

News source may steer perceived solution to childhood obesity

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Where you get your news could play a significant role in determining what you perceive as the best strategy for addressing childhood obesity. According to a study led by researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, whether you believe the keys to combating childhood obesity are personal factors such as individual behavior changes or system-level factors such as marketing and the environment may depend on your primary news source. Researchers examined the news media's framing of childhood obesity and found that television news was more likely than other news sources to focus on individual behavior change as a solution, while newspapers were more likely to identify system-level solutions. The results are featured in the June 20, 2011, issue of *Pediatrics*.

"Overall, news stories consistently mentioned [behavior change](#) most often as a solution to the problem of childhood obesity, however, we identified noticeable differences in coverage by source. Newspaper articles more often mentioned changes affecting neighborhoods, schools and the food and beverage industry, while [television coverage](#) often focused on individual child or parent behavior-oriented solutions," said Colleen Barry, PhD, MPP, lead author of the study and an associate professor with the Bloomberg School's Department of Health Policy and Management. "News media coverage patterns indicated that by 2003, childhood obesity was firmly on the news media's agenda, remaining so until 2007."

Barry, along with colleagues from Sarah Lawrence College, Yale School

of Public Health and the University of Minnesota, analyzed the content of a random sample of news stories on childhood obesity published in 18 national and regional news sources in the U.S. from 2000 to 2009.

Researchers measured whether a news story mentioned any potential solutions to the problem of childhood obesity and coded individual behavior change as well as system-oriented solutions such as changes affecting schools, neighborhoods and food and beverage industry practices to combat obesity. Over the ten year study period, researchers found the mention of solutions involving restrictions on the food and beverage industry such as food and beverage taxes, vending machine restrictions and advertising regulations rose substantially in the early years of the study, but have declined sharply in recent years.

The most common individual-level solutions mentioned were behavior change related to diet (45%), such as parents serving their children more fruits and vegetables, and exercise (36%), such as making more time for family-oriented physical activities. Thirty-seven percent mentioned school-level changes as a solution to the problem like serving healthy school lunches and requiring gym or recess. Few news stories mentioned neighborhood-level changes such as creating safe places for children to play or moving more grocery stores with healthy food options into poorer communities.

"Given that a majority of Americans obtain health information from the news media, how the news media frames the problem of childhood obesity will likely influence citizens' opinions about the types of private or governmental responses that are appropriate for addressing this global epidemic," said Sarah Gollust, PhD, senior author of the study and assistant professor in the Division of Health Policy and Management at the University of Minnesota. "Considering the movement toward consumer-oriented health care, the public increasingly relies on news media to obtain health information, challenging journalists to provide a fuller picture of the causes of childhood obesity and available options to

combat it."

"We also found a decline in coverage of childhood obesity by the [news media](#) over the last few years. This decline would make sense if media attention had led to greater public awareness, and greater public awareness had led to a decline in obesity rates," Barry adds. "However, studies show that childhood obesity rates show no signs of declining. Thus, it is perhaps troubling that our results indicate reduced [news](#) media attention to the issue in the absence of having identified and implemented effective strategies for reducing [childhood obesity](#) rates."

Provided by Johns Hopkins University

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