that mean teasing is an active behaviour in middle childhood. Also, our findings showed that being the recipient of teasing in the form of derogatory labeling about weight related issues was reported by over 15% of the children. The nature of the teasing varied from calling underweight children spaghetti sticks

and skinny bones to calling overweight children fatty boomba, fatso and pumba (name of the wart hog in the movie "Lion King"). Whilst both mothers and fathers were reported to engage in this form of teasing towards their children, friends were cited as being the biggest offenders of this derogatory behaviour.

As predicted at the outset of our study, it was those children who were outside normal weight for height ranges that experienced greater levels of being teased. Importantly, our results further support research by Kostanski et al. (2004), who found that body image dissatisfaction is not necessarily related in a linear fashion to BMI. As such, problems in body image perceptions do not only arise as a consequence of being too fat. Indeed, children who were either under or overweight were more likely to report being teased about their weight, in comparison to normal weight children. This is an important finding particularly since the overwhelming majority of literature in this area focuses only on issues associated with being obese. It is considered that being obese is of major concern for one's physical and psychosocial well-being; moreover it is the issue of being obese that is most strongly associated with negative physical stereotyping within our society (Flannery-Schroeder & Chrisler, 1996; Hill & Silver, 1995). For example, previous research has indicated that children perceive 'fat' people as being the least preferred, as well as being lazy and most likely to lie (Feldman, Feldman, & Goodman, 1988), with little reference to other figure types. In contrast, there is very little indication in the literature that thinness is associated with anything but positive ideology amongst normative ideals, particularly for females. However, recent literature (e.g., Kostanski et al., 2004) does indicate that being underweight, or 'puny' is a serious concern for some, particularly young men. Indeed, body image dissatisfaction arising from this concern in young men is reported to be high, with current literature identifying this concept as a 'drive for muscularity' (McCreary & Sasse, 2002).

The results of our study support the notion that actual physiology does play an important function in determining social behaviours between children, in the form of negative verbal commentary. That being either under or overweight elicits teasing behaviour, particularly for boys is noteworthy. Our finding is consistent with previous proposals that there are strong socio-cultural pressures for boys to be strong and muscular (e.g., McCreary & Sasse, 2000), with being perceived as thin appearing to elicit as much derision as being overweight for middle primary age boys. Conversely for girls, the pressures appear to be associated with normative ideals that promote the ideology of females as being lean and willowy. Our findings indicate that one of the processes through which these pressures are applied is via negative verbal commentary.

The present finding of a significant relationship between body image dissatisfaction and teasing in our study is supportive of previous work with older female populations (e.g., Cash, 1995; Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Thompson & Heinberg, 1993). Specifically, being teased by one's friends, mother and/or father were found to independently, as well as interactively with BMI, predict body image dissatisfaction. However, compared to previous research with older groups, (e.g., Thompson & Heinberg, 1993), which has indicated that appearance related teasing is predictive of eating pathology, the results of the current study found that teasing did not contribute significantly to the variance in reported restrictive eating scores for children. This is an interesting finding, and possibly provides an indication of the genesis of body image dissatisfaction being a quite separate issue from eating dysfunction in the earlier developmental years. Previously reported prospective accounts of being teased as a child being related to actual eating pathology in later adolescence (e.g., Cash, 1995), may infact be tapping into issues of eating pathology and self-image attitudes which have evolved through enmeshment of emotional and behavioural attempts to cope with external demands and pressures. Thus, whilst teasing is not directly related to restrictive eating behaviours

in middle childhood, its actual presence may be suggestive of the beginnings of a long-term developmental issue in relation to health and well-being. It is only through further longitudinal studies that this proposal can be addressed.

Given that our study involved a cross-sectional rather than a prospective design, it is not possible to make conclusive claims about the order of effects. However, it maybe that being under- or overweight leads to being teased which, in turn, leads to increases in negative body image attitudes. Further, heightened levels of body image dissatisfaction for overweight children in turn then lead the to adoption of restrictive, and potentially dysfunctional eating behaviours, as a perceived practical means of solving the problem. Such a proposal is consistent with previous research amongst adolescent populations (i.e., Thompson, Coovert et al., 1995). However, as suggested previously and recommended by Willett et al. (1998), longitudinal research, incorporating several waves of data collection would need to be conducted prior to any firm conclusions regarding this cyclic pattern can be drawn.

Similarly, the examination of teasing experiences within the current study is limited to a singular, self-report evaluation of this behaviour. A more detailed and explicit examination of this behavior, incorporating a multiplicity of respondents, and possibly qualitative assessment would enhance our understanding of the covert as well as overt and structural context of such.

Despite these limitations, the findings have shown that a sizeable portion of children who do not physically fit within normal weight limits are subject to being teased, and report higher levels of body image dissatisfaction. This is consistent with previous literature (Keltner, 2001, Ross, 2003; Werthheim et al., 1997), which has proposed that teasing experiences are not innocuous or benign. Moreover, they are not normative. In contrast, the present findings indicate that the form of teasing reported by the current sample is most likely to be aligned with current literature (i.e., Roberts & Morotti, 2000, Ross, 2003), which has shown that teasing is a form of derisive bullying and can have serious detrimental effects on the psychosocial well-being of children, adolescents and adults. As with research amongst older populations (e.g., Cash, 1995), the primary perpetrators of this behaviour were found to be the child's friends, however parents were also implicated. As noted by Neufeld (2002), the actual process of adults tolerating teasing by not intervening, let alone engaging in the process themselves, sends a very powerful message that the use of hurtful words, surreptitious comments and harassment of others is an accepted part of 'growing up.' Furthermore, this implicit confirmatory behaviour on the behalf of parents acts as a strong reinforcement of the derisive messages regarding one's physical status, increasing the propensity of the child towards development of negative body image attitudes. This negative attitude, in combination with children's actual weight has already been confirmed as a strong predictor of pathological eating behaviours in adolescence.

Our study also offers a baseline from which to develop an understanding of this aspect of social behaviour on individual development in the formative years, particularly in relation to body image attitudes and eating behaviours. As noted by Warm (1997), cognitive development plays a major role in the form and impact of teasing. As such, between the ages of five and eleven years, 'mean' teasing becomes more pronounced as children learn to "harass with words." At the same time, the maturation of conscience and cognitive skills of the recipient influence how literally the teasing is taken and whether it is deflected or internalised. It would appear from the current study that the teasing being experienced by the children was heavily premised in a physical reality, thus could not be so easily deflected or dismissed. However, given that not all children who were outside normal weight limits reported being teased, important questions are raised regarding this experience. That is, were those children who were over or underweight and did not report being teased, actually not

being teased or were there other intrapersonal and/or developmental processes available to these children which meant they were not as easily impressed or vulnerable to being teased? Second, was the teasing that was reported by children the outcome of, or related to, other behaviours? Furthermore, are the frequency and intensity of the teasing behaviour important confounding characteristics in the adverse influences of the experience on body image beliefs and dieting behaviours (cf Thompson et al., 1995)? In order to answer these questions, future research examining the psychosocial status of children who are and are not teased, particularly their vulnerability to external influences is required. Moreover, a more exacting evaluation of the frequency, nature and intensity of this behaviour amongst a broad range of pre-adolescent children is needed. Importantly in order to address the question of whether teasing at this age is a precursor to future psychopathology (i.e., eating disorders), longitudinal research spanning the developmental years from childhood through adolescence is required.

What our study does provide is an understanding of the experience of mean teasing in relation to one's weight in childhood. As such it does provide a form of validity in relation to previous studies, which suggest that this behaviour does occur in childhood and could be a precursor to future dysfunctional attitudes and eating behaviours. Moreover, the outcomes of our study lay a firm foundation for future studies examining the prevalence, impact and relevance of this behaviour in childhood, not only in the immediacy of childhood, but prospectively.

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