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Parents May Be the Last to Recognize That Their Child Is Overweight

PRINT

As many as 6 out of 10 parents of children with weight problems fail to realize their child has a problem. Don't be one of them.

By Eve Glicksman, Staff Writer



About 1 in every 3 children and teens in the U.S. is now overweight or obese. There is another unsettling statistic that is often overlooked but related, though. Up to 6 of every 10 parents of children with weight problems are not aware their child has a problem.

Multiple studies from around the world show that this is true for parents in other developed countries as well. More than half of the parents of overweight children (ages 2 to 14) underestimate their child's weight group. The percentage is even higher among African American families and among parents of preschool kids.

In one study of 355 parent-child pairs:

- 22 percent of parents of normal-weight children said their child was underweight.
- 63 percent of parents with overweight children thought their child to be normal weight.
- 63 percent of parents of obese children said their child was overweight rather than obese.

The upshot, of course, is that parents who don't recognize there is a problem can't help their child reach a healthy weight. And without involved parents, a child's poor eating habits and limited activity are likely to continue. Children seldom outgrow obesity on their own.

Recognizing overweight children

Weight problems are not as easy to see in a child as they are in an adult - even for doctors. That's because other factors besides weight and height help determine whether a child is thought to be overweight or obese. The CDC has created a tool that uses body mass index (BMI) and growth charts to identify overweight and obesity in children and teens. The tool

compares the child's BMI to that of other kids of the same age and sex. The process leads to a percentile ranking for the child. This number, not the actual BMI, is what determines whether the child is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese.

It's also important to track how a child's BMI percentile changes over time. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that doctors take a BMI reading at least once a year starting when a child is 2.

Many factors can skew how parents' perceive a child's weight:

- Weight can increase so slowly that the change is hard to see.
- Many kids today are bigger, so your child may look like the norm.
- Social stigma may keep parents from admitting a child is too heavy.
- A boy's excess bulk may be dismissed. Social awareness is higher when a girl is overweight.
- Some cultures are more accepting of large body size. Latin American women said they worried more about thin rather than heavy children. African American parents were twice as likely to underestimate their children's weight as white parents.
- Weight problems are missed far more in children under age 6 than in older kids. Almost three out of every four parents of overweight or obese preschoolers said their child was a healthy weight.
- If you are an overweight mother of a school-age child, you may be less aware of a child's excess weight than a mom of a normal-weight child is.

How's a parent to know?

When parents don't recognize a child's weight problem, they set the child up for a lifetime of increased health risks. Being obese or overweight as a child is a strong predictor of adult weight struggles. Delays in addressing the problem can make it harder to instill healthier habits.

And here's a surprise: The number one predictor of a parents' failure to identify their child as overweight? It's related to the child's doctor. Especially when a child is very young, some pediatricians sidestep weight issues. They may think it's too early to worry a parent, or they may not want to offend a parent who is also overweight. But this non-discussion of the child's weight can lead the parent to assume that everything is fine.

Parents need to remember that no news is not always good news. If your pediatrician does not mention your child's weight, ask about it yourself. Monitoring your child's weight and discussing the results with your doctor is the best way to catch a weight problem and get back on the right track.

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