

Intimate partner violence against mothers associated with children's obesity

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Children whose mothers report being abused by their partners appear more likely to be obese at age 5, according to a report in the June issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

About 3 million to 10 million [children](#) witness intimate partner violence—physical, sexual or psychological abuse by a current or former partner or spouse—annually, according to background information in the article. "Exposure to intimate partner violence in childhood is associated with altered neuroendocrine system profiles, impaired socioemotional development, cognitive functioning, attachment to caregivers and emotional regulation, and poorer physical and mental health," the authors write.

Renée Boynton-Jarrett, M.D., Sc.D., of the Boston University School of Medicine, and colleagues studied 1,595 children born between 1998 and 2000. The children's mothers were interviewed when the children were born and again after 12, 36 and 60 months; children's height and weight were measured at 36 months and five years.

About half—49.4 percent—of mothers reported some form of intimate partner violence, and 16.5 percent of children were obese at age 5. Children who were exposed to intimate partner violence were more likely to be obese at age 5 than those who were not exposed to any intimate partner violence. The association was stronger in girls compared with boys, and also among children whose mothers reported they lived in less safe neighborhoods.

The findings persisted even when several proposed intermediary and potentially confounding factors—including obesity at age 3, television watching, depression among mothers, smoking during pregnancy and child birth weight—were considered in the analyses, the authors note.

The authors suggest that the association could work through several pathways. "First, if intimate partner violence influences maternal responsiveness to the socioemotional needs of the child, then feeding practices may be influenced," the authors write. "Second, witnessing [family violence](#) may be associated with emotional distress and emotion-focused coping using food to self-soothe and address negative emotions." In addition, early-childhood disruption of the neuroendocrine system could increase the risk for disordered eating and changes in fat storage and distribution.

"Medical and public health practitioners must consider the impact of family violence on obesity risk when designing and implementing primary obesity prevention interventions," the authors conclude.

"Interventions to prevent intimate partner violence, particularly those aimed at educating adolescents about healthy relationships prior to childbearing, may play a crucial role in prevention of early childhood obesity. Moreover, interventions aimed at improving neighborhood safety may have a benefit on reducing childhood obesity risk, even among those exposed to family violence."

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