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Research Methods 460-2

Parents as Promoters of Physical Activity and Diet

**INTRODUCTION**

Obesity has become prevalent in unhealthy lifestyles for many living in the United Sates. Increasingly, children and young adults are adding to the obesity rates with the percentages of these age groups doubling over the last 25 years. Although there are many campaigns targeting parents to promote children’s health in the United States today, childhood obesity rates are still too predominant (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010). Today, health has become more a personal moral which places the responsibility of successful or unsuccessful health on the individual. However, that individual cannot be held solely accountable as it has been found that children are socialized with health mainly by their parents serving as influential modeling figures (Paugh & Izquierdo, 2009).

A college setting is one of the first times individuals become solely responsible for most aspects of their daily lives. We presume they will make healthy decisions as responsible young adults socialized by their parents, yet the term “freshman 15” stands true for many for the 15 pounds they are expected to gain after going off to college (Childers, Haley, & Jahns, 2011). This study focuses on parental communication of physical activity and diet. I will ground my research on the effects of social learning theory by analyzing the messages communicated by parents about physical activity and diet to their children and adolescents, perceived now, as college students. This research will attempt to understand different variables which influence parental messages of physical activity and diet to their children and college student’s learned behaviors.

**PARENTS AS HEALTH PROMOTERS**

The rates of children being categorized as either overweight or obese are now every one in three children. Stunning evidence revealing that compared to children of normal weight, overweight children are twice as likely to die before the age of 55. (Rabin, 2010). Children are continually living unhealthy lifestyles because of little or no guidance and it is jeopardizing their whole future. As children become young adults, more responsibilities in the decisions they make regarding physical activity and diet become their own and college bestows the situations of their individual decision making. As college students go through their day, paying close attention to diet and nutrition are typically not at the top of their list and the “freshman 15” becomes more of a known reality than a rumor. Although some make conscious healthy decisions, first-time feelings of freedom often lead new college students to make poor decisions regarding health as they get caught up in late-night snacking and the availability of cheap eating in junk food (Bregel, 2006).

A critical aspect in structuring the decisions made by college students is the messages communicated by their parents during their childhood about diet and physical activity. The most successful programs in decreasing childhood obesity have resulted in the parents being the most instrumental and influential factors (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli. 2010). If parents realized the scope of the problem and the variables that can affect their roles in modeling healthy lifestyles to their children they could be further instrumental in promoting healthy lifestyles for their children and influencing their individual decisions in college.

This phenomenon of communication of health is important to study and deserving of attention because poor diet and obesity are significant problems in the U.S. While there are many campaigns today working towards preventing childhood obesity, they are lacking many important factors to consider. The most important factor often overlooked is parents and their influential power over their children’s eating patterns and chances of becoming obese (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010). Previous research often analyzes genetic, individual, family, and societal influences on children’s diet and activity behaviors, but most overlook the actual messages parents are communicating and how they communicate them to their children, which can be an impacting variable. With this research, future campaigns can highlight the communication aspect of parents in facilitating healthy lifestyles for their children and college students.

**THEORETICAL GROUNDING**

Social learning theory can be used in analyzing and explaining this research. Social learning theory explains that behaviors are learned through the provided information and the environment which within it occurs, mainly by modeling. The behaviors are modeled then learned and are either positively or negatively reinforced or punished (Galvin, 2006). For example, a social context of family dinners provides an environment for applying social learning where a parent is the modeler and a child is the learner. When the parent models a behavior, such as eating their vegetables at dinner, a child’s attention may be called to this and the parents may provide information of why they are eating their vegetables (because they are healthy), the child retains this information then models this information and it is either reinforced or punished by maybe the parent granting extra play time or some other incentive for the child also eating their vegetables. If learned behavior of physical activity and diet is apparent in the children’s learning and the behaviors they have formed based on their parents, then parents are named as an influential factor in communicating and modeling physical fitness and diet.

Social learning can be used to explain many learned behaviors in familial situations, as well as, the behaviors learned or reinforced through gender roles. Parents often reinforce femininity in girls and discourage masculine attributes or activities. Vice versa, they reinforce masculinity in young boys and direct them away from “girl like” behavior (Wood, 2005). This can be seen in regards to physical activity and dieting as masculinity often is seen as involving attributes like strong muscles, cut bodies, and outstanding athletic performance. As well as for femininity, females are often taught to care a lot about appearance which includes a regard for dieting/ healthy eating and exercising often to stay thin. Social learning can be used to explain how femininity and masculinity are learned in familial situations by how the parents present and model the roles to their children and either positively or negatively reinforces their behaviors when trying out the roles.

Through social learning, the behaviors of physical activity and diet which children exert can be explained as a result of modeling and information provided by their parent. Also, the learned behaviors of physical activity and diet which college students exert can be explained as a result of modeling and information provided by their parent during their adolescent and teen years. Gender roles can also be learned and be prevalent in the behaviors of diet and physical activity, however, they may differ between families in that it will depend on how the parents identify with and perceive their own gender roles which they model to their children. In examining the learned behaviors of physical activity and diet of children through social learning theory, we can explain that parents are named as influential factors in communicating and modeling physical fitness and diet.

**PREVIOUS INSIGHTS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND DIET**

***Parental influences in communicating physical fitness and physical appearance***

*Children and adolescents*

Parents have been found to be influential in the ways they communicate about physical fitness and physical appearance to their children and adolescents. Researchers have studied the different influential factors affecting children’s physical fitness and physical appearance, however evidence suggest parents serve as one of most contributory factors in structuring their children’s lives in regards to physical fitness and appearance. In a study of parents as health promoters, Andrews, Silk, and Eneli (2010) examined how parents responded to the theory of planned behavior and how they relate when providing their children with healthy foods or limiting their intake of unhealthy ones. It was found that one predictive factor of childhood obesity was the parent’s body mass index (BMI), which measures a person’s body fat based on weight and height. This was a predictive factor because the parent’s BMI is based on their health related behaviors, which are modeled in front of their children (Andres, Silk, & Eneli, 2010).

Parent’s genetics and BMI percentile effect and often predict their children’s physical fitness levels. When a parent lives a moderately sedentary lifestyle it is transmitted to their children through modeling. When parent’s level of TV viewing increased it lowered the limitations they put on their child’s TV viewing. Watching TV is a sedentary activity that parents typically partake in and is then modeled by their children, influencing their physical activity involvement (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010).

Similarly, according to a study done by Turman (2007) on parental influences regarding children and adolescent’s participation in sports, parents are influential factors for their child’s involvement in the messages they convey about sports participation. When parents were asked about their children’s involvement in sports activities it also led the parents to talk about their own level of invested involvement in the sport. Of those involved, 63% of the parents assumed the role of supporter/encourager for their child because they provided the emotional and financial support needed for them to participate (Turman, 2007). Parents also described themselves as filling the teacher/mentor role for their child participating in sports where they were providing educated information about the sport which the coach did not provide (Turman, 2007).

*College students*

While parents play a large role in the communication of physical fitness during childhood and adolescence, that communication often decreases once in college. College students must rely on many other influential factors, such as previously learned knowledge, now that they are independently living from their parents. Childers, Haley, & Jahns (2011) found that parents need to let their college students make their own physical activity and diet decisions so that they can learn from their mistakes. Similarly, in a study on college student’s weight issues and decisions on eating, Childers et al. (2007) found that many students were trying to lose weight, mainly women, but their strategies for doing so were considered unhealthy. Also, they found that men entering college often tried to put weight on to feel better about their appearance (Childers, Haley, & Jahns, 2007).

Parents play a large role in communicating healthy lifestyles through involving their children in activities and themselves getting involved as a source of modeling behavior for their children. As well, parents role in letting their college kids develop their own habits of health and diet is important so that they can learn how to make their own decisions based on previous learned behaviors from their parents. These findings present evidence that parents are influential over their children’s and college student’s life in regards to physical activity, but it fails to examine the actual communication aspect of the messages being exchanged and how different variables of both the communicator(parent) and receiver (child/college student) could impact the learned behaviors from the messages.

***Parental communication about diet and nutrition***

*Children and adolescents*

An everyday occurrence of food intake greatly affects lifestyles in terms of health and typically, parents are the ones providing and preparing the food for their children. This control parent’s bestow over providing or limiting foods can shape or influence the way a child perceives dieting and healthy eating. Paugh and Izquierdo (2009) researched the interactions of dual-earner middle class families in regards to situations of eating. Parents are typically cognizant about what they want their children to eat and drink and many efforts to rely their thoughts are through directives and rule states, but it was found that parents tend to negotiate with the child about what they will consume. Typically, the negotiation includes changing type or amount of food, or offering some sort of unhealthy option if they eat the healthy option. When the parents engage in this negotiation they are communicated an unclear message to child because the child will often pick the unhealthier option (Paugh & Izquierdo, 2009).

Likewise, as parents are *expected* to provide healthy food options, research found that parents varied in their attitudes towards providing healthy foods and limiting unhealthy foods, possibly because they are not aware of healthy food options. Parents also vary on whether they perceive their roles as important or even influential in their children lives or if they even have control over it (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010). When they don’t feel in control of their decisions, it often show they are not confident or are unsure that their actions will really make a difference in providing their child with a healthy lifestyle. Also, in support of that finding, response efficacy (a term used to refer to a person’s belief as to whether a recommended action step will actually reduce a threat) was found as a predictor of parents’ actually tracking their children’s eating. Some parents may or may not choose to track their children’s behaviors because they do not foresee or have confidence in the effectiveness it may have (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010).

As well as, in a study by Baxter, Bylund, Imes, and Scheive (2005), environments of family communication were analyzed to determine the perceived child compliance of healthy lifestyle rules in different environments that families communicated in. Research revealed that families high in expressiveness (conversation orientation) often had less compliance as a family to health related rules because of the value they place on individual decision making. Also, families which followed structured traditionalism (emphasizes conformity to a family unit’s authority structure), parents and children had more parallel ideas and attitudes in regards to health related rules (Baxter, Bylund, Imes, & Scheive, 2005). This research supports the idea that family structure and the environments in which they communicate can influence perceived communicated messages about health.

*College students*

While making the shift from parents cooking to dining hall menus, often find making decisions about what to eat as difficult because they are used to the home cook meals so they compare those to the ones they are being served in the dining halls (Childers, Haley, & Jahns, 2011). This could influence their decisions differently, picky eaters may not eat enough because of this comparison, but those overwhelmed with the large menu or quantity of food available may tend to overeat.

Also, parents contribute to college students weight issues because when they visit them at school they take their children out to eat, or pay for their groceries trips to stock up their dorms (Childers, Haley, & Jahns, 2011). When they stock up on these goods, they found that parents are often providing food and snacks with a highly caloric and fat content than if the student went shopping at school by them self. However, providing financial support by buying food and treating them to dinners are not the only ways parents influence their kids eating. Students also reported that when they go home to visit their parents, they often overeat because they offer to make their favorite food or whatever they want (Childers, Haley, & Jahns, 2011). This shows that parents have an impact on their college student’s eating and weight issues both when they are away at school and when they come home to visit.

Parental communication of diet and nutrition is very influential throughout childhood and the college years of their children. Previous researchers support these findings; they are looking at mainly the actions being communicated, there is still a need for research analyzing the actual messages being communicated and the variable affecting them that could lead to a difference in how they may be perceived and acted on.

***Parental communication regarding gender roles***

*Children and adolescents*

Gender roles can also be learned and be prevalent in the behaviors of diet and physical activity, however, they may differ between families in that it will depend on how the parents identify with and perceive their own gender roles which they model to their children. In children and adolescent’s sports, there are often different feminine and masculine stereotypes that exist of the players, however, families also often relay stereotypical gender norms in athletics. Turman (2007) analyzed the athlete sex and parent sex to see if it influenced the athlete’s perceptions of compliance gaining behaviors (compliance gaining is a term used to identify the act of getting someone to do something or alter their behavior). In regards to the gender roles, male athletes associated with rewarding, positive behaviors more so than female athletes. Also, the sexes of the parent were perceived differently by the children athletes; fathers used more rewarding and impersonal commitment attitudes. These findings support that stereotypical gender norms are often prevalent in families involved in sports which can influence how gender roles and associated behaviors are learned or reinforced. (Turman, 2007).

*College students*

Much research of gender roles in reference to health and diet examine college aged students and the relationships with their parents. In research by Gross and Nelson (2000), female undergraduate students were analyzed to reveal their perceptions of their parent’s messages about eating and weight and possible influences on them. Research exposed multiple messages of gendered differences, such as women’s pressure to be thin, from mothers and fathers that influenced their daughter’s perceptions of the messages. Direct communication of messages about eating and weight to young women from family members was found to be an influential pressure for the young women to be thin and often led to eating disorders. In accordance to the fact that mothers typically communicate more influential messages to their daughters than fathers, young women who perceived their mothers to be dissatisfied with their daughter’s weight or critical of if it led to more pressures to lose weight and dissatisfaction with their weight. Also, negative messages mother’s directly communicated to their daughters had a greater influence on the young woman’s perception of weight and diet than any messages communicated by their father. However, other perceived influences were that when fathers communicated negative messages to the child’s mother about the mother’s weight and eating, led to disturbances in eating or weight in the daughters. This supports findings that femininity ideals communicated and reinforced by parents have an impact on the way the daughter views their own body image and weight issues. (Gross & Nelson, 2000)

Gender roles parents communicate and reinforce to their children and college students through messages are an influential factor in how their messages are perceived. Daughters and sons interpret and perceive communicated messages differently, often in accordance with typical feminine and masculine gender roles ideals, depending on the sex of the parent.

Findings through previous research present evidence that parents are influential factors over their children’s and college student’s life in regards to physical activity and diet. However, it fails to examine the actual communication aspect of the messages being exchanged and how different variables of both, the communicator of the information and receiver of the information, could impact the learned behaviors from the messages. Parents are known influential factors, yet the freshman 15 is typical for many new college students. Since parents are such influential factors, their communication of messages regarding health and diet should cause a consistent behavior in their children, yet something is lost in the transition from pre-college life to becoming a college freshman. This study will attempt to fill that gap and examine the variables that college students consider in using, or ignoring, those messages previously communicated. It will examine how college students perceive the previously communicated messages and the information within those messages of physical activity and diet by their parents and apply them to see how they either reinforce or cause a reform in their habits now.

**METHODOLODY**

This study will done using a quantitative approach through a cause and effect analysis of parental communication and college students behaviors. A qualitative approach is most applicable for this study because it will attempt to identify different trends in the way college students perceive previously communicated messages about physical activity and diet by their parents and apply them now. It is generalizing the effects of the communication that typically occurs within a large group, parents and college students. This study will predict particular outcomes between the parent-college student relationships that are a result of effective or ineffective previous communication about physical activity and diet. (Personal Communication, Naomi Johnson). The influential factors within the parent’s communication will be analyzed through surveys that the college students will take which will reveal their perceptions of the previously communicated messages of their parents and how it has caused them to make decisions regarding physical activity and diet now.

*H1: Parents who communicate positive messages about diet to the children will be more likely to influence healthy diets of their college students.*

This hypothesis was chose to examine the influence parent’s communicated messages about physical activity and diet has on their college students behaviors now. This will help to see if parent’s messages communicated during childhood and adolescents influence habit making in college students because of the positivity bestowed within the messages.

*H2: Parents who communicate positive messages about the gender roles associated with physical activity will influence their college student' attitude about their physical activity behaviors.*

This hypothesis was chose to examine the social learning that is prevalent within the way parents communicate gender roles of physical activity and how children form a learned behavior from it. This will help to see if the way parent’s messages shape gender roles ideals that the college students forms their own gender behaviors from as a result of.

***Participants***

When collecting research data, the focus will be on college students, both male and female, at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. The participants can include freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, however, a representative amount from each class will be needed so that results are not distorted (it is likely that freshman and seniors often different in their lifestyles). Also, having a decent amount of differences in the participant’s family backgrounds, demographics, experiences, and lifestyles will be important in order to obtain results that are representative of all college students, not just certain groups or types. These participants have been chosen to conduct the research because of the known change in dietary and physical activity of college students resulting in the “freshman 15”. Choosing college students was considered because of the life turning point they begin at college where their health behaviors become their own responsibility and new influences are present. Analyzing college students will examine how they perceive their parent’s previously communicated messages that influence their behaviors now.

***Procedure***

The participants of this study will answer questions in an online survey in order to retrieve valid and reliable conclusions representative of a large population. A survey allows for participants to anonymously describe and explain their attitudes and behaviors of physical activity and diet. The survey will be beneficial to use as it allows participants to remain anonymous, it is convenient for both the researcher and participants, cost effective, and are generally user friendly. However, online surveys also have the potential of collecting low-quality data because participants often use cognitive shortcuts and relying on neutral or don’t know answers more in their responses to questions (Keyton, 2011). The survey will focus on certain topic areas: parental communication about physical fitness and physical appearance for children and college students, parental communication about diet and nutrition to children and college students, and parental communication providing information about and reinforcing gender roles. See appendix A for preliminary survey questions.

In analyzing H1, *parents who communicate positive messages about diet to the children will be more likely to influence healthy diets of their college student,* the independent variable is the parent’s positive messages about diet that are communicated to their children and the dependent variables is the college student’s attitude about the communicated messages about diet from their parents. Positive messages will be operationalized as messages that present supportive and helpful, factual information about physical activity and diet. A correlation test will be used, which is used in analyzing a relationship to find out if two variables vary in the same or opposite ways, either positively or negatively, or if there is no correlation at all (Personal Communication, Naomi Johnson). The variables moving will be the dependent variables in response to the independent variable, for example, the positive attitudes college students hold towards diet may increase when the positive messages the parents communicated about diet increase, which will reflect either a positive or negative correlation.

The study will examine the different potential correlations in the relationships of the parent’s communicated message and how they affect the college student’s habits of physical activity and diet now. This approach will help achieve this data because a quantitative method, using correlative tests, examines behaviors and experiences and relationships that may vary in the same of opposite direction. This will facilitate in filling the gap this study attempts by finding specific trends in data that are from a cause and effect relationship of the messages parents communicate about health and diet and the behaviors and attitudes college students form based on that communication.

**CONCLUSION**

This study will examine how college students perceive the previously communicated messages and the information within those messages of physical activity and diet by their parents and apply them to see how they either reinforce or cause a reform in their habits now. This study will use a quantitative approach and examine correlations within the parent-college student relationship. Data of college student participants from Longwood University will be gathered through an online survey regarding parent’s messages about physical activity and diet and the attitudes and behaviors of the college students now as a result of their parent’s messages. Parents are known influential factors in children’s and college student’s healthy lifestyle, this study will examine the communication aspect of how parents serve as influential communicators for college students.

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**APPENDIX A**

I have chosen the college student’s perceived importance of the messages communicated from their parents as a dependent variable.

1. How important do you believe the messages communicated by parents during childhood or adolescents about physical activity to be?

No Importance/ Little Importance/ Neutral/ Significantly Important/ Very Important

Depending on the level of perceived importance about the messages communicated by parents during childhood or adolescents about physical activity, we will be able to analyze college student’s attitude toward the perceived importance of the actual messages being communicated by their parents.

1. Whether the parent communicates positive messages about diet impacts the perceived importance of message?

None/ Very Mild/ Neutral/ Mild/ Moderate/ Severe

When analyzing the perceived importance of the parent’s positivity in the messages they communicated, it will attempt to examine the significance of the parent’s attitude in influencing their child to perceive their messages about diet as important or not.