

A Parent's Perspective: My Kid Isn't Fat

What Was the Question?

Health problems related to overweight or obesity are quickly becoming a serious international issue. What is even more troubling is the growing prevalence of overweight and obese children in our society. In this context, parents play a critical role in not only recognizing overweight- and obesity-related health issues, but in preventing them. However, it is often difficult to get parents to recognize that this issue concerns them or that their children are overweight or obese.

What Was Done?

From 2001 to 2003, He and Evans (2007) recruited 355 child-parent pairs from Ontario, Canada, to participate in a study investigating parents' perception of their children's weight status. The children, in grades four to six (198 boys and 157 girls), were measured for height and weight to calculate their body mass index. Children's weight status was then classified using the age- and gender-specific references published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Parents completed a self-administered questionnaire that included two questions about their perception of their child's weight status. The first question asked whether their child—when compared to same-age children—was underweight, slightly underweight, normal-weight, overweight, or obese. The second question was related to how concerned parents were about their child becoming overweight. The possible responses were "unconcerned," "a little concerned," "concerned," "fairly concerned," or "very concerned." The questionnaire also asked about socioeconomic status and the parents' self-reported weight and height. Eighty-seven percent of the parent questionnaires were completed by mothers.

What Was Found?

Sixty-two percent of parents correctly classified their children's weight. The remaining parents tended to underestimate their children's weight status. Of the normal-weight children, 22 percent were perceived by parents as underweight; of the overweight children, 63 percent were perceived as normal-weight; and of the obese children, 63 percent were perceived as overweight and 15 percent were perceived as normal-weight. Forty-one percent of parents whose children were overweight or obese were unconcerned about their children's weight. In addition, parents were more likely to have inaccurate perceptions of their boys' weight than their girls' weight. He and Evans (2007) offered three possible factors contributing to these misperceptions: (1) societal norms or expectations about girls' body image, (2) ethnic and cultural influences affecting weight perceptions, and (3) overweight mothers having less awareness of their child's weight status than normal-weight mothers.

What Does the Study Mean?

While national efforts to address the prevalence of overweight and obesity among youths have focused on increasing physical activity and decreasing caloric consumption, it is becoming more evident that environmental, family, and community factors also need to be considered. Parents play a critical role in the health and well-being of their children. Presumably, their perceptions of what constitutes an appropriate weight for their children will determine whether or not they will act to redress deficiencies. These findings suggest that, although most parents accurately perceive their child's weight relative to norms, many (38% of this sample) have

faulty perceptions. Consequently, it would seem that a need exists for developing and employing ways to educate parents about how weight and health are linked, and how to accurately assess the weight of their children.

Reference

He, M., & Evans, A. (2007). Are parents aware that their children are overweight or obese? *Canadian Family Physician, 53*, 1494-1499.

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Viewpoint

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While the culture has norms, many of us have several degrees of freedom to pursue our goals and dreams. My three contributions have fulfilled *my* sense of purpose but, of course, not necessarily yours. Are you wearing out your sword trying to make the right contributions? Not my contributions but ones that you own and cherish? My ultimate viewpoint is that all of us need to ask that question. Again and again.

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