

Preschoolers tend to have negative perceptions of overweight children: Canadian study

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A recent study by Ryerson researchers Wei Su (left) and Professor Aurelia Di Santo (right) found preschoolers tend to have a negative perception of overweight peers, which reinforces the importance of learning about positive body image in young children.

(Medical Xpress) -- A new Ryerson University study has found that some preschoolers may perceive overweight children to be not as “nice”.

“A child’s perception of body image is influenced by many factors in their environment, yet there hasn’t been much research conducted in this

area with young [children](#),” says Wei Su, lead author of the study. She conducted the research as part of her master’s thesis in early childhood studies at Ryerson.

Wei Su, in collaboration with Aurelia Di Santo, a professor in Ryerson’s School of Early Childhood Education, spoke with 41 children (21 boys and 20 girls), ages two and a half to five years, at five early learning and daycare centres in the Greater Toronto Area. Each child listened to four stories, two about boys and two about girls, where one child in each story says or does something ‘nice’ and the other child does or says something ‘mean’. After each story, the child is shown an illustration of two accompanying figures without any facial features: one who isn’t overweight and one who is. The child is then asked to identify which figure is “nice” and which one is “mean”.

The researchers found that nearly 44 per cent of [young children](#) chose the child who was overweight to be the “mean” child in all four stories. When the children were asked to give a reason for their choice, they described the figures looking “really, really mean” or “mad” and that the “mean” child looked “fatter” or “bigger” even though the figures did not have any facial expressions.

Slightly more than two per cent of children identified the heavier child as being “nice” in all four stories. The researchers also noticed a trend in children’s negative perceptions of [overweight children](#) increasing with their age.

“Based on these results, preschool children as young as two and a half are being exposed to many factors in their environment that seem to have an impact on body image,” says Su.

“The preschoolers that we worked with in this study tended to have these negative perceptions,” adds Di Santo. “That tells us we need to pay more

attention to what’s happening during the preschool years.”

In order to address these [negative perceptions](#), the researchers recommend that parents, caregivers and early childhood educators should reflect on their attitudes about body image and try not to project these ideas onto children.

“We need to reinforce positive values about body image in young children, especially when there are activities at home or in early learning centres that involve discussions on healthy eating,” says Di Santo. “We also need to really listen to what children are saying about [body image](#) and work with that.”

The study was published in the February issue of the *Journal of [Early Childhood Research](#)*.

Provided by Ryerson University

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