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## Why do children become overweight?

Sally Robinson, PhD

### **Open your eyes**

Studies show that we are becoming so accustomed to seeing overweight children that our eyes see an overweight child as being a healthy weight. In one study, one-third of parents with an obese child thought that their child's weight was about right. Another study showed that parents may not be willing to limit their child's food intake unless he was diagnosed as being clinically (seriously) obese.

There is a substantial amount of international research that finds that being obese in childhood is linked to physical and psychological harm not only in childhood, but into adulthood in ways that reduces quality of life, predisposes to illness and leads to earlier death. Measuring a child's height and weight can give us factual information, where our eyes may deceive us. Many countries are concerned about the high numbers of children who are overweight or obese and are asking why children become overweight.

### **Factors**

#### *Genes*

Your child may become overweight because he has inherited genes that affect his appetite, when he feels full, how much he likes being active and how his body processes food. If both his parents are obese, then he is more likely to become overweight. Genes, however, are only part of the story, and many other factors also play a part.

#### *Pregnancy*

Women are more likely to have an overweight baby if they were overweight during pregnancy, gained too much weight during pregnancy or had diabetes during pregnancy. Similarly, women who were underweight during pregnancy, or who gained too little weight during pregnancy, are more likely to have an underweight baby.

#### *Newborn weight*

Overweight babies are more likely to become overweight children than babies who are born a healthy weight. When babies are born underweight, they will biologically programme themselves to gain weight very rapidly during the first few months of life. This programming is not turned off, and they are twice as likely to be overweight by the age of five, compared to a baby who was not underweight.

#### *Infant feeding*

International experts advise breastfeeding for six months because of the health benefits for both baby and mother. Breastfeeding seems to protect the baby from developing obesity, though exactly how this works is not fully understood.

## **Food**

### *Exposure*

All children are born with neophobia, a fear of new things. It helps to keep them safe. This is often why children refuse new foods such as fruit or vegetables. Your child will accept food if it is frequently offered in small quantities without fuss or anxiety from you. Your child will get used to seeing the new food, touching it, and eventually trying it. Just put a small amount on his plate, and don't comment if it isn't eaten. Repeat the exposure, up to 15 times if necessary, and eventually he will eat it. (You also need to be a role model and eat a varied, healthy diet in front of him!)

### *Satiety*

When your child indicates that he has eaten enough, either by saying so, or pushing his plate away, he has had enough. Many parents think that their child needs more food than he does. If he keeps being encouraged to eat to a point of being uncomfortably full, he will lose sight of what a "normal" portion is and the knowledge that being comfortably full is sufficient. This can set up a habit of over-eating and not listening to his body.

### *Role Model*

Consider your own eating behaviour. If your kitchen is stocked with high calorie food, both you and your child are likely to eat it. If you are continually snacking throughout the day, your child will copy you. He may learn that eating is about boredom or comfort, rather than satisfying physical hunger. If you forbid a food, it will seem all the more appealing and your child will crave it more. If you keep talking about dieting, or your own body image, your child may pick up this tension around food and eating. If you are a picky eater, your child is likely to become a picky eater. If you force food onto a child, the child will link the upset with the food, and may never eat it again.

### *Attitude*

Try not to confuse food with love. You do not need to show your child that you love him by giving him food, and he does not need to show that he loves you by eating it. Show him that you love him in non-food ways (e.g., cuddles and attention).

Try to eat as a family where possible so that you can supervise and be a role model. Have high expectations of your child's eating, set standards, but also be sensitive to what your child is communicating and provide support. Keep mealtimes relaxed and positive; do not make food a weapon of control.

## **Exercise**

### *Activity*

If you are physically active, your child is more likely to be physically active. Some studies show that parents are sometimes too quick to assume that there are no suitable green spaces to go, or that they are more difficult to get to than they actually are. Focus on fun and family games where possible.

### *Inactivity*

If asking you or your child to be active is a challenge, focus on reducing your own and your child's inactivity. If your child has a television in her bedroom or regularly plays computer games, she is at risk of having long periods of inactivity. The more your child is inactive, the more likely it is that she will become overweight.

## **Socioeconomics**

### *Access to food and recreation*

It is generally easier to eat a healthy diet, with more fruits and vegetables and fewer calories, if you have a higher income. Foods that are very high in fat and sugar, and therefore calories, tend to be cheap. Similarly, it is often easier to be more active if you live near to green areas and play facilities, than if you live in an urban area where leisure facilities can be expensive for local residents. It is easier for you to encourage your child to be active if you live in a safe environment, rather than one where you are anxious about his safety. Among preschool children, not having enough sleep is linked to obesity.

### *Expectations*

It is easier to prevent overweight and obesity if it is the norm for your family, friends and local community to value healthier eating and higher levels of activity. These wider factors are matters for industry, government, town planning and local community representatives. The World Health Organization, the U.S. Government and the European Union all have urgent strategies to tackle childhood obesity and all seek to challenge the commercial, environmental and social factors that contribute to child obesity.

## **Conclusions**

The evidence shows that it is easier for some than others to prevent a child from becoming overweight. We cannot say that an obese child is entirely the parents' or the child's "fault," but nor is it entirely a child's destiny. It is every parent's responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of their child, and the adult that they are going to become, to do what they can to prevent unhealthy weight gain. It is everyone's responsibility to support the wider the initiatives that will help us to live in places and circumstances that do not encourage unhealthy weight gain.

Dr Robinson works at Canterbury Christ Church University, England, where she leads the health promotion and public health team. In addition to lecturing, she carries out research related to children's health and wellbeing, and completed her PhD on children's perceptions of eating and body image.