

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

“Tubby, like a marshmallow”:  
The lived experiences of children and  
their parents as participants in a child  
weight management programme.

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
Health Psychology  
At Massey University, Wellington  
Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Catherine Trezona  
2014



## Abstract

Global concern regarding the 'obesity epidemic' has focused increasingly on children, resulting in numerous child weight management programmes around the Western world. The reality of this 'epidemic' is controversial, with large bodies of literature presenting arguments both for and against an urgent need for intervention. Between each side is little common ground, making a cohesive analysis of the extent of the obesity reality difficult. Additionally, there is a paucity of studies that include participants' experiences. The present study adopted a critical realist ontology in an attempt to bridge the divide between the realist/positivist and relativist/constructionist camps. Further, it aimed to give voice to parents and children through a two-phase exploration of their lived experiences as participants in bodywise, a child weight management programme, based in the Waikato, Aotearoa/New Zealand. In phase one, seven focus groups were undertaken with 22 participants whose children had been part of the bodywise programme, to explore their views on the programme. In phase two, individual interviews were undertaken with three children aged 11 to 16 to explore their experiences of being bodywise. Groups and interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. All data were analysed under an interpretative phenomenological framework (IPA), which provided three superordinate themes, namely *sites of struggle*, *sites of support* and *sites of success*. A key finding was the contrast between the programme's sole measure of success (the child's reduced or maintained BMI), and the wide range of successes experienced by participants. The children described success as that which was fun and enjoyable, in contrast to previous studies that found little relationship for children between health behaviours and pleasure. Overall, bodywise was a positive experience for participants regardless of improvements in the child's BMI. The key metaphor of the experience of bodywise as "special journey" by waka [canoe] was developed from the parents' talk, and this metaphor is posited as an ideal way to integrate the bodywise experience for all participants. Future research could develop a model based on the waka metaphor model, with an emphasis on fun, enjoyment and active engagement for participants of child weight management programmes.

## Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks goes firstly to the 22 parents who shared their bodywise experiences with me in the focus groups with such honesty and humour. I give a special thanks to Sheryl<sup>1</sup> for her insightful metaphor of herself as the “director of the waka” on “a special journey” with her granddaughter Meiani.

Secondly, thank you to the three child participants – three special young women - who shared their trials and triumphs with me with such courage and honesty. It was both a fun and humbling experience for me to spend time with you during the interviews, and in the many hours that followed as I analysed your talk. I am so grateful for both your insights and your sense of humour. Bobby, your fitness and energy is inspiring! Keira, I commend your courage – kia kaha, wahine toa! JoBob, thank you for giving me the perfect title to this thesis. May you enjoy your time on your 5 week island adventure – and perhaps even toast tubby marshmallows on an open fire!

Thank you to my field supervisor, Natalie Parkes, for your wisdom, patience and gentle guidance, and for the opportunity to spend time with the bodywise families. Thank you also to the rest of the bodywise team, Soroya, Helen and Donna for your support. And an extra thank you to Sam, the super receptionist at Sport Waikato for your gracious welcome and flexibility.

I have had many reasons over the duration of this study to be profoundly grateful to my academic supervisor Dr Antonia Lyons. You brought me through the morass of confusion at many crossroads and averted disaster more than once, on my behalf. Thank you for seeing exactly what needed to change and for your persistence in expressing this to me in ways that were clear and encouraging.

Finally, just as it takes a village to bring up a child, it seems it takes a community to give birth to a thesis. Thank you to my mother for your support at every level. You will be so pleased to see this baby grow up and leave home! To my sons, thank for sharing your considerable skills with me at crucial moments. To my church whānau, thank you for calling on supernatural help when I had run dry. Truly, I could not have done it without you all. And no doubt you are all as relieved as I am that it is done!

---

<sup>1</sup> Not her real name - all names are pseudonyms

## Table of contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Table of contents

List of figures

Prologue

Chapter 1: Child obesity

Definitions

Debates

Consequences

Lifestyle interventions and their effectiveness

*Research trials compared with clinical programmes*

*Family interventions*

*School interventions*

*Community interventions*

*Evaluations by parents and children*

**Chapter 2: Children's sense-making of their bodies, weight and health**

Locating the research

*A critical realist ontology*

*A contextualist epistemology*

*A critical health perspective*

Bodywise

**Chapter 3: Methodology and methods**

Phenomenology

Methods

*Phase one research design: Parents*

*Phase two research design: Children*

*Analysis*

*Validity and cultural and ethical considerations*

## Chapter 4: Parents' experiences of bodywise: sites of meaning

Sites of Struggle

*Whose journey is it?*

*Good cop, bad cop*

*Family struggles*

Sites of Support

*Family support*

*Support from the bodywise community*

*Support dealing with bullying*

Sites of Success under Te Whare Tapa Whā

*Te taha tinana [physical]*

*Te taha whānau [family/social]*

*Te taha hinengaro [emotional/mental/psychological]*

## Chapter 5: Children's sense-making of their experiences of bodywise

Key experiences

*Commitment to bodywise*

*Dealing with bullying*

*Family/whānau, friends and the bodywise community*

*Fun and enjoyment as success*

Making sense of the impact of bodywise

*The relationship between cause and effect*

*A sense of personal agency*

Integrating the findings: A "special journey"

## Chapter 6: Discussion, limitations and reflections

Motivated by fun and enjoyment

The importance of personal agency

A future model

Limitations

Reflections

**References**

**Appendices**

Appendix A: Demographics – focus groups

Appendix B: Information to parents- focus groups

Appendix C: Informed Consent – focus groups

Appendix D: Approval for study from Te Puna Oranga, Waikato DHB

Appendix E: Information sheet for child interviews – parent

Appendix F: Information sheet for child interviews – child

Appendix G: Informed consent - child interviews

Appendix H: Transcription Notation



## List of figures

**FIGURE 1:** Al Nisbett's cartoon published in the Marlborough Express on May 29 2013 (Daly, 2013).

**FIGURE 2:** Distribution of fathers, mothers and grandparents in focus groups

**FIGURE 3:** Distribution of the ethnicity of the children of focus group parents