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“You can tell kind of about the body”:

Exploring young children’s talk about bodies, health, fitness
and fatness

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Abstract

Fears of an 'obesity epidemic' have led to a growing focus on children's weight, diet and activities. Children are seen as 'at risk of' or currently suffering from fatness, largely attributed to overeating, 'bad' diets and increasingly sedentary lifestyles. Echoing work overseas, this has led to various initiatives in New Zealand where children, and those responsible for them, are targeted with messages about 'getting fit' and 'eating right' with implicit or explicit undertones of getting thin. The aim of this research project was to highlight children's voices, stepping back from obesity interventions to explore how these notions are taken up by young primary school children. Following ethical approval, nine six and seven year old children took part in individual semi-structured interviews which involved play and craft activities to focus discussion. Interviews were videotaped, transcribed, and a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach was used to explore how children talked about bodies, health, fitness and fatness, with an additional focus on the ways in which children used their bodies to convey meaning. Key lenses applied to the analysis included the roles of body image/function, morality, and pleasure, where children got their health information, and gendered effects in children's talk. Children primarily drew on a series of dichotomies to construct bodies, health, fitness and fatness in relatively clear cut ways, drawing on four inter-related discourses: good foods and bad foods; active, able and fit; unhealthy fat; and big strong and healthy. These findings support previous research suggesting that children, from a young age, are taking up narrow corporeal constructions of health in relation to food and fitness 'choices', and additionally children assume that these constructions can be 'read' off the body. Such constructions may be problematic given the complexity and ambiguity around the social and scientific research on health, fitness and fatness. Further, it may set children up to have unrealistic expectations about bodies and health with potentially damaging effects for how they engage with food, physical activity and their own and others' bodies. On the other hand, however, children were often hesitant, and at times resisted or problematized these straight-forward constructions, occasionally drawing on alternate or moderating understandings, including notions of pleasure and practicality, moderation, diversity and individuality, and being happy and healthy. Future research could explore these ideas further, investigating how children and adults utilise alternate meanings to negotiate the complexity of bodies, health, fitness and fatness.

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