

Parents' depression can weigh on children

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A parent's struggle with stress or depression can lower a child's quality of life -- and it could hinder an overweight youngster's attempts to lose weight, too, University of Florida researchers say.

Parent distress, peer bullying and childhood depression can propel a cycle that makes it more difficult for children to adopt healthier lifestyles, UF researchers report in the current issue of the journal *Obesity*.

Understanding more about factors that affect an overweight child's well-being could help health-care professionals better treat these kids, said David Janicke, a UF assistant professor of clinical and health psychology in the College of Public Health and Health Professions and the lead author of the study.

Tending to the needs of distressed parents could be one of the best ways to help children, Janicke said. Having supportive parents is vital for children to be able to make the lifestyle changes needed to lose weight. Often, children only have access to food at home, so what a parent puts on the table usually determines what the child eats, Janicke said. Also, the behaviors a parent models affect the lifestyle choices a child makes, too.

When parents are struggling, they may have less energy and not be able to provide the emotional support an overweight child needs or help organize play dates and exercise activities, Janicke said.

“Looking at how parents are doing themselves, how they are doing socially and emotionally and how they are coping with the stresses in their lives, is really important too,” Janicke said. “It’s important for them to take time out to take care of themselves.”

More than 33 percent of children and adolescents in the United States are overweight or obese, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Prior studies conducted elsewhere have shown that overweight children have a poorer quality of life than normal-weight peers. UF’s study is one of the first to examine how factors such as parent distress, depression and bullying affect a child’s well-being, giving researchers a better understanding of how to help overweight children.

UF researchers surveyed 96 overweight or obese children and their parents, comparing how bullying, depression and parents’ well-being related to each child’s quality of life. The researchers looked at a combination of factors, namely health, emotional well-being, academic performance and social status.

Children whose parents were struggling or who reported more problems with peers tended to have a lower overall score for quality of life. Both bullying and parent distress were linked to more depressive symptoms in children, and these symptoms seemed to be related to poorer quality of life.

“One of the pathways to poor quality of life seems to be childhood depression,” Janicke said. “If a parent is distressed, that seems to impact a child’s symptoms of depression, which then impacts quality of life. It’s the same with peer victimization. It impacts depression, which then impacts quality of life. And it seems to affect not just the emotional aspect of quality of life, but also their health status.”

Talking about quality of life and problems such as bullying also helps

clinicians encourage children to confront their weight problem, said Meg Zeller, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Cincinnati and a psychologist with the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. Often, fears of developing type 2 diabetes or cardiovascular disease don't motivate children, but factors such as bullying do, she said.

"It gives a kid language to be able to talk about what it would mean to them to be able to make lifestyle changes," she said, adding that Janicke's research helps advance researchers' understanding of factors that affect a child's quality of life.

Addressing emotional and psychological issues is a key part of helping kids manage their weight, Janicke said. Aside from helping kids open up about making healthier lifestyle choices, psychologists also can help children deal with depression and teach coping strategies for peer bullying.

"Sometimes it's hard to change peer interactions, but just giving the child an ear can be very powerful," Janicke said. "Helping parents take care of themselves and be effective listeners is a starting point."

Source: University of Florida

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