

Overweight Children with Healthy Weight Parents, an Inquiry

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### **Abstract**

Childhood overweight and obesity (COWOB) is an epidemic that is extremely prevalent in many societies across the globe today, especially in the United States where obesity rates remain to be some of the highest across the developed world. There has been extensive research done regarding parenting styles and other related developmental variables (both controlled and uncontrolled) including socioeconomic status, social biases and stigmatization. Researchers in the past have often concluded that both environment and genetic predispositions have significant impacts on people who are overweight or obese, but research dwindles when diving deeper into the circumstance where children end up being more overweight than the parents who have raised them. This study aims to learn more about this specific phenomenon surrounding childhood overweight in nuclear families, specifically through the examination of parental attitudes towards food, health and the bias surrounding obesity when it relates to their child.

### **Introduction**

Researchers in the past have addressed the genetic correlations between overweight parents and overweight offspring. Li, Robiou-du-Pont, Aaand, Morrison, McDonald, Atkinson, Teo and Meyre (2016) discovered a significant association between parents and offspring at the genome level during early childhood. However, current research surrounding overweight children who are born and raised by normal weight parents is seemingly elusive. Studies do exist involving parental style, high and low energy food attitudes and socioeconomic status and their respective correlations to childhood overweight as well. According to Frontini, Moreira, &

Canavarro (2016), childhood overweight all over the world has dramatically increased across many societies in recent times due to many underlying factors. Statistical research from Ogden, Carroll, Kit, and Flegan (2012) has informed us that 17% of children within the United States are overweight. With childhood overweight on the rise, it's important we uncover every aspect in order to help combat its prevalence.

Soussignan, Schall, Boulange, Gaille, and Tao Jiang (2012) discovered that overweight or obese children have a completely different relationship with food as a whole than children of normal weight. In conjunction with these findings, Golan (2006) states that children and adolescents who are overweight often may be receiving conflicting messages from their families and society as a whole about weight and food related problem sets. These results suggest that it's very important that children have positive healthy experiences early on with food and only adds to the question of why normal weight parents may not be providing the correct reinforcement to their overweight child.

Studies surrounding generalized parenting styles and childhood obesity have also been completed in the past. According to Larsen, Sleddens, Vink, Fisher, and Kremers (2018), permissive, aggressive, authoritative and uninvolved parenting styles are huge risk factors when it comes to increasing frequencies of childhood overweight, especially when observing higher socioeconomic status groups. This study was more so focused on less what parents actually do but the demeanor in which they do it. In addition to this, according to Mech, Hooley, Skouteris, and Williams (2016), possessing low socioeconomic status combined with parental obesity puts offspring at a much higher risk when it comes to the onset of childhood obesity.

Research surrounding implicit and explicit biases parents may hold about overweight children are also present. Lydecker, O'Brien and Grilo (2018) found that parents hold both negative implicit and explicit biases towards children with obesity which promote negative behaviors towards them. It's possible that parents of overweight children who are not overweight themselves may hold similar biases. These findings assist us in providing background information into why some children may be overweight while their parents are not, while actual parental attitude-based research would be useful to find a more solid correlation overall.

All of these findings lead to the conclusion that parents, who are the main monetary providers for their children as well as primary behavior role models play a massive role in instilling healthy eating habits for their kids at a young age. In order for us to gain more insight into why overweight children might have healthy weight parents, we should refer to research that specifically deals with parental attitudes towards food. The issue was locating research that dealt with this, so background knowledge regarding these specific attitudes was limited.

After observing and reflecting this past research and literature, our research team hypothesized that parents who hold more passive and unhealthy perspectives towards their child's food consumption will be more likely to raise kids who are overweight.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Out of the 52 families that applied for this study, 16 participating families (n = 16) were recruited through an online obesity support group where researchers posted an advertisement for the study. The study was presented to participants as a behavioral analysis questionnaire for

families with overweight children. In order to be included in this study, certain prerequisites had to have been met by the users who applied, which was done through the automated online application vetting process. Only nuclear families within the United States were included in this study (i.e. 2 parent families), where both parents BMI fell within the range of normality (18.5 - 24.9) while the child(s) needed to fall into the range of overweight / obese (25+). Basic demographic information was collected including age and sex of both parents and children, as well as education levels of the parents in hopes of finding a possible correlation between higher education in parents and lower levels of childhood overweight. All participants will be respected and valued as is in line with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 1992).

## **Procedure**

Our research team started by defining exactly what they wanted to test this self-report based study, which was the impact of differing parental attitudes and behaviors towards food and how that correlates to childhood overweight, especially when parents are not overweight themselves. The team utilized a 30 question, 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire that we designed order to dive deeper into the family's histories and parenting styles. Questions revolved around attitudes that parents of overweight children have about the parenting styles they employ for their children in conjunction with the stereotypes they hold about both food and obesity.

Parents were instructed before beginning the survey to answer the questionnaire in unison with one another and come to a general consensus for their answers. A limitation to this self-report based method is that it is not always accurate and we must rely on the participants to

respond honestly, which was also communicated to participants. Questionnaires were distributed online through email and parents were given 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire once they began. Every questionnaire given out to each family was exactly the same as one another in order to stay controlled. Socioeconomic status questions were included in this survey as there is extensive research linking lower SES to higher levels of childhood overweight. One of these questions is “how would you describe your socioeconomic status?” with potential responses being listed as impoverished, struggling, breaking even, well-off and high class.

Questions about parenting style were most frequently present in order to determine if parents held more permissive or structured attitudes towards the dietary habits of their children and frequency of certain family nutritional events. Some examples of these questions were “how often does your family eat together?”, “how often do you see your child eating junk food?”, “how often does your family go out to eat versus cooking food at home?”, “how often do you prepare food for your child?” and “how often do you look at the nutrition labels on packaged foods?” with potential responses ranging from frequently, often, sometimes, seldom, and never.

Questions were also included which inquired into levels of possible intervention into the child’s overweight by parents such as “how much control do you have over your child’s eating habits?”, “how knowledgeable is your child about the fact that they are overweight?”, “how much do you care about your child’s weight?” and “how much knowledge do you believe your child has about food in general?” with participant responses ranging from none, minimal, somewhat, very, to extreme.

Due to the differing subsections of this questionnaire having different scoring mechanisms, in order to properly score this questionnaire, separating sections like socioeconomic familial status and parental attitudes towards food and obesity is required. All results need to be scored and compared independently of one another. These questions are meant to provide insight into the attitudes that parents hold surrounding food and their children's weight as the parents of a child who is overweight.

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