

Social background weighs heavily on teenage diet

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Teenagers' attitudes to diet and weight are shaped by their social class, according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Policymakers have long insisted on the importance of understanding young people's health and [eating habits](#) but this is the first study to show how everyday practices and perceptions of different social classes contribute to variation in the diet, weight and health of teenagers.

'It is evident that children are moulded according to their parents' expectations about behaviour,' says Dr Wendy Wills of the University of Hertfordshire, who led the research. The study reveals the ideals and beliefs of both family life and parenting by looking at the diet, weight and health of middle class teenagers, their parents and comparing them with an earlier study of working class families.

Middle class families look towards their children's future, expecting young teenagers' tastes to develop and have a good [body shape](#) to actively participate in adult life. Parents expressed concern that if children were overweight they would have poor health in later life. They also felt that being overweight would affect the children's self-esteem and ability to take part in life's opportunities.

In working class families, concern for the future is dominated by more pressing concerns about everyday life. 'In the context of risk and insecurity for working class families, the ideal body shape has little

value,' says Dr Wills.

Although working class families express the desire to improve the diet and lifestyle of their children, they sometimes lack the social and cultural abilities as well as money to make such changes happen.

At the same time, the independence of teenagers to make their own food choices and take responsibility for their health is seen as an important sign of being working class. This contrasts with middle class families where parents supervise and control young teenagers' [food choices](#) on a daily basis.

Middle class teenagers saw obesity as the result of being lazy, unhealthy or unable to control a desire for 'bad foods'. Middle class [parents](#) feel a moral urgency to ensure their children to stay an 'acceptable' size. Being seen to be 'respectable' in this regard is a significant sign of middle class distinctions.

The findings of the study have proved important for understanding why inequalities in diet, health and weight continue to persist. NHS Health Scotland have used to them to help Health Boards implement child healthy weight initiatives and the Department of Health's new Healthy Living social marketing initiative also uses the project's research.

However, policymakers should not expect quick results, the study warns. 'Given the complex, embedded nature of familiar practices and beliefs,' says Dr Wills, 'policy and practice targets need to be realistic in terms of the timescale needed for achieving change.'

Source: Economic & Social Research Council ([news](#) : [web](#))

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