RESEARCH ARTICLE

An exploration of how adolescents experience and reason their parents' comments on their weight, shape, and eating

Lucy M. Dahill[1] | Natalie M. V. Morrison[1] | Stephen Touyz[2,3] | Deborah Mitchison[1,4] | Kay Bussey[5] | Haider Mannan[1] | Phillipa Hay[1,6]

[1]Translational Health Research Institute, Western Sydney University, Campbelltown, New South Wales, Australia

[2]University of Sydney Inside Out, Camperdown, New South Wales, Australia

[3]Sydney Local Health District, Camperdown, New South Wales, Australia

[4]University of Technology Sydney, Broadway, New South Wales, Australia

[5]Centre for Emotional Health, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

[6]South West Sydney Local Health District, Camden and Campbelltown Hospitals, Campbelltown, New South Wales, Australia

Correspondence
Lucy M. Dahill, Translational Health Research Institute, School of Medicine, Western Sydney University, Sydney, NSW 2715, Australia.
Email: l.dahill@westernsydney.edu.au

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Abstract

Introduction: Disordered eating among adolescents is of increasing concern given associated physical and mental health sequelae. Cognitions underlying disordered eating are formed in childhood and adolescence. Parents are a significant presence during this period, so it is critical to understand how they influence their adolescent's eating cognitions and behaviors.

Methods: Qualitative analysis using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was employed to consider the lived experiences of 10 Australian adolescents (14–19 years), 60% female, as they engaged with their parents in a range of weight, shape, and eating communications.

Results: Our inductive IPA revealed three key themes representing adolescents' experiences and meaning-making: *Parents as Influencers*—adolescents acknowledged parents are influencers (objects) within a wider context of community and cultural norms (symbols) and can be protective for peer influence on body image ideals; *Expression and Perception*—the "what" (weight-talk as an object) and the "how" (objects as independent influences) of gendered parental communication related to health and fitness ideals and illustrated diverse interpretations of both verbal and non-verbal expression; and *Fertile Soil and Maturity*—the adolescent's characteristics and context influence perceptions of communication, a fear of deviating from norms, and an overarching focus on being "healthy" yet not always knowing what that was. Perception of bidirectional communication also offered valuable insights into potential dangers through family loyalty and in-group permissions.

Conclusions: Findings highlight implications for the nuanced influence of parental communication and illustrate the pivotal role of parents within the bioecosystem of adolescent development.

KEYWORDS

eating disorder, family loyalty, mental health, parent–adolescent communication, parent–adolescent relationships, weight-teasing

1 | INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a life stage during which parental comments and behavior have been identified among the sociocultural factors influencing the development of body dissatisfaction and eating concerns (Ata et al., 2007). Reviews of parents as a source of weight-talk in childhood and adolescence (ages 6–18 years) have demonstrated that parental weight-talk is often associated with negative psychological (Gillison et al., 2016) and physical health-related outcomes (Yourell et al., 2021). Reviews have also found that parents are strong communicators of sociocultural pressures (Rodgers et al., 2009). In the

home, parents set the foundations for standards of communication and normalize behaviors related to eating, weight, and body shape (Brown et al., 2016; Kaplan et al., 2006), yet report being unsure how to support their adolescents in this domain which leads to challenges with communication (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010; Puhl et al., 2022).

Parents are not the sole influence in an adolescents' life, rather, they form part of a wider context of influence. Previous research for weight and shape comments have found parental comments work in concert with peer and media influences (Dahill et al., 2022; Puhl et al., 2022). Therefore, considering that children do not grow up as isolated individuals but within a web of other social influences (McMichael, 1999; Neumark-Sztainer, 2005), further research is needed to consider the nuances of parent-adolescent eating and weight-talk and how it is perceived, and interpreted as a contributing factor to disordered eating outcomes within this wider context of influences.

Bronfenbrenner's early ecology theory considered these wider contexts of influence and the synergistic interrelations between people and their environments, illustrating them as concentric rings of context and these complex influences as being "like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 814). Parents form part of the microsystem and one of the primary contexts of development. Yet it is Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological theory of human development that recognized that interactions from different influences affect development. These "proximal processes" act as "engines of development" and described the reciprocal interactions between the young person and the people, objects, and symbols in their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p. 798). Weight, shape, and eating communication is a proximal process within that environment. Therefore, as the family is one of the primary contexts of development, considering the consequences of perceived positive and negative weight, shape, and eating communication as a proximal process within the context of other influences could offer greater clarity when considering the influence such parent communication has on adolescent mental and physical health outcomes.

The term "parent communication" assumes a generic influence, yet recent studies, including a systematic review, have begun considering the importance of perceived weight and shape comments from mothers and fathers as separate sources of influence within the family structure (Dahill et al., 2022; Lawrence et al., 2022; Puhl et al., 2022). There remains a paucity of qualitative research; however, regarding the nuances of didactic gendered relationships, particularly the influence of fathers, and how important these perceived comments are to the adolescents. It is critical to note that although adverse outcomes were likely unintentional, current evidence suggests that weight-based language from "parents" can result in a spectrum of emotional reactions from adolescents, from being perceived as "critical" or "nagging" (Dailey et al., 2014, p. 393) to eliciting high levels of distress and eating disorder cognitions (EDCs) (Puhl & Himmelstein, 2018). Additional qualitative research is required to understand how parental weight, shape, and eating comments as a "proximal process" could explain such variability in emotional responses (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) also speak to how context and time interact with proximal processes, therefore considering whether the frequency of comments over varying lengths of time influence outcomes, and if a person's characteristics such as gender have influence. Prevalence papers to date have found mothers tended to comment most frequently on eating, weight, and shape, and mainly to daughters (Dahill et al., 2021; Lawrence et al., 2022). Further, there is evidence that eating comments directed to daughters are more negative than those directed to sons (Almenara & Ježek, 2015; Dahill et al., 2021). On the other hand, gendered dyad studies within family systems have found that boys are more attuned to conversations about muscle-ideation from fathers, whereas girls are more attuned to conversations about thin-idealization from mothers (Berge et al., 2013; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Yet, the paucity of qualitative research about such comments results in a reduced view of how frequency and context of weight, shape, and eating comments from both mothers and fathers are perceived and any adverse associations.

Time equally refers to how these comments act as proximal processes that lead to competence and interactional reciprocity or lead to negative outcomes. In a study by Eli et al. (2014), 51% of adult participants reported first becoming aware of their body weight during childhood or adolescence, with 14% pinpointing this awareness (and associated negative feelings) to the comments their parents made to or about them. Strikingly, no positive outcomes of parents' comments about body weight were reported in that study. Rather, there was the suggestion of possible intergenerational impacts, as participants exposed to parental weight-talk perceived this to have adversely influenced their communication with their own children and grandchildren. Further understanding of the lasting influence of such comments is needed.

Lastly, when considering the competence element of Bronfenbrenner's model, age and social cognition of differing styles of weight-talk delivery also become relevant to the "engines of development." Humor often involves irony, teasing, and sarcasm, yet these forms of communication require markers for understanding that do not develop in the adolescent brain until 11–13 years of age (Burnett & Blakemore, 2009). Keltner et al.'s (2001) conceptual analysis and empirical review of teasing across all ages illustrates the complex cognitive processes required to understand teasing in the context of developmental change. Overall, it was found teasing can motivate the intended recipients to avoid transgressions of norm deviations and spoke to the ambiguity of teasing when initiated by men and from more familiar people (family) or someone of a higher "status." Within a family, this could have negative implications over time for autonomy and self-

perception, with the intended recipient being more attuned to dysfunction, approval seeking and potential attachment anxiety (Doba et al., 2018; Navarro et al., 2022; Peleg et al., 2023). A child's lack of executive function development may mean they perceive what is being said in an unintended way (Burnett & Blakemore, 2009; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Other knowledge about developmental stages and expected capabilities (e.g., Theory of Mind, Social and Emotional Processing, and even Face Processing; Brizio et al., 2015) should also be considered when trying to understand the potential mismatch between adult communication styles and the cognitive capacity of their adolescent children. Ambiguity concerning the perception of humor specific to weight, shape, and eating communication as a proximal process, how those comments are internalized and interpreted, and their unintended consequences could benefit from further qualitative analysis. Therefore, further exploration of weight-talk as a proximal process (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020), the influence of exposure to weight-talk and its frequency, and the power of spoken words that, once spoken, play out in the adolescent's mind and live beyond the time, the moment and "the proximal," may offer some understanding of how and why the cognitions and behaviors associated with disordered eating among adolescents have arisen and are perpetuated.

2 | RESEARCH QUESTION

This qualitative study aimed to explore adolescents' experience of parents' communication around body weight, shape, and eating. Such experiences were thought to extend from recalling and sharing examples of their interactions with their parents to the meaning-making and interpretations adolescents make of these lived experiences. As such, the research question guiding this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research was "What are the lived experiences of adolescents as their parents engage them in communications relating to body weight, shape, and eating?"

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 | Research approach

Qualitative methodology was used to research adolescents' lived experiences of communication around body weight, shape, and eating with their parents. IPA was explicitly selected as it allows for a deep exploration of the adolescent's personal lived experience of parent–adolescent communication regarding weight, shape, and eating behaviors while also seeking to highlight how adolescents make sense of and derive meaning from those experiences. This meaning-making and interpretation were essential to explore the adolescents' experience without expectation and with an aim not only to understand what happened but the underlying feelings and thinking associated with those experiences (Alase, 2017; Oxley, 2016; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

In selecting an IPA approach, the research team is cognisant that the researcher is playing an active role in the meaning-making process—that is, as the researcher is extracting the lived experiences from participants, they are giving voice to and examining the meaning-making of those experiences and considering them within the broader context of the family system. In addition, the researcher is also attempting to grow their own understanding of that experience—with a focus on the participants' disclosures but also, ultimately, underpinned by their own history and proximal processes. In recognition of this, a double hermeneutic approach (Smith & Osborn, 2008) was employed from project conceptualization through to analysis and write-up. As such, substantive time was spent on reflexive practice to ensure that the participants' experiences took priority and are showcased in the results here, with reflection on the researcher's experiences made transparent to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and the analysis presented.

3.2 | Participant recruitment

All participants participated in Wave 2 of the EveryBODY longitudinal research study (Dahill et al., 2021). Recruitment took place through eight selected schools in New South Wales, Australia, with inclusion criteria requiring school enrolment aged between 11 and 19 years. The Wave 2 survey included questions about parent weight/shape and eating comments and subsequently sought consent for future contact for interview invitations. A research assistant (R. A.) sent the initial email in 2020 offering a $20 financial incentive to participate. Twenty-four participants replied to the R. A. Two further emails were sent by L. M. D. to confirm participation, and 11 agreed on a date and time by phone. Ten attended their interviews, at which time participants chose their own aliases. As such, interviews were conducted 2 years after initial recruitment. This study was approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 5201600312) in March 2018.

3.3 | Data collection

Data were collected using an online videoconferencing system to conduct semistructured interviews enabling the researcher to be guided by open and exploratory questions while allowing space to explore the responses provided by the participant. The specific questions were designed by the research team and guided in part by the existing research in the field (e.g., examining both positive and negatively valenced comments and the role of gender dyads) and by the clinical experience of the researchers—one psychiatrist, two practising clinical psychologists working with adolescents in the eating disorder field, and one researcher (Public Health Masters) working in a high school with adolescents, all parents themselves. The initial set of questions was deliberately simple to allow for the recruitment of adolescents from various levels of cognitive development. The root questions were designed to recognize cognitive differences between positive and negative weight, shape, and eating comments and to capture information about potential gendered differences. The root questions were also purposefully broad to allow adolescents to interpret them in a way that was meaningful to them, therefore, to not impose on the participant the expectations of the research team nor elicit a manufactured response. The interview schedule was designed with various prompt levels for adolescents who indicated they were unsure how to respond, did not use many words or displayed various levels of openness. As guided by Smith and Shinebourne (2012), the questions identified the areas of interest and the interviewers enquired, with curiosity about their different experiences. The interview schedule was shared with experts in the field for feedback before finalization. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 min.

The interview schedule is included as Supporting Information: Additional File 1.

3.4 | Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with care taken to protect the anonymity of the participants by using aliases (including the additional altering of two self-selected aliases), places named in the interview, and removing or paraphrasing any information that might otherwise identify the participant. The interviews were analyzed using inductive IPA (Reid et al., 2005). This iterative and staged methodology included reflexive processes to protect the integrity of the participant disclosures and ensure the outcomes reported were a truthful representation of their experiences and derived meaning. First, L. M. D. prepared descriptive summaries following each interview to capture the "overall essence" of the experiences of that participant. L. M. D. then read the content making preliminary notes and coding throughout. Second, these codes were then clustered to appreciate the connections between them. At this point, L. M. D. and N. M. V. M. met to discuss the coding process and to review individual transcripts to determine any points of disagreement in the coding approach. L. M. D. and N. M. V. M. then independently reviewed the coding and the transcripts to construct and describe themes representative of the material and which provided meaning to the code clusters. Data were attached to each grouping, and a disconfirming case analysis was conducted to ensure themes fully reflected the participants' words (Yardley, 2008). Following discussions between L. M. D. and N. M. V. M., a final thematic map was prepared to represent the experiences and meaning-making of the participants.

3.5 | Validity and integrity

The research team undertook a number of measures to preserve the integrity of the data. To ensure adolescents had a clear understanding of the purpose and direction of the study and to ease any potential anxieties, the participants were given a week to consider the interview schedule and their responses before giving their informed consent. Two researchers were involved throughout all aspects of the coding and thematic arrangement steps, and to ensure bracketing, both L. M. D. and N. M. V. M. kept their own reflexive diaries (Chan et al., 2013) and met regularly.

4 | ANALYSIS

4.1 | Participant demographics

Demographic descriptors of each participant are provided in Table 1. The ten interviewed participants were aged 14–19 years, with four attending secondary school and six attending a tertiary education facility. Six identified themselves as female at the time of qualitative data collection (2020); however, one participant who identified as female had identified as male in the EveryBODY survey (i.e., in 2018). The majority of participants (80%) were still living at home. Seven (70%) participants identified that when reflecting on their childhood and adolescence during the interviews, their home life included both their

TABLE 1 Participants demographics at the time of interview participation.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Accom	PAH	PE
Lesley	F	19	Uni-1st year	Home	M/F	Asian M/F
Barry	M	18	Uni-1st year	Away	M/F	Australian M/F
Dave	M	19	Uni-1st year	Home	M/F	Australian M/F
Elizabeth	F	19	Uni-1st year	Away	M/F	European M Australian F
Eric	M	16	10	Home	M/F	Asian M/F
Carol	F	15	9	Home	M/F	Asian M Australian F
Helen	F	17	12	Home	M	Asian M/F
Holmes	F	16	11	Home	M	Asian M/F
Poketato	M	14	9	Home	M/F	Australian M/F
Winston	F	16	10	Home	M	Australian M/F

Notes: Accom, accommodation at time of interview (Home, living at home; Away, living away from parents); F, father; Gender (F, self-identified as female; M, self-identified as male); M, mother; PAH, parent in the home during adolescence; PE, parent ethnicity.
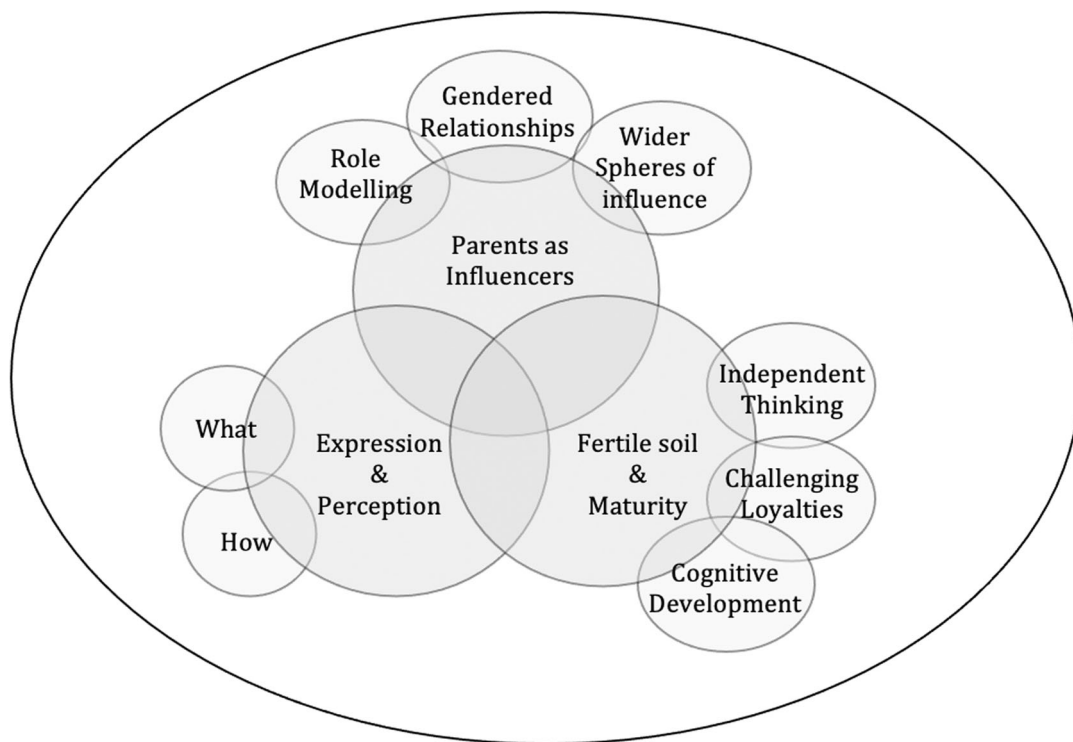
FIGURE 1 Graphical representation of the thematic map representing the three emergent themes.

mother and father, with the remaining three (30%) participants indicating that during the same period, they had lived only with their mother. Parental ethnicity was Australian, Asian, or European.

4.2 | Findings

The research team present the participants' shared stories and insights under the themes *Parents as Influencers*, *Expression and Perception*, and *Fertile Soil and Maturity*. This thematic mapping, as depicted in Figure 1, includes the three overlapping

themes and subthemes to represent the complex inextricable ties while each yields its own independent function and purpose in the lives of adolescents.

4.2.1 | Theme 1: Parents as influencers

The participants illustrated the way their parents communicated weight, shape, and eating ideals and, in so doing, illustrated the influence of proximal processes in their parent's lives, the context, and what objects and symbols had influenced their parents in their upbringing to embody and then share those ideals. The subthemes that emerged were "Role Modeling," "Gendered Relationships," and "Wider Spheres of Influence."

Role-modeling
This theme considered parents' role as influencers through their communication and role-modeling for weight, shape, and eating. What transpired was a complex set of bidirectional expectations for the parental role. Winston offered a basic understanding of parental expectation, "they kind of like educate like us on what's good for you and what's not good for you," showing how she views her parents as key teachers in her life who provide direction, boundaries, and advice to achieve the "best version" of herself. However, other participants went further than just confirming the presumption that parents would be influential people, they indicated that they had an expectation that parents *should* play a guiding role in helping them to develop and navigate healthy physical behaviors and mental wellbeing for weight, shape, and eating and that leaving such education to outside sources alone was "not the right way" (Lesley).

Gendered relationships
Parental influence was spoken about in different ways by the various participants, with some talking about their "parents" as a single unified unit (Dave), while others spoke of the influence emanating more so from one parent; Carol said, "it's whatever mum says goes." Notably, the presence of one or more parents at home was not the primary driver of whether one or both parents were influential, highlighting that parental influence in weight, shape, and eating grows from the general familial system already established in the home environment unique to each adolescent. Nevertheless, the gendered influence was evidenced as part of that existing structure and its subsequent influential power. For example, Poketato shared that he takes most of his lessons in the home from his father "he's a male as well and I find that he teaches better in a way … he just influences me more than mum…." Barry is similarly more influenced by his father's explicit communication "he is probably the only one that um says anything about it." The projection of gendered health ideals and expectations is also evident in Helen's reporting of her mother's comments:

> she's always trying to lose weight and stuff…I guess she might have concerns like that for me as well.

Dave shared that many of the conversations in his house were reinforced by parental modeling as his parents "[lead] by example by being very active." Parents can be role models for health and fitness ideals that start very young by encouraging participation in sports, selecting healthy food options and "just eating healthy and buying wholemeal bread rather than white bread" (Dave). Holmes shares how her father always encouraged her to swim, run, and do it all at a young age, "and it's influenced me to kind of look after my body." Elizabeth too speaks of exercising regularly with her father though she does highlight that her father competes in triathlons which "is really extreme" and creates a point of conflict for her as she struggles to engage in such intense activity. This point of differentiation for Elizabeth shows that she can recognize her fathers' choice to exercise to that level is not "healthy"; nevertheless, she does like to accompany her father as often as she can, which suggests she also invests in his fitness ideals.

Wider spheres of influence
Many adolescents were aware of their parents' networks as a larger sphere of influence that could also influence how they parented and from where they took their ideals. For instance, Lesley reflected that their Indian background meant their parents "didn't like the idea of wasting food," which led to being "taught to not waste food," which they noted led to their own internalization of "there are people out there who are starving so I need to finish this, whether or not I am hungry or full." Lesley believed this series of experiences, lessons, and internalizations had an enduring impact when they said, "I do think it has shaped the way that I responded to hunger." Eric also spoke of the Indian cultural influences that have impacted multiple generations in his family "their lifestyle revolved around the food and the community." Helen speaks of "Asian beauty standards," and Elizabeth speaks of her mother's European heritage, making her "watchful" about eating habits. Further, Elizabeth also spoke of the influence of her mother's work as a sonographer and how she feels those workplace experiences impact the communications in her home "she sees obese people all the time" and recounts her mothers' fears "oh I hope none of us get to that extreme." Elizabeth's meaning-making of these experiences and ability to recognize why her

mother was using those specific words and expressions highlight how the experiences of parents can result in both directed communications (i.e., food monitoring) but also more indirect and subtle ways, such as through role modeling of eating and weight control behavior or commentary about others' bodies.

The adolescents also spoke of the role of peers. For instance, Winston spoke about how rife disordered eating was among her peer group and how easily that has influenced her own thinking

> A lot of teenagers nowadays have eating disorders and everything, so sometimes that's all they talk about, and you kind of hear that and (think) oh, like that's what people think.

Elizabeth shared similar experiences with her peers and how their behaviors had impacts on her behaviors when she stated that "[peers] definitely impacted me and I was conscious about (my weight) and I was comparing myself to them." Lesley highlighted here that, ultimately, the influences outside the family are moderated or exacerbated by parents in the home and that parents have a

> Responsibility to guide their child and, in a lot of sense, not only my parents but a lot of parents have unfortunately failed.

It is here that we see how parental communications in the home may be able to moderate the influences coming from outer spheres of influence (peers and media) and can be protective, as Helen shares:

> I think that my parents, how they've raised me to perceive my body image, I feel it was important in my self-confidence around my body, like I don't have too many concerns about my body image.

Participants privileged the perspectives offered by their parents, which is a cross-cutting with Theme 3. They are loyal to their parents and take care to consider and justify their parents' communication, recognizing that perhaps their parents are unaware they are acting as a source of information at the time or are influenced by their own ethnic, cultural, or work-related beliefs. However, an assumption of this privilege allows for miscommunications. Furthermore, it undermines the potential protective role parents can play in their adolescent's lives with respect to the other complex ecology systems adolescents grow up within, particularly for weight, shape, and eating features.

4.2.2 | Theme 2: Expression and perception

This theme captures how the adolescents placed importance in the what ("content" or the "object"), such as healthy eating ideals or concern for health comments, and the multiple variations of the how ("delivery") their parents' communication was perceived.

The "What"—content

Participants spoke of how their parents would embed such discussions about weight, shape, and eating within conversations on "healthy eating" ideals. Helen says her father's values highlighted the most "important thing" was to be "healthy" and "having a balanced diet," and Poketato remembers his father would comment that "a good diet helps your brain study harder…don't eat so many sweets." Helen noted that importance in her household was placed on "balance"—but that little direction was given as to what "balance" actually was. The challenge of determining how best to meet that "balance" becomes more evident in Theme 3. The lack of specificity equally challenged Lesley as it created uncertainty for the adolescents, which was not a space they found helpful as they had to anticipate their parents' intentions. They would seemingly prefer more specific directions from their parents rather than gently delivered ambiguous information.

Although still related to health, Dave felt the content of comments he received were more "concerned comments" about the outcomes of his eating rather than about the process of eating. The comments of Dave's parents about being "a bit skinny" were deemed purposeful as he believed "they are not making that comment off the cuff," Helen's mother was also worried that she was "too skinny." Holmes reported her parents to have a body ideal in mind, "not too obese or too slim," leaving Holmes, like Helen, to feel uncertain about what this might look like and how to achieve it, but recognizing that slipping into either of these ambiguous body shapes would be disappointing to her parents. Comments were perceived to be more personal and focused on appearance outcomes than health. This uncertainty and the personal nature of the comments leave potential for heightened anxiety and unhealthy coping strategies to alleviate that tension.

On the other hand, Eric perceived his mother harbored a desire to control his weight after his childhood health concerns where she was most involved in his care, "she really wants my weight to like not fluctuate as much as it has." Poketato's mother has celiac disease and projected concerns about higher weight and diabetes and "(didn't) want that to happen to

us." Lesley received comments perceived as a "warning" about potentially dire future health and social consequences: "if you keep eating, you'll die, or if you go this path, you're not going to find a girlfriend or boyfriend." Although the content was clearly exaggerated, the internalized message from their parents stayed with Lesley as it spoke to what was portrayed as a physical and emotional worst-case scenario for them and a clear projection of their concerns. This interpretation is a further cross-cutting with Theme 3. Lesley described spending a lot of time in their room as being around their parents and receiving such comments was not a space they chose for themselves anymore.

The "How"—delivery

Participants reported that the impact of "healthy eating" and "healthy-looking body" content was ultimately influenced and moderated by *how* their parents delivered that content to them. The sincerity of the comment, the context, frequency and valance, whether the comments were verbal or non-verbal, and if the comment came after a request or was unsolicited all contributed to the perception of their expression.

The participants noted a host of positive or ambiguous comments delivered by their parents that would take on different meanings because of the circumstances in which they were spoken. For example, Lesley felt comments had to be considered in "context," being called "pumpkin [by mum] in my native language…I've never really found it offensive." Context also extended to appreciating whether the comment was given "freely or not." For instance, Elizabeth felt she had to seek out affirmations from her mother for her investment in her abdominal workout to hear her "abs were a good thing," yet was conscious these comments were not freely delivered, "she was like 'oh oh yes' (slight laugh) she would just acknowledge." Elizabeth seemed uncertain of their validity, which illustrates a raised level of anxiety within a didactic relationship and a potential need for affirming comments about body weight and shape. Eric would try to determine if any negative comments sounded "sincere," and Helen stated she was not interested in "a shallow comment." Therefore, sincerity was deemed more important and suggested their parents' intention for the comments is being perceived and felt to be important in translating the meaning and potential impact of the comment.

Lesley reasoned that "context" was pivotal with humor suggesting some level of permission for, and or ability to tolerate, "not positive" comments (i.e., humorous, ambiguous, or outright negative comments) if their day had otherwise been typical and could have adverse outcomes:

> If I come home from school and I feel bad about myself and you're going to make a comment that is NOT positive, then it would hurt and exacerbate the challenges of the day

Notably, while there appeared to be some allowances made by participants for commentary by their parents, the delivery of comments perceived as negative by the adolescents held significant and lengthy impacts. For instance, Eric revealed that

> a slight negative comment (from mum) would feel more intense than the positive comment that weighs three times as much.

Further, although negative comments might not be experienced often by Holmes from her mother because they are "very close," just the thought of them "would be very saddening" and "would hurt a lot." This cross-cutting with Theme 1 and the influence of those gendered relationships and potential anxiety within that relationship suggests avoiding negative comments regardless of intention.

Some participants took responsibility for communicating confusion over the intentions behind their parents' disclosures, either verbally or non-verbally, as they did not expect their parents to be intentionally hurtful. Holmes and Elizabeth felt they let their mothers know if a conversation was going badly using non-verbal expression. For instance, Holmes offers, "I'm very expressive from my face so like they can just see that 'ok I have to reword everything I just said'," which Holmes felt supported transparency in their communications. Holmes could be controlling the conversation to ensure they are not upset by the commentary or potentially picking up a subtext through non-verbal communication that, when called out, the mother retracts and corrects. Elizabeth is also non-verbal in her expression, "I will show that I am upset by it, I will go really quiet and then she'll have a think about it." Holmes and Elizabeth report that their parents' response to those non-verbal reactions is to reword what they were saying, or in Elizabeth's case, simply acknowledge the clumsiness of the comment, "oh, sorry that was that was wrong of me to say that." Neither Holmes nor Elizabeth reported being upset by those interactions illustrating a sense of being able to differentiate a targeted comment and a projection. Both appeared to appreciate their parents' awareness of their non-verbal communication and felt it had been part of healthy communication with their parent/s. Dave also reported how non-verbal communication in the family was regularly used to inform his weight, shape, and eating behaviors. For instance, he recalled his mother continually asking him about what "protein powder" he wanted, and he took this to be a tacit endorsement from her of his weight control behavior and even a subtle reminder to continue to be conscious of his eating. Likewise, his father would place "the scales next to my bowl" so Dave could weigh his food—which again was viewed as another reminder to be vigilant of his eating and that health could be inferred by weight. Dave reflected that his parents

likely communicated with him in this way because they recognized that he did not like talking openly about it, so they acted this way to be "less invasive." However, they could also be finding ways to appease his anxiety and bilateral non-verbal communication, which could inform a level of permissiveness. Similarly, Barry found it anxiety-provoking to talk about his weight, shape, or eating and shared, "I am terrible at telling them anything that bothers me." Therefore, nothing was shared.

In contrast, Carol felt that she explicitly gave her parents permission to discuss weight, shape, and eating because "they're the only ones that are gonna tell me the truth." As such, in Carol's household, any potential misunderstandings were addressed expressly through direct verbal interactions. Carol indicated that she felt such an approach reflected healthy communication. Common amongst these disclosures is that despite diverse communication methods, adolescents felt that as long as there was a space created to address potential miscommunications, a healthy and prosperous relationship was maintained where weight, shape, and eating conversations were helpful in their lives. Unfortunately, for some of the participants here, including Eric, Barry, and Lesley, the absence of any form of clarification space in their interactions with their parents meant that they did not always understand the purpose of their parent's disclosures and subsequently had no way of addressing the internal conflict and potential hurt helpfully. As a result, the potential for withdrawal and unhealthy coping strategies is high.

In summary, this theme represents a bidirectional relationship between adolescents and parents as each express information and expectations regarding weight, shape, and eating to the other. For some families, these communications are overt and verbally articulated and include feedback mechanisms or pathways to clear up misunderstandings which the adolescents reported to be helpful as they recognized content, delivery, and context were equally important when considering what was intended by their parents. For other families, those communications are more non-verbal or may play out via mechanisms unknown to each party (e.g., using silence to depict disappointment). While some indicated an appreciation for such an approach (e.g., Dave), it is clear that a lack of open discussion creates fertile ground for miscommunications. This theme illustrates the emotional interdependence within the family system and the complexity of what and how weight shape and eating comments are communicated.

4.2.3 | Theme 3: Fertile soil and maturity

While Themes 1 and 2 were heavily driven by how adolescents reflected on their parents' behaviors and communication efforts, Theme 3 focuses on how these observations were internalized, reasoned, and changed as they matured and illustrated the influence of person characteristics both as antecedents and as outputs, reciprocity in communication and the influence of context. This theme illustrates essential elements of "independent thinking," "challenging loyalties," and "cognitive development" through which we see their protective strategies to keep themselves emotionally safe.

Independent Thinking
Independent Thinking illustrates the reasoning that comes with being asked a question and given space to answer. What is shared is a picture of more self-awareness and greater trust in their own opinions. As much as their parents act as role models, as adolescents mature, their parents seemingly become less of an ideal. Lesley, the eldest participant, reported how they feel they are now old enough to make choices to "feel comfortable" in their body "regardless" of their gender or parents' opinion. Likewise, Winston shared that being "happy" meant she doesn't "feel the need to change for anyone" (including her parents), and Carol felt like she was her own person, "an individual," and can now "decide how I feel." Both Winston and Carol are in middle adolescence. Eric "zoned all negative comments out"; he stopped caring what people thought as a coping mechanism because of "the amount of times I would just cry by myself." While there was growing independence from parents with age, it was clear that a legacy remained.

Challenging loyalties
The ongoing importance of parents to the adolescents in this study was regularly noted throughout all the interviews as the participants expressed, explicitly and implicitly, loyalty to their parents and their parents' parenting behaviors. This demonstration of loyalty is illustrated through their ability to make cognitive sense of the way words were expressed (i.e., considering the use of humor, context, and personal idiosyncrasies) and, although similar to Themes 1 and 2, are differentiated by their ability to reason with themselves how that information should then be interpreted and taken on board. For all the participants, there were many situations where ambiguous, or even potentially negative, parental commentary was dismissed as being "safe" and "not harmful," with adolescents ultimately accepting the information consistent with a view of their parents as "protectors." For instance, Helen protects Mum or any interpretation of negativity towards Mum when she shares, "[Mum] wouldn't say it in a mean way to actually make me hurt … they're always looking for what's best for me," with the addition of "I'm assuming" which was followed by a 'small laugh'. Similarly, Barry reasoned that although his father would joke about weight and shape, "it's obviously not mean-natured." The notion of a protective quality of the family unit, and therefore a loyalty towards it, was also expressed by Carol as she dismissed jokes and humor about weight,

shape and eating because they occurred "in the family." It can be inferred from here that the same language selections in settings outside the family would not be acceptable for Carol. However, Carol's loyalty to her family means that she justifies its use in the family context out of a sense of loyalty to her kin, dismissing it altogether as "we're joking around" or reinterpreting its purpose to something she deems more palatable "even if [the comments] are negative, I know they're not negative but they're just advice." Holmes rationalized her mothers' comments not to feel hurt by them,

> (she) could be saying something that sounds really mean, but she wouldn't know that it sounds mean; she thinks she's doing the best thing cause I'm her daughter.

Indeed, this differential acceptability of comments made inside versus outside the family was captured when Barry said that playful banter could be misunderstood by "an outside observer" and could be seen as "a little degrading." They are, at times, working to counter their instinct to be hurt by the comments. However, without a well-developed sense of self that can challenge these assumed loyalties and without rejecting the person expressing the behavior, there is the potential for a greater risk of permissiveness for abuse that could project into adult relationships.

Challenging loyalties extended to the acceptability, reciprocity, and appropriateness of humor in the family in the context of weight, shape, and eating, which was not uniform, with several participants here identifying that it was not used within their family interactions, "I wouldn't say it's like an unspoken rule, but we don't make jokes [about] weight and things like that" (Dave). Winston was also emphatic about the appropriateness of that humor in their family ("definitely not") and was able to consider how others might feel, "you kind of don't really know how it is going to like affect someone else's life." Winston's response shows a level of awareness for wider spheres of influence. For others, the use of this banter or humor was more permissible; for instance, Eric's brother was called "bird bod" by their father, and Barry's father said, "He's GDU which is like garbage disposal unit—he'll eat anything." Poketato shared that his father used humor to "lighten the mood" and Eric contributed that humor can make serious conversations "more casual and… it makes me just feel more comfortable talking about whatever." Here there appears to be an understanding that the content matter of weight, shape, and eating is serious, and that humor can somehow reduce the discomfort caused by such 'serious' conversations. For Eric, his acceptance of such language in the family setting was less about rationalizing such commentary as "safe" or dismissing its emotional valence for himself but instead was more about remaining loyal to the family and ensuring he did not in some way hurt *them* by challenging it, essentially privileging the feelings of his family members above his own. In the absence of any communication about the negative impacts of such commentary, Eric may be unintentionally confirming to his family unit that such commentary is permissible.

Cognitive development

When considering how adolescents perceive and make sense of their parents' comments through developing cognitive capabilities, Lesley calls for more explicit parental communication and complains that their parents "have a very ambiguous way of expressing themselves, then you're stuck figuring out yourself." Some of the older participants reflected on how the cumulative impact of many small comments influenced them in their younger years. For example, it can be "that little casual comment where they saw an overweight person or an obese person on TV" (Lesley) or their mother's comments on peoples' appearances "wow, she's big, or she's really like a stick cause like anorexia" (Lesley). The participants noted how they were left trying to appraise themselves and their appearance against those judgments. Elizabeth even reasoned that the absence of communication regarding weight, shape, and eating could be equally harmful as when her parents were "not encouraging me or giving me positive feedback," she questioned whether they might have been thinking badly of her at the time and conceded that the absence of communication "probably, subconsciously, has had a bad impact on me" as she has continued to grow and mature potentially leaving her dependent to some extent on reassurance-seeking to determine if she is acceptable. Lesley reflected that "children have amazing retention abilities," and so it is important that parents realize that it can be the small things, or the absent things, that can be carried for an extended period and which have, according to Lesley, "ramifications" and "consequences".

Lesley also speaks to cognitive development through adolescence and how reasoning changes over these years and so parenting must reflect those changes. They point out they did not have "a level of emotional or mental maturity" to reason the comments directed at them when they were 8 or 9 by their father,

> you're mocking me for my weight father like you know 'chunky' but at the same time … what are the consequences? And if and this has happened over so many years … over time, it just got worse and worse and worse.

Lesley felt that parents need to be aware of what is and is not age appropriate and know what language features (e.g., humor) may be more or less reasonable. Seemingly Lesley is speaking of ensuring the best possible landscape is set for communication between adolescents and their parents, reducing the likelihood of miscommunications. Miscommunications

have differential impacts on children and adolescents dependent upon their level of emotional and mental maturity which moderates how those comments are perceived and how well they can work to counter the influence of wider spheres of influence. "Fertile Soil and Maturity" highlights that adolescence is about growth from a dependent child into an independent young adult and that the conversations held between parents and children regarding weight, shape, and eating can impact children in the long term.

5 | DISCUSSION

This study sought to consider the lived experiences and the meaning-making of the adolescents as they engaged with their parents in communications relating to body weight, shape, and eating. These disclosures were interpreted as representing three distinct yet intertwining themes: *Parents as Influencers* (Theme 1), *Expression and Perception* (Theme 2), and *Fertile Soil and Maturity* (Theme 3), as depicted in the thematic map. A complex picture of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) proximal processes was revealed, illustrating the reciprocal interactions between adolescents and parents, objects or symbols in their immediate environment and their influence over time. While our study did not place a specific focus on context, such as the make-up of the household or socioeconomic status, our adolescents did speak to these influences where relevant. For example, did a one-off comment from a parent have as much influence as comments that featured regularly over an extended period of time; was the "context," the make-up of the home (single-parent families), an indicator for parental influence being protective against adverse outcomes or contribute to dysfunction; and further exploration of how cultural or work influences (symbols) influence proximal processes. Further, our study design asked about the adolescent recollection of parental comments without focusing on frequency, yet frequency was considered pertinent to outcomes in the answers of our participants. The purposefully exploratory perspective illustrates complex challenges for parents, carers, and practitioners working with adolescents across the age range. What our participants are influenced by and the meaning they ascribe to those experiences highlights the opportunities for further in-depth research into each aspect of this study.

Theme 1 illustrates that *Parents as Influencers* work in concert or counteractively with other symbols (influences) in their and their adolescent children's lives beyond the proximal (i.e., through culture, work, media, and peers). Within the microsystem, parents can play a protective role in the lives of their adolescent children, reducing or increasing the risk of EDCs and other poor mental health sequelae (Gillison et al., 2016; Kaplan et al., 2006; Langdon-Daly & Serpell, 2017; Navarro et al., 2022; Prest & Protinsky, 1993). The influence of same- and different-gendered commentary has been highlighted in previous survey-based research (Ata et al., 2007; Dahill et al., 2023; Puhl et al., 2022). This paper further illustrates the proximal processes that occur frequently and increase in complexity and that the perception of communication about controlling weight and shape is not reduced to verbal but also modeled through parental behaviors through symbols and objects. Our participants add context and depth to research on parental commentary, cultural influences, parenting styles, and associations with EDCs (Ackard et al., 2006; Almenara & Ježek, 2015; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Brown et al., 2016; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006; Puhl et al., 2022; Rodgers et al., 2009). This study offered insight into a practical application of proximal processes, illustrating how the adolescent's characteristics influence how words are heard, the reciprocal interaction, the bidirectional expectations, and the synergy with other people, objects, and symbols in their immediate environment. These processes occur verbally and non-verbally over an extended length of time or, in some reported cases, infrequently, yet led to dysfunction and lack of competency more in line with Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020) who challenged Bronfenbrenner and Morris's view that proximal processes involved positive interactions and led to "competency, buffering against deleterious influences" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Navarro et al., 2022).

5.1 | Mothers influence

Mothers have been found to comment more than fathers (Dahill et al., 2021; Lawrence et al., 2022), and participants in our study confirmed that. They were more likely to have direct communications, "whatever mum says goes" (Carol), with both their sons and daughters and were more focused on health. This study offered a wide variety of health-related challenges (obesity, low weight, kidney disease, diabetes, celiac). Puhl et al. (2022) found that most conversations among the parents in their study came from a concern about their adolescents' health or weight. Nevertheless, parents worrying about their child's health illustrated the interdependent relations between parent and child and their choices over time, leading to the child taking on the concern. For example, Eric shared that his mother wanted his weight to "stabilise" he could feel her concern, and he knew, based on his history, that it was warranted. Nevertheless, his comment was weighted by her anxiety for him— her worry then became his worry, fulfilling his mother's worry that her son could not make good choices. A further example is that Poketato shared that his mother had celiac disease, which he felt fuelled her concern for his health. Merçon-Vargas et al.'s (2020) paper highlights this challenge as a potential example of inverse proximal processes.

Almenara and Jezek's (2015) paper found more negative eating comments for daughters than sons, and Lawrence et al. (2022) found that the adults in their study recollected their mothers as the source of weight stigma. However, in our paper, Holmes justified some of those negative comments as her mother being unaware of how mean it sounded and thinking she "is doing the best thing cause I'm her daughter." Elizabeth and Holmes also reported mothers as being willing to recognize when a comment or line of communication upset them. The Adolescents were either "very expressive" (Holmes) or "I will go really quiet, and she'll have to think about it" (Elizabeth). The interactional reciprocity in these mother–daughter interactions creates an interesting contribution to the dyad relationship between mother and daughter, where the daughter is taking a lead role in the education of their mother and also using non-verbal "I am disappointed in you" type of communication to get their mother to see the "error" of her ways. The mothers in both cases were willing to retract and reword, suggesting that parents created an atmosphere of reciprocal communication. Ackard et al. (2006) found that adolescents who reported their mother cared "quite a bit" or "very much" were less likely to have a high prevalence of unhealthy weight control behaviors, encouraging parents to foster contexts that are not loaded with symbols that adversely impact interactions. These examples illustrate the progressing complexity of parent–adolescent interactions that led to competence in addressing and correcting perceived errors rather than dysfunction. However, a consideration of the processes that led to being able to address it rather than stay quiet to appease any anxiety and keep the didactic relationship intact is worthwhile (Brown et al., 2016; Krycak et al., 2012). Holmes, like Winston and Helen, live with their mothers. Perhaps this single-parent context manifested in more protective comments from daughters to their mothers and less acceptability for humor around weight shape or eating. Mothers appeared to model or project more cultural ideals and were likely influenced by those wider spheres of influence (objects and symbols) from their upbringing, which speaks to the context and characteristics they then communicate with their adolescents. Symbols from the wider spheres of influence deserve much more focus than we offer here, but body image ideals and eating styles clearly influence adolescents living between cultures. Helen speaks to "Asian beauty standards," Elizabeth—the "watchful" habits that were deemed to emanate from Europe, and Lesley's Indian conditioning not to "waste food" created frustration at the subsequent response to hunger. Of note, the relationship with their mothers held value. Eric shared that a "slightly negative comment from mum feels more intense than the positive comment," and Holmes felt that their close relationship with their mum meant a negative comment "would hurt a lot." Mothers' didactic relationship with all our participants was influential, which confirms findings from other mother–daughter research and the modeling for future EDCs (Ackard et al., 2006; Berge et al., 2013; Delsing et al., 2005; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006; Puhl et al., 2022; Simone et al., 2021).

5.2 | Fathers influence

There is less research on paternal commentary. Therefore, we were interested to see how our adolescents perceived paternal weight shape and eating comments and if there were any consistent patterns. From previous research on paternal communication and gender stereotypes, fathers tend to comment less (Ackard et al., 2006; Dahill et al., 2021) and focus on more muscle-ideation and fitness ideals (Berge et al., 2013; Bussey & Bandura, 1999), which was consistent in our research. Dave described their father as a role model and being "very active," and Holmes and Elizabeth were influenced by their fathers to look after their bodies, eat "healthily," and stay fit. Puhl et al., in their 2022 study between parents and non-related adolescents, considered motivation for conversations and found the primary motivator was healthy eating ideals, with fathers also experiencing a fear of weight teasing for their child, which could lead to the same inverse proximal processes as maternal concerns for health. Further, fathers have been reported as using more humor with sons (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Lawrence et al., 2022), which, considering the influence of these objects over time, could explain Ackard et al.'s (2006) findings that having considered the acceptability of humor and teasing, over half of girls and one-third of boys felt unable to talk to their father. This acceptability and ability to talk to fathers about sensitive topics was a point of interest in this study as many of the participants in our study suggested their fathers were the source of weight humor or teasing. Humor is used to "lighten the mood" (Poketato) or make things more "casual" (Eric), using words like "Bird-Bod" to describe low weight or "GDU" (Barry) to describe excess eating patterns or "chunky" to describe size (Lesley). Barry offers that his fathers' jokes were not "mean-natured." However, Bronfenbrenner and Morris describe proximal processes as "engines of development"; therefore, if these interactions introduce doubt about the intention of the comment, there is a greater potential for risk of dysfunction.

5.3 | Protective relationships and communication

This study highlights the multiple layers of environmental influences (i.e., people, systems, and objects) around adolescents (Berge et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Eli et al., 2014; Lydecker et al., 2018; McMichael, 1999; Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020; Neumark-Sztainer, 2005; Simone et al., 2021), and the challenges of healthy communication in relation to weight shape and eating within those systems. The adolescents spoke of predominantly positive relationships with their parents and

their protective mediational role within the multiple influences (i.e., media, peers) that either confirm or refute information received from other sources and work in concert with and counteractively to each other, which is in line with Bussey and Bandura (1999) and aligned with Bronfenbrenner and Morris's suggestion that protective proximal processes can lead to competence and protected against negative outcomes. The adolescents also considered the workplaces, roles, cultural beliefs, and communities their parents are a part of, recognizing the expanding ecological universe of a child's environment beyond the proximal has a strong influence on their wellbeing which offers current adolescent lived-experience data alongside bioecology theories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; McMichael, 1999; Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020; Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). Our research and the lens through which we then tease out the importance of the way parents' words are perceived offers insight and a more nuanced understanding into how those key relationships can contribute to the misunderstandings that come through the delivery of the communication, and how "intention" can be rendered unimportant. Of note is what influences how the child perceives parental comments and whether the proximal processes lead to greater competence and are protective or lead to a more protective set of behaviors and dysfunction.

Theme 3 spoke to how the adolescents interpreted their parents' communication and what "fertile soil" impacted that interpretation. This theme contributes to a discussion on the bioecology model and the person characteristics as an antecedent of proximal processes, as well as an output capturing the influence of nature-nurture and heritability and the impact of repetition and time. While their maturity and cognitive ability to understand and process the nuances of communication was influenced by cognitive development (Keltner et al., 2001), it was clear there was emphasis put on the desire to understand their parents' intentions and what might have led their parents to say or do what they did. What transpired was a sense of what influenced what adolescents "heard" and how it was influenced by an individualized cocktail of fertile soil containing past experiences, relationship attachment, fear of rejection, fear of negative evaluation, self-esteem, BMI, peer influence, family dynamics and the maturity to reason "their" perception of what was communicated. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) illustrate this as the result of proximal processes, how the adolescents' actions with the people, the environment, symbols, and objects repeatedly operating over time influence outcomes. Some of the participants had not wanted to upset their parents or consider their parents would have meant their comments to be interpreted negatively, this finding adds to past research on social rules and the sense of "loyalty" to their parents (Bigelow et al., 1992; Delsing et al., 2005; Doba et al., 2018). Many reported they did not consider their parents' actions ill-intentioned; however, this sense of loyalty also determined how comfortable they were communicating how they felt with their parents, which could have exasperated any attachment anxiety or fear of negative evaluation which has been shown to increase risk of EDCs (Trompeter et al., 2022). The influence of didactic and challenging relationships also illustrated how adolescents try to match their parents' picture of health ideals and not disappoint them or, worse, risk not being "acceptable" to have a relationship. How they answered the questions and what they included illustrated differing levels of conformity. Many sought approval or validation about their bodies from their parents. In light of the synergistic relations among the different factors of proximal processes, it is also worth considering that the participants could be connecting correctly with their parents' projection of concern, in turn worrying about their own health, thereby confirming the concern their parents had for them—a self-perpetuating cycle. If the adolescents are unaware of the symbols embedded in their parents' culture, they will likely be unaware of their influence. Perhaps this fear of causing upset to their parent is why Eric was so hesitant to bring anything up, "if they know then they'll feel bad, and I don't want them to feel bad."

In multiple reviews, the negative commentary was deemed particularly inappropriate in the family where distress in the parent-child relationship could have adverse consequences for future interactions and relationships, and our participants have illustrated how and why those comments are so damaging, regardless of intention (Gillison et al., 2016; Lawrence et al., 2022; Soylu, 2011; Yourell et al., 2021). As such, for the adolescents, it was revealed that having a space to communicate about how particular commentary impacted them was deemed the most important way to address all of this. While a family environment can be protective for adolescents (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Neumark-Sztainer, 2005), this very protective shield, over time, yields a space where adolescents feel a sense of responsibility to be accommodating, forgiving, and permissive of parental commentary that may be hurtful, unhelpful, and degrading and rather than proximal process building confidence and buffering against negative experiences, can lead to dysfunction (Dahill et al., 2023; Gillison et al., 2016; Lawrence et al., 2022; Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2022; Puhl et al., 2022). Eric illustrated the necessity for a level of maturation due to what he perceived as a negative repetition of comments or teasing and undesirable outcome (tears, hurt, or upset). He taught himself to stop crying or caring and Lesley to retreat into their room. As Lesley offers, these comments have "ramifications" and "consequences" and remembering Barry's observation that the comments could be seen as "a little degrading" to an outside observer.

The participants in our study have highlighted the practice of reflection about how different commentary choices are perceived differently at different ages—together with some perspective on how, as adults, parents are primarily responsible for mindfulness around their language use and in creating communication pathways that allow their adolescent children to question the status quo of the family environment without feeling a sense of disloyalty in doing so.

6 | REFLECTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

At each stage of this research, the team considered the hermeneutic circle as part of the IPA process. We were particularly conscious of how these findings connected with our own therapeutic practices and personal lives as parents and made sure to discuss these as a group to examine how our experiences might be influencing how the words of the participants were being interpreted. Significant time was spent moving back and forth between the thematic maps and the individual disclosures of the participants, the descriptive summaries written immediately following each interview, and our reflexive diaries to ensure that the experiences of the participants were those which took precedence.

Many aspects of Themes 1 and 2 extended literature, and therefore, their presence here is a reflection of them being fundamental aspects of adolescent–parent communications regarding weight, shape, and eating. Further, the willingness to take a broad perspective on the methods adopted yielded disclosures regarding family loyalty and in-group permissions that are, to our knowledge, not previously reported and are an important contribution to the literature on parent communication styles and EDCs. The emergence of this, particularly in Theme 3, was unanticipated, and as such, its presence here really emphasizes how the adolescent voices were privileged and that the methods here provided a platform for the unexpected to become visible.

7 | CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was not to identify parents as a focal cause of adolescent concerns about weight, shape, and eating challenges but rather to understand how adolescent–parent communications influence adolescent cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in these areas—both positively and negatively. There needs to be a greater understanding of how this communication is heard, as the synergy of proximal processes, the characteristics of people, the context, objects, maturity, and didactic relationships all contribute to the fertile ground these words are falling on. What became evident through this research was a rich illustration of the many varied forms of expression and the unappreciated challenge of not abusing the loyalty that is fostered within the family and cultural constructs. These parent–adolescent communication moments shaped the life, identities, cognitions, and behaviors of the adolescents and were not founded on socioeconomic status but rather influenced by societal ideals and beliefs around humor, family loyalty, and in-group permissions. Perhaps the challenge is not to avoid conversations about weight shape and eating talk, but as Carol offered, and Lesley requested, parents instead create a safe space to engage adolescents in discussions about how weight and eating features within their own value systems versus societal values so they can learn to internalize messages about self-worth that are not dependent on weight/shape, and critically evaluate the messages received from media/peers. It is positive to note, and something that should encourage practitioners working with adolescents and families, how many of the female participants shared that they felt equipped to deal with the challenging body image ideals from their friends and society based on their upbringing and role modeling they had received from their parents. This relationship resulted in competence that could buffer against other negative influences, a strength of agency in translating potentially confusing messages about self-esteem and self-view, and a possible protection from fear of rejection or attachment anxiety. The changing and challenging landscape of context for adolescents illustrated by a rise in blended families, acrimonious separations, living between multiple homes, and parents having health challenges or an eating disorder themselves means overt and obvious communication cannot be the only focus for support or intervention. Rather, greater understanding of what proximal processes, objects, past life experiences, and distal influences have contributed to the resulting verbal and non-verbal communication between parents and adolescents. This research offers a lived-experience voice to the current research, demonstrating the rising trends for adolescent EDCs.

The strengths of this study include the level of free disclosure offered by the participants and the diversity of participants (i.e., age, gender, cultural backgrounds, diverse health presentations, family make-up) sourced from a representative sample and the valuable insight into under-researched paternal comments. The limitations of this study include further qualitative research being needed to triangulate the findings as they may not be transferable to other populations, and additional layers of complexity might be missed (Joronen & Astedt-Kurki, 2005). Further, while a host of prompts were considered before the interview process, additional thought regarding age-appropriate prompts would be beneficial in future research efforts.

8 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the findings of this study, longitudinal research should consider paternal dyads within the family structure in further detail. Further exploration of the nuances and implications of family loyalty and in-group permissions should be addressed, considering the adolescent voices have highlighted that this area influences much of their communication and interpretation of comments and lays the foundations for adult communication and relationships. Healthcare practitioners should consider encouraging parents to be more aware of their multi-faceted role-modeling, the influence of cultural expectations, and should

encourage space for conversations about healthy ideals questioning the influence of media and peers. Children and adolescents should be encouraged to develop their own inner sense of self, allowing a more solid and lived self-esteem as a counter to the messages they may receive through other sources.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Deidentified data are available upon request, subject to approval from the authors' institutional ethics committee.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

ORCID
Lucy M. Dahill http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7732-4017
Natalie M. V. Morrison http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7055-535X
Stephen Touyz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1290-6243
Deborah Mitchison http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6736-7937
Kay Bussey http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6806-0892
Haider Mannan http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8236-0912
Phillipa Hay http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0296-6856

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