

New insight on relationship between parents, preschoolers and obesity

February 8 2013

While sugary drinks, lack of exercise and genetics contribute to a growing number of overweight American children, new research from Washington State University reveals how a mom's eating habits and behavior at the dinner table can influence her preschooler's obesity risk.

The findings come from WSU alumna Halley Morrison's undergraduate honors thesis, which recently was published in the journal *Appetite*.

As a biology major and student fitness instructor, Morrison knew she wanted to focus on health and the human body. She learned about the [childhood obesity](#) and prevention research of Tom Power, chair of the WSU Department of Human Development.

Together, they analyzed surveys of 222 low-income African-American and Latino Head Start preschoolers and caregivers in a U.S. Department of Agriculture/Agricultural Research Service Children's Nutrition Research Center study.

"The problem is no longer food scarcity, but too much food," Morrison said. "It doesn't cost families extra to change their behavior."

Morrison found that moms who eat when they are already full and also show a high level of control when feeding their kids - for example, by pushing children to finish what's on their plate or withholding food until the next meal - tend to produce picky eaters. Meanwhile, moms who eat in response to their emotions or who are easily tempted by the sight,

scent or taste of food had children with a strong desire to eat.

"Like mother, like child," Morrison said. "This is especially true when kids are so young their environment is primarily based on what their parents are doing."

Nearly 17 percent of U.S. children between ages 2 and 19 are obese. While past research has focused mainly on middle-class European-American families, Morrison said the demographic focus on low-income families made this particular study unique. [Obesity rates](#) among preschoolers are highest in African-American and Latino populations: 21 and 22 percent, respectively.

The results from the study suggest a family can alter eating behaviors to reduce obesity risk and associated health problems like high blood pressure, respiratory issues and sleep apnea.

Power said some of these behavior changes can include dishing up smaller portions of food and then giving children more only if they ask. This creates a positive mealtime experience for a child, as he or she feels a sense of accomplishment and is less likely to overeat.

Power said moms who eat based on their emotions or temptation can try to keep unhealthy foods out of cupboards.

"When a [preschooler](#) says they are full and still has food on his or her plate, it's important for parents to listen and trust the child," Power said. "Limit the availability of high-calorie low-nutrient foods, like sweets, but don't turn them into forbidden fruits."

It typically takes up to eight exposures to a new food before a child is willing to eat it - a natural instinct to make sure the food isn't poisonous or dangerous, Power said. Since preschool children tend to get hungry

every two or three hours, they might not eat everything on their plate but rather enjoy a healthy snack a few hours after a meal.

As children grow up and begin to make their own food choices, they have a tendency to seek out foods they were not allowed to eat when younger, Power said. Morrison said this could lead them to consume unhealthy foods in amounts that increase their obesity risk.

"It's important for parents to be mindful of their eating practices and how they feed their [children](#)," Morrison said. "It will help their kids develop a healthy relationship with [food](#) that can then naturally carry over into future generations."

More information: Morrison, H., Power, T.G., Nicklas, T., Hughes, S.O., Exploring the Effects of Maternal Eating Patterns on Maternal Feeding and Child Eating, *Appetite* (2012), [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2012.12.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2012.12.017)

Provided by Washington State University

Citation: New insight on relationship between parents, preschoolers and obesity (2013, February 8) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-02-insight-relationship-parents-preschoolers-obesity.html>

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