University of Messina

ISSN 2612-4033

Journal of Clinical & Developmental Psychology

Journal homepage: http://cab.unime.it/journals/index.php/JCDP/index

Mothers' Parenting styles and attitudes to food

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ABSTRACT

Background: Eating disorders can be very complex. Even if apparently can seem characterized only by a bad relationship with food, can hide much more serious and often silent problems. The present study aimed to examine several factors that can contribute onset of the declared eating disorder, such as mothers parenting styles and the influence of socio-cultural factors, in children and pre-teens.
Methods: 70 mothers (36 of children and 34 of pre-teens), had filled out some self-report relating to the perception of parenting style, socio-cultural influences on body image and eating disorders behavior.
Results: In predicting eating behavior both parenting styles and socio-cultural factors had a crucial role, the first through dysfunctional behavioural patterns adopted by the mothers, the latter through the presentation of models unattainable and perfect. In addition, in according to our hypothesis, fear of becoming fat and concerns for food are already present in children and largely than pre-teens.
Conclusions: This study contributes to the advancement of the literature on the combination of contextual factors in the eating disorders in children and pre-teens, highlighting the role played by mother dysfunctional parenting practices and the impact of the socio-cultural influences, as a source of information on ideal body.

Keywords: *Mothers; Parenting Styles; Eating Behavior; Children; Pre-Teens*

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https://doi.org/10.13129/2612-4033/0110-3418

Accepted Online first: 2022

Introduction

In industrialized countries, is experiencing a rapid increase in the prevalence of eating disorders and a strong lowering of the age at onset (Trombini, 2007).

The increase of this disease, for an influence of historical, social and cultural factors, has been characterized, in recent years, by a rapid metamorphosis of clinical forms and the concerned: in effect, despite the adolescence is considered to be always at risk, the phenomenon has extended to an earlier age pubertal development (Howard, 2009; Bravender et al., 2010).

Cuzzocrea, Larcan, Lanzarone (2012) reported significant differences between male and female non-clinical adolescents with eating behaviors and personality traits while no statistical differences in anxiety were found, even though males seem to show higher trait anxiety than females. These gender differences were confirmed even comparing between adolescents exhibiting moderate binging and non-binging eating behaviors (Cuzzocrea et al., 2015) and could be related to parental education and social influences (peer group, media, internet etc.).

Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2004) claim that, a positive family atmosphere, especially during meals, represents a protective factor for eating disorders in adolescents on the contrary, a climate oppositional by the family during meals is a precipitating factor.

Gugliandolo et al. (2019) underlined the role of parent's perceptions in authoritarian style and the correlation with their psychological control (disappointing and shaming). Moreover, in general parents with high level of anxiety tend to use more frequently an authoritarian style and inadequate parental practices (Gugliandolo, et al., 2019). In add satisfaction/frustration of basic psychological needs and emotional dysregulation seems to be associated with eating behavior of adolescents, especially in females who report higher scores in emotional eating than male adolescents (Papa, Capo, Danesvalle, et al., 2020).

Previous studies underlined the importance to consider the parental attitude to psychological control when studying eating disorder and exercise dependence symptoms in adolescents (Costa, Hausenblas, Oliva, et al., 2016). It also seems that, an excessive rigidity, typical of authoritarian parenting style, may contribute to the development of an eating disorder: in contrast, it has showed a negative correlation between authoritative parenting style and eating disorders (Enten & Golan, 2009). Moreover, Gugliandolo et al. (2020) focused on the role of a supportive parenting on adolescents and Body Uneasiness that seems to be related to eating behaviours and lifestyle in pre-adolescent and adolescents.

For Enten & Golan (2009), it is clear that parents, especially the mother, is a strong source of influence: they, in fact, through their educational practices, may be a factor that can trigger an

eating disorder or otherwise to prevent it. Specifically, the role of the mother would seem crucial: mothers too attentive to the weight and body shapes, with past histories of diets, may be able to trigger an eating disorder in their children (Pike & Rodin, 1991).

On the other hand, the use of the internet, the social networks seem to contribute to reinforce or encourage specific beauty stereotypes, body image in male and female adolescents (Verrastro et al., 2020). The literature still reveals a positive linear association between the frequency of reading women's magazines and attempts to go on a diet, the start of a program of exercise, the desire to lose weight and the 'idea of the shape of the body perfect (Field, et al., 2008).

Most of the researches focused the attention in adolescents sampling and only some studies carried out on young people of school age (Field et al., 1999). Observations young people, it has emerged as the only exposure to images of perfect bodies immortalized in magazines influence the form of the idea of the perfect body and increases the desire to lose weight and start a diet. Even at this developmental period, it is possible to observe differences between mothers and fathers in their parenting styles and psychological control (Gugliandolo, et. al., 2019).

Starting from these premises, the objective of this research is to evaluate possible differences about food attitudes and perceptions of socio-cultural factors in relation to body image in different groups (Children vs. Preteens). In add, we want to verify if mothers adopted a different parental style with different ages' children.

Moreover, we want to investigate whether, in the two different groups, parenting style adopted from mothers, the influence of socio-cultural factors and children's attitudes to food are related to each other.

Method

Participants

70 mothers (36 of chindren and 34 of pre-teens) have a mean age of 42 years (DS= 5.43) and were found at several educational centers in Calabria. The mothers have only one child and they were divided into two groups (Mothers of children and of preteens). The son's group were composed by 27 males and 43 females with a mean age of 10.73 (DS= 1.64). All participants viewed and signed the informed consent to ensure the privacy of the data and their use for the sole purpose of research.

Procedure and Measures

All mothers compiled three questionnaires.

The *Parents Preference Test* (PPT; Westh, 2003; Italian standardization by Baiocco et al., 2008) consists in 24 images representing everyday family activities of five pictures. Each items include a presentation picture and four pictures illustrating four different parenting interactions. The test measures four general aspects: Focus of Attention; Experiential Modality; Regulation and Energy that are combined into Three Sets of Dynamic Quadrants. The Quadrants are formed by Energy (Active versus Passive), Attention, Experiential Modality and Regulation. Active Energy means that the parent is mostly the monitor; i.e. the parent is playing the initiating and active part in her/his interactions with the child. Passive Energy means that the parent is mostly playing the expectant part, leaving the initiative to the child.

Paedoptic Attention means that the parent's attention is focused on the child during interactions (as opposed to autoptic attention). Rational Experiential Modality means that during interactions, the parent is primarily logical, analytical and rational in his/her way of perceiving and understanding the child and the parent-child interactions. Emotional Experiential Modality involves the parent based his/her interactions on emotional aspects. Perceptual Regulation Style means that parent is regulating the child's behavior primarily on the basis of an a priori set of rules. Instead, contextual style means that the parent is regulating the child's behavior primarily based on the functional options seemingly present in the situation as well as in the child.

Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire-3 (SATAQ-3, Thompson et al., 2004; Nerini, Matera, Pisani & Stefanile, 2011) was used to detect various aspects of sociocultural influences on body image by 30 items. More specifically, four different attitudes were assessment: (1) Information (9 items) assess the importance of social media messages about beauty ideals (for e.g. "the magazines and ads are an important source of information about fashion and being attractive"); (2) Pressure (7 items) assess the perceived sensations of pressure to conform to the ideals set out by the media (for example,"I felt pressure from TV or magazines to lose weight"); (3) General Internalization is composed by 9 items that measure the internalization of an ideal body (for example: "I compare my body with the bodies shown on TV and movie stars"); (4) Athlete Internalization consists of 5 items that measure the internalization of an athletic body – ideal (for example, "I try to look at the body of the stars of the sport"). The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The *Children's Eating Attitudes Test* (CHEAT, Maloney et al., 1988) is a modified version of the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT), the changes have been made to make the questionnaire understandable to children and preteens. Measure the eating disorder behaviors and the psychological attitude toward food and weight. The test consists of 25 items with response alternatives on a six-point Likert scale (always, very often, often, sometimes, rarely and never). It constitutes of 4 subscales: (1) Fear of gaining weight, composed of 10 item refers to all behaviors related to body weight gain; (2) Restrictions and compensatory behaviors, consists of 6 items and takes into account the restricting food and compensatory behaviors after eating; (3) Preoccupation with food, 6 items designed to measure rumination attitude toward food: (4) Social pressure, 3 items that investigate how people's thoughts can influence our eating behavior.

Results

Statistics and data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS 17.0) was used to conduct the analysis of the data. For the small number of cases was used non-parametric statistics.

To analyze differences in parenting style among families, we used the Parents Preference Test (Westh, 2003). Table 1 report the descriptive statistics for mothers' parenting styles.

Mothers of	Active Energy		Paedoptic Attention		Rational Experiential Modality		Preceptual Regulation	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Children	8.33	2.88	4.75	1.27	3.57	1.29	5.92	1.08
Pre-teens	8.94	2.49	4.21	1.34	4.24	1.44	5.74	1.14

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (mean and standard deviation) mothers scoring on active dimensions Parents Preference Test (PPT)

The data analysis using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test showed no statistically significant differences comparing mothers of the children with mothers of preadolescents. However, as it is possible to observe in figure 1, the non-parametric Wilcoxon test showed some statistically significant differences.

Specifically, both mothers of children [Z (34) = -4.78; p = .000] and of pre-teens [Z (34) = -4.51; p = .0001] show lower levels of attention paedoptic compared to the energy active as confirmation of the fact that, during the interaction with their children, mothers seem to be more focused on attention to other. In addition, mothers of both groups show higher levels of active energy than a rational modality of interaction rational [children's mothers: Z (34) = -

5.03; p = .0001; pre-teens' mothers: Z (34) = -4.27; p = .0001] and a preceptual regulation [children's mothers: Z (34) = -4.34; p = .0001; pre-teens' mothers: Z (34) = -3.62; p = .0001].

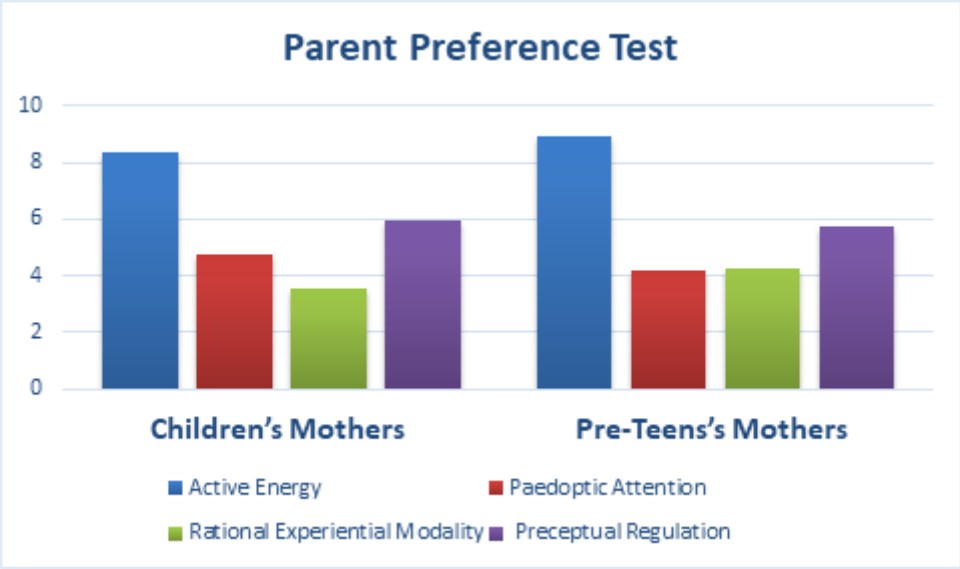

Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics (mean) mothers scoring on active dimensions Parents Preference Test (PPT)

The mothers during the interaction with son play an active and a receptive role seem to focus less rational appearance of the interaction and it seems that their behavior is poorly regulated by the rules previously acquired.

In addition, both groups of mothers showed a greater level of perceptual regulation respect to interaction rational during the interaction that would be governed by pre-established rules [children's mothers: Z (34) = -4.82; p = .0001; pre-teens' mothers: Z (34) = -4.20; p = .0001]. Moreover, only children's mothers showed higher levels of paedoptic attention than rational experiential modality [Z (34) = -2.18; p = .029], confirming the fact that, during the interaction with their child, they focus more on the other, to the detriment of attitudes typically rational.

Mean scores and standard deviations about mothers' opinion related to the influence of sociocultural factors on body image of their children and preteens are reported in table 2.

Mothers of	General Internalization		Athletic Internalization		Pressure		Information	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Children	18.86	7.98	10.89	5.18	13.36	5.70	22.33	8.52
Pre-teens	24.32	9.11	13.41	4.89	17.59	6.63	28.35	5.79

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics (mean and standard deviation) mothers scoring on SATAQ_3

The statistical analysis was carried out using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test. The results showed statistically significant differences; can be concluded that the levels of general internalization [U=387,00; Z= -2,64; p= 0,01], athletic internalization [U=433,00; Z= -2,10; p= 0,03], pressure [U=384,00; Z= -2,68; p= 0,01] and information [U=375,00; Z= -2,79; p= 0,01] are higher in mothers of pre-adolescents than in mothers of children. This confirms that the idealization of a lean and athletic body and the level of social pressure and information from the media to be more present in the group of pre-adolescents than in children.

As it is possible to observe in figure 2, the non-parametric Wilcoxon test showed some statistically significant differences within subscales investigated by questionnaire.

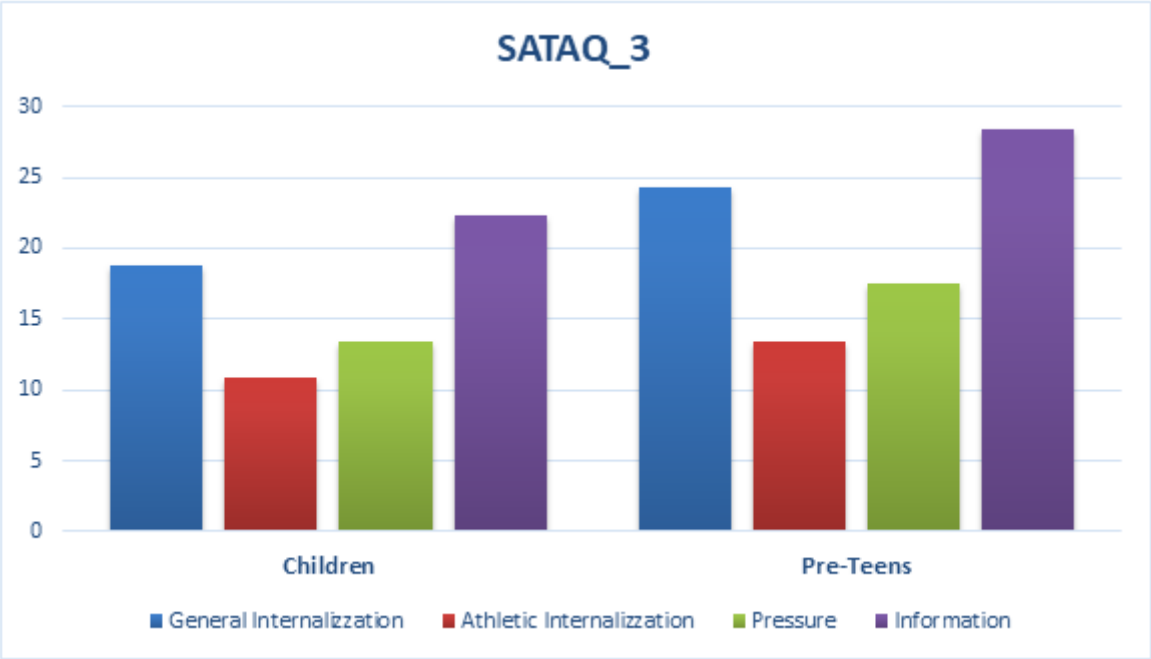

Figure 2. Descriptive Statistics (mean) mothers scoring concerning aspects of sociocultural aspects that could influence the sons' body image

The levels of general internalization are greater than the levels of athletic internalization both in mothers of children [Z (34) = -4.73; p = .0001] and of pre-teens [Z (34) = -4.76; p = .000], such as the levels of pressure [Mothers of Children: Z (34) = -4.21; p = .0001; Mothers of pre-teens: Z (34) = -4.64; p = .0001]. In both groups the levels of athletic internalization are minor compared to the pressure [Mothers of children: Z (34) = -2.82; p = .005; Mothers of pre-teens: Z (34) = -3.19; p = .001]. These results confirmed that the idealization of a lean, thin and an athletic body by mothers is greater than the pressure exerted by the media, even if the levels of general internalization were lower than information in both groups [Children' Mothers: Z (34) = -2.54; p = .011; pre-teens' Mothers: Z (34) = -3.06; p = .002]. Therefore, the importance of

the media as a means of information relating to the ideal body emerges in both groups; in fact, the level of information is higher than of pressure, both in pre-teen's mothers [Z (34) = -5.75; p = .0001] and for children's mothers [Z (34) = -5.01; p = .0001].

Table 3 shows the mean scores and standard deviations obtained from mothers' evaluation of eating attitudes of their children and preteens. The data analysis carried out using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test showed statistically significant differences; the levels of fear of gaining weight [U=328,50; Z= -3,35; p= 0,03] and preoccupation with food [U=405,00; Z= -2,44; p= 0,01] increased in mothers of children compared to mothers of a preadolescent.

Mothers of	Fear of Gaining Weight		Restrictions and compensatory behaviors		Preoccupation to food		Social pressure about eating behavior	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Children	49.50	8.81	30.83	4.02	25.92	4.07	18.44	5.20
Pre-Teens	41.76	10.20	29.29	4.57	23.56	4.37	17.74	4.39

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics (mean and standard deviation) mothers scoring on CHEAT

Subsequently analyzes were carried out within the two groups studied and the non-parametric Wilcoxon test showed some statistically significant differences.

In both groups (see figure 3), scores related to the fear of gaining weight are greater than the restrictions and compensatory behaviors [Children' mothers: Z (34) = -4.90; p = .0001; Pre-teens' mothers: Z (34) = -4.34; p = .0001], the preoccupation with food [mothers of children: Z (34) = -4.90; p = .0001; mothers of pre-teens: Z (34) = -4.34; p = .0001] and to social pressure about eating behavior [Children' mothers: Z (34) = -5.23; p = .000; Pre-teens' mothers: Z (34) = -5.08; p = .0001].

In both groups of mothers, the levels of restriction and compensatory behaviors are greater than preoccupation with food [Children' mothers: Z (34) = -4.90; p = .0001; Pre-Teens' mothers: Z (34) = -4.34; p = .0001] and the social pressure about eating behavior [mothers of children: Z (34) = -5.08; p = .0001; mothers' of pre-teens: Z (34) = -5.34; p = .0001]. On the other hand, the social pressures seem to be lower than to the concern for food [Children's mothers: Z (34) = -5.13; p = .0001; Pre-Teens' mothers: Z (34) = -4.82; p = .0001].

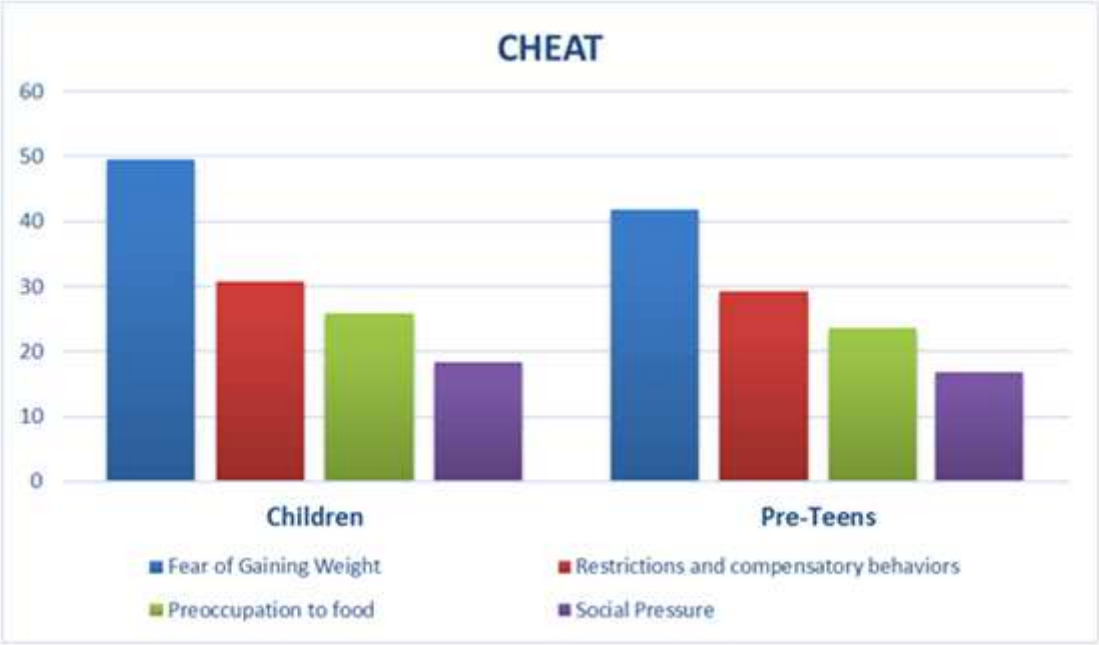

Figure 3. Descriptive Statistics (mean) mothers scoring concerning Children's Eating Attitudes

The final analysis focused on the correlations between all variables. Among of mothers of children, there was a significant correlation between the active energy and social pressure was found [ρ = .327; p = .053]. This result seems to confirm that the parenting style characterized by a substantial involvement by mother tends to make children more susceptible to pressure from the media.

In the group of mothers of pre-teens, however, the desire for an athletic body appears to be correlated with the active energy [ρ = .390; p = .023] and paedoptic attention [ρ = .349; p = .043]. Statistically significant correlation between the dimension of social pressure and the implementation of compensatory behaviors and dietary restriction [ρ = .371; p = .031] was found, the older kids tend to take on dysfunctional eating behaviors if they perceive a considerable social pressure.

Discussion and Conclusion

The first point highlighted by this study is that there are no significant differences between the group of mothers of children and preteens in educational practices and behavioral patterns adopted; thus, have a preteen son does not seem to determine significant differences about the way they interact mother - baby. However, several similarities were found between the two groups, in fact, both mothers of those children who are pre-teens be more focused on a ' attention to other than the engagement itself.

Both mothers' groups interacting with their child, play an active role which is to forfeit both the rational aspects that standards of conduct previously acquired. This latter dimension is, however, more significant in comparison to the attention of the mother towards her own child the attention and respect of the same for the rational aspects of the interaction.

It was also found that only the children's mothers when interacting with their child; they focus more on the other, to the detriment of attitudes typically rational.

With regard to the socio-cultural influences are significant differences between children and preteens, the idealization of a lean and athletic and the level of social pressure and information from the media would be greater in the group of preteens rather than in that of children. Both prefer a lean and wiry rather than an athletic body, the idealization of lean body shapes is a more significant factor than the pressure perceived by young people by the media.

The idealization of a body is sporty and athletic achievement for both groups of young people's look less meaningful than the other analyzed (idealization of a thin body and pressure information and the media).

The size that does appear to be more significant than the other is the importance of the media as a source of information on ideal body.

With regard to eating behavior research has shown that children in unexpected ways compared to pre-adolescents have more fear of gaining weight and have more concerns for food.

In both groups, however, the fear of gaining weight is greater than other dimensions such as social pressure about eating behavior, the compensatory behaviors and restrictions and concerns for food. The eating behaviors aimed at weight loss in both groups are more significant than the social pressure and concerns for food.

Another aspect that emerged from this work is that one parenting style characterized by a substantial involvement of the mother tends to make children more susceptible to pressure from the media, also a mother particularly involved in the interaction with one's child and used to direct attention another appears eager to make your tween an athletic body.

Research has finally shown how the perceived social pressure of the latter relates dysfunctional eating behaviors adopted by preteens.

In accordance with the literature reference, we can therefore say that the group of preteens is more sensitive to attitudes to food not healthy as driven by excessive idealization in relation to their body and by messages coming from the social reference.

As shown by the literature (Cuzzocrea, Larcan, Lanzarone, 2012) is that in this work the eating disorders are very complex, though apparently may seem of disorders characterized by a bad relationship with food hardships they hide much more serious and problematic situations often

silent. We can therefore say that there are several factors that contribute interaction is declared the disorder.

In predicting eating behaviors seem to have a crucial role both parenting styles that mass media. The first through dysfunctional behavioral patterns, the latter through the presentation of models unattainable and perfect.

The family, which has among its functions to foster the development of personal identity and ensure physical and mental integrity to be able to confidently face life's experiences, but can become a factor capable of promoting faulty eating habits (Costa et al., 2016).

The child learns and develops love for himself the esteem and the ability to trust himself and others in the primitive relationship with his mother, but this relationship if overly intrusive and contradictory that it cannot turn into a negative element, capable of predict an eating disorder.

Relatively to media influence, pre-teens seem to be more affected by them than children are the presentation of aesthetic models slender bordering on perfection can lead young people to adopt incorrect eating behavior in order to achieve such models (Verrastro et al., 2020)

The media are viewed by young people is an important source of information about what is in fashion and how to be attractive; it is obvious that the social approval they seek to follow and emulate the aesthetic models that the media dictate.

Finally emerged from this work is an important aspect that is the fear of getting fat and concerns for food are already present in children and to a greater extent than pre-teens, which confirms the hypothesis leads to the lowering of the age of ' onset of eating disorders and concern for most body shapes.

Limit of the research and future prospective

In the present study, there are some limitations to take into consideration. Firstly, the small number of participants and the sampling method necessitates caution about the generalizability of the results, to this end, future studies should try to consider a wider sample of participants. Secondly, only mothers with one child/pre-teen was included in this study, for this reason, future research could analyse the potential difference between parenting style of mothers and fathers and should involve families with more than one child/pre-teen. Thirdly, the exclusive use of self-reports could increase measurement bias, for this reason, future studies should use objective measures. Having taken into account these limitations, the study presents interesting results, which need to be explored to prevent eating disorders behaviors in children and pre-teens, with the main aim of promoting the welfare.

Declaration of Interest statement: None

Authors' contribution

Cuzzocrea Francesca assisted with manuscript editing, data analysis, data interpretation, and study supervision; Vinci Enrica assisted with the generation of the initial draft of the whole manuscript, manuscript editing; Famulari Roberta assisted with manuscript editing and data interpretation; Andricciola Federica assisted with concept, study design, data analysis, manuscript preparation and manuscript editing; All authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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