

Children with emotional difficulties at higher risk for adult obesity

September 11 2009

Previous research has shown that low self-esteem and emotional problems are found in people who are overweight or obese- but not which influences which. Research published today in the open access journal *BMC Medicine*, sheds light on this issue showing that children with emotional difficulties are at higher risk for obesity in adult life.

Andrew Ternouth, David Collier and Barbara Maughan from the MRC Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, studied data from around 6,500 members of the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study who, as 10 year-olds, had been assessed for emotional problems, self-perceptions and BMI, and who reported on their BMI again at age 30. The researchers found that children with a lower self-esteem, those who felt less in control of their lives and those who worried often were more likely to gain weight over the next 20 years. They also found that girls were slightly more affected by these factors than boys.

Ternouth said: "While we cannot say that childhood emotional problems cause obesity in later life, we can certainly say they play a role, along with factors such as parental BMI, diet and exercise"

The authors suggest that early intervention for children suffering low self-esteem, anxiety or other emotional challenges could help improve their chances of long-term physical health. Ternouth continues: "Strategies to promote social and emotional aspects of learning, including the promotion of self-esteem, are central to a number of recent

policy initiatives. Our findings suggest that approaches of this kind may carry positive benefits for [physical health](#) as well as for other aspects of children's development."

The authors conclude, "Given the growing problem with [childhood obesity](#) in many western societies, these findings are particularly important. On a larger scale, they may offer hope in the battle to control the current [obesity epidemic](#)."

More information: Childhood emotional problems and self-perceptions predict weight gain in a longitudinal regression model; Andrew Ternouth, David Collier and Barbara Maughan; *BMC Medicine* (in press); www.biomedcentral.com/bmcmed/

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Citation: Children with emotional difficulties at higher risk for adult obesity (2009, September 11) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-09-children-emotional-difficulties-higher-adult.html>

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