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When talking about body weight, parents want guidance and adolescents want acceptance

Hartford, Conn. –

As many as two-thirds of parents talk to their teens about weight, but these conversations can leave adolescents feeling criticized, ashamed, and distressed. A new study from the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health highlights the barriers in these conversations between parents and adolescents, and the need for more parent education and supportive communication.

Researchers surveyed racially and ethnically diverse parents and adolescents, across a range of body sizes, from the general population. Using a national survey panel, 1,936 parents and 2,032 adolescents were asked about the barriers they have in talking about body weight, and what guidance, information, and support would be most useful to them in having more supportive conversations.

“How parents talk to teens about weight-related health can impact their emotional and physical wellbeing,” says Rebecca Puhl from the Rudd Center, and lead author of the study. “Seeking input from both parents and adolescents is important to inform education and resources that can better support families.”

Study findings, published in the journal *Pediatric Obesity*, show that parents want guidance on how to communicate about weight-related topics with their adolescents, while adolescents want their parents to be more supportive and accepting of their weight.

Key findings include:

- Barriers to talking about weight included discomfort, viewing the topic as unnecessary to discuss, and not knowing enough about body weight or already knowing enough.
- Discomfort in talking about weight was reported most by adolescents who identified as Latinx, teens with higher weight status, and those trying to manage their weight.

- Most parents, regardless of their child’s weight status, expressed that they want guidance on how to communicate about weight-related topics, such as:
 - Strategies to help improve their child’s body image
 - Supporting their child to make healthy behavior changes
 - Focusing conversations more on health rather than weight
 - Ways to make their child feel more supported about their weight
 - How to talk about body weight, appearance, and teasing
- Adolescents expressed many ways that they want their parents to be more supportive when it comes to their body weight. Their preferences were strongest for parents to:
 - Avoid blaming and critical comments about their weight or appearance
 - Stop pressuring them to look a certain way
 - Use weight terminology that they feel comfortable with
 - Make it easier to be healthier at home
 - Be supportive when they feel down about their weight or appearance
- Adolescent preferences for parent support were generally consistent across sex, body size, and race and ethnicity, with a few exceptions. For example:
 - Preferences for parent support were generally stronger among adolescents with higher weight status and those trying to manage their weight.
 - Compared to boys, girls expressed stronger preferences for parents to avoid lecturing them about what they eat, making critical comments about their appearance, and blaming them for their weight.
 - Compared to Black teens, White teens expressed stronger preferences for parents to avoid being critical of their weight or appearance and pressuring them to look a certain way.

“Our findings highlight the need for education and guidance to help parents be more supportive and less critical of their child’s body size,” says Puhl. “Shifting conversations to focus on health, rather than appearance, is an important first step to help promote more supportive communication with their adolescents.”

This study was supported by a grant from WeightWatchers. Study co-authors include Leah Lessard of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health at the University of Connecticut, and Michelle Cardel and Gary Foster of WeightWatchers.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health at the University of Connecticut promotes solutions to food insecurity, poor diet quality, and weight bias through research and policy. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org and follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter.