

Over-Bearing Mothers Can Produce Daughters With Poor Social Skills and Disordered Eating Attitudes

A new study finds that young women are more likely to have disordered eating attitudes when their mothers often communicate criticism and are over-involved. The study, "Family Interactions and Disordered Eating Attitudes: The Mediating Roles of Social Competence and Psychological Distress," was published online today in the National Communication Association's journal *Communication Monographs*.

According to the study's lead author, Analisa Arroyo, Ph.D., assistant professor of communication at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA, young adult females whose mothers frequently engaged in "family expressed emotion" which she explained as "an extraordinarily harmful pattern of criticism, over-involvement, excessive attention, and emotional reactivity that is usually communicated by parents toward their children," tended to have poorer social and relationship skills. In turn, poor social and relationship skills were related to the daughters' higher levels of psychological distress and disordered eating attitudes.

Disordered eating attitudes involve "body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight control beliefs and practice," the investigators wrote. Although prevalent in U.S. women, women with these attitudes do not always have eating disorders, according to Arroyo.

Although family dynamics, such as conflict and control, can affect children's emotional and social well-being, the authors found that neither predicted daughters' social incompetence. Instead, according to Arroyo, it was the mother's "hyper-involved and overtly critical" pattern of expressed emotion that was directly related to decreased social competence and indirectly linked to psychological distress and disordered eating attitudes.

"It appears that this corrosive form of family communication is particularly damaging to individuals' sense of self and well-being, as it seems to promote a struggle for control and self-enhancement," she said. "We believe that disordered eating can develop as a compensatory technique for dealing with social incompetence and negative emotions."

To evaluate the role of family interactions on young women's eating attitudes and body image, Arroyo and her co-author, Chris Segrin, Ph.D., professor and head of the communication department at the University of Arizona, Tucson, surveyed university students and their families.

They collected data from 286 family triads, each consisting of a mother, young adult daughter (average age, 21 years), and adult sibling. Each family member individually received an online questionnaire.

Daughters and their siblings each rated their family interaction patterns, including "family-expressed emotion. Both mothers and daughters rated the daughters' social skills, and daughters rated their ability to form positive relations with others, which together evaluated social competence. In addition, daughters rated their levels of depression, self-esteem, and loneliness, as a measure of psychological distress. To help measure disordered eating attitudes, daughters rated their self-perceptions of body shape, participation in dieting, awareness of food content, and food preoccupation.

The investigators suggest that, because parents are the primary agents in the development of their children's self-concept and social skills, "by focusing on healthy parent-child relationships and teaching their children effective communication skills, such social competence may serve as a protective factor in the development of psychological distress and disordered eating attitudes."

The above story is based on materials provided by National Communication Association.