

# Children perceived as overweight 'more likely to gain pounds'

Swedish study throws into question the practice of telling parents whether their children are overweight

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Children whose parents think of them as overweight are likely to put on more pounds than other children, according to a study.

The research throws into question the current practice of telling parents whether their children are overweight or obese after they have been weighed and measured at school, as all children in the UK now are in the reception year and year 6.

It has been assumed that parents who realise they have an overweight child will help them exercise and follow a healthier diet.

But a presentation by researchers in Liverpool and Florida at the European Obesity Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, has found that, no matter what the child's weight at the age of four or five, if the parent perceives them to be too heavy, they will on average put on more weight, not less, than other children. That was the case whether the parent was right or wrong in thinking they were overweight.

The research was carried out by Dr Eric Robinson at the University of Liverpool and Dr Angela Sutin at the Florida State University College of Medicine. They analysed information from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, involving more than 3,500 children and their parents. The study followed the children from the ages of four to 13.

Nearly a fifth of the children were overweight at the age of four (19.7%). Most parents (80%) of overweight children wrongly thought their weight was normal. Some parents wrongly thought their children overweight when their weight was in the normal range for their age.

Children whose parents thought they were overweight, as opposed to "about the right weight", put on more weight over the years from four to 13 than children whose parents thought their weight was normal.

The researchers say they do not know exactly why this is happening, but it is possible that the stigma of obesity is part of the problem. Children who feel labelled as overweight

become less able to deal with it: “Experiencing stigma and feeling judged negatively because of one’s body size is associated with disordered eating and maladaptive coping responses, such as overeating.”

They say that more research is needed to find out exactly what is going on. “Contrary to popular belief, parental identification of child overweight is not protective against further weight gain, regardless of whether or not the child actually is overweight,” they write. “Rather, it is associated with more weight gain across childhood. Further research is needed to understand how parental perceptions of child weight may counterintuitively contribute to obesity.

“The present findings have implications for childhood obesity initiatives. It has long been presumed that parental identification of overweight is important to obesity intervention efforts. For example, in the United Kingdom and United States, national measurement programs are in place to correct parental perceptions of child weight.

“Until now there has been little formal assessment of whether such interventions do in fact protect against further weight gain ... There is now a greater need than ever to systematically assess the effectiveness of child measurement and obesity screening interventions delivered to parents.”

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