

Using Action Tendency Emotions as Persuasive Tools for Mothers to Encourage a Healthy Diet for their Preadolescent Daughters in a Theory of Planned Behavior Framework

**Research category: Communicating Research Findings to the Public**

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**Background:** About 17% of American preadolescent girls are overweight. These girls are more likely to become overweight women, and more likely to incur weight-related conditions in adulthood, such as breast cancer. The diet of preadolescent girls is highly influenced by their mothers. Using the theory of planned behavior as a framework, the action tendency emotions of anger, sadness, and guilt were explored to determine what sources elicit these emotions and whether these emotions predict mothers' intent and encouragement of a healthy diet in their preadolescent daughters.

**Hypotheses:**

Mothers' attitude (H1), subjective norm (H2), perceived behavioral control (H3) of encouraging a healthy diet for their preadolescent daughter(s), will be positive predictors of intent (H4) and actual encouragement of a healthy diet in their preadolescent daughter(s).

H5: Mothers-in-law and other mothers will evoke anger.

H6: Own mothers will evoke guilt.

RQ1: Will own mothers, mothers in law, and other mothers differ in evoking sadness?

Anger (H7) and sadness (H8) will be positive predictors of intent and encouragement, whereas guilt (H9) will be a negative predictor of intent and encouragement of a healthy diet by mothers to their preadolescent daughter(s).

**Methods:** In a 2 X 3 between subjects design, participants (N = 132) who were mothers of preadolescent daughters read a message from one of three sources (own mother, mother-in-law, or another mother). One message focused on the reduced likelihood of having an overweight daughter if a mother encouraged her to eat healthily and the second focused on the improvement of a daughter's general well-being now and as an adult if a mother encouraged her to eat healthily. Participants returned a week later (N = 32) to report on their behaviors.

**Results:** The TPB components of attitude and perceived behavior control predicted intent, but none of the hypothesized variables predicted behavior. A negative emotional response mechanism was found to be the only predictor of encouraging behavior, showing that as negative emotions were evoked mothers were less likely to encourage their daughters to eat a healthy diet. Mothers-in-law and other mothers evoked anger more than own mothers, and sadness was evoked more by other mothers. The overweight message from another mother was most likely to result in actual encouragement.

**Conclusions:** Practitioners should avoid aggravating this population as undesired behaviors may result. Messages from other mothers about reducing daughter's future chances of obesity were powerful predictors of actual encouragement.