

Kids with obese friends and family more likely to misperceive weight

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Kids and teens surrounded by overweight peers or parents are more likely to be oblivious to their own extra pounds than kids from thin entourages, according to a new study by researchers from the Université de Montréal, McGill University, Concordia University and the Ste. Justine Hospital Research Centre.

"When children's parents and schoolmates are overweight or obese, their own overweight status may seem normal by comparison. The higher the BMI of their friends and family, the more kids are likely to underestimate their weight – a trend consistent for both sexes, regardless of the socioeconomic levels of their school or family," said lead author Katerina Maximova, a PhD student in the Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics, and Occupational Health at McGill University.

"Peers and parents have an enormous impact on kids' weight perception and when they live in environments in which people they see on a daily basis, such as parents and schoolmates, are overweight or obese, they may develop inaccurate perceptions of what constitutes appropriate weight status. So it is important that we help them correct their misperceptions and help them recognize that they may be at risk."

Published in a summer edition of the *International Journal of Obesity*, the original study was part of the Quebec Health and Social Survey that investigated children from three different age groups – 9, 13 and 16 years old – from 178 schools across Quebec.

Researchers analyzed the body mass index (BMI) of 3,665 children and adolescents and found about 14 percent of students were overweight (BMI of 25 and over), 9 percent were obese (BMI of 30 and over), but only 1.6 percent of kids perceived themselves as having excess weight.

To analyze weight misperceptions, investigators used the Stunkard Figure Rating Scale, which features images of seven sex-specific silhouettes that are underweight to obese.

Participants selected figures they perceived as corresponding to their appearance and researchers found that younger participants were most vulnerable to under-evaluating their weight.

"If you are surrounded by overweight people, you may be more vulnerable to distorted perceptions about your own weight," says Tracie Barnett, from the Université de Montréal Department of Social and Preventive Medicine and Ste-Justine Hospital Research Centre.

"I think this speaks to the importance of children's every day settings like school, home and neighborhood, and how these environments can influence our health in many ways. Obesity rates have nearly tripled in Canada over the past two decades and helping children to maintain or achieve healthy weight remains a substantial challenge. Since children are influenced by their surroundings, health promotion programs targeting healthy weight should take this into account."

Compared to youth with healthy BMI's, overweight or obese kids were more likely to significantly underestimate their weight, which is the crux of the public health issue.

"Accurately perceiving oneself as overweight or obese is an important cue to take action," says Jennifer J. McGrath, a psychology professor and director of the Pediatric Public Health Psychology Lab at Concordia

University.

"That's why obesity prevention programs should be created to help youth correct their weight misperceptions. If youth recognize themselves as being overweight or obese, they are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyles and it is important that healthy lifestyle behaviors are adopted early in life when kids are more malleable and habits are being established."

Source: University of Montreal

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