

Majority of toddlers who are overweight are still too heavy several years later

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Toddlers with extreme overweight are often still too heavy several years later. This is particularly true for children from families with a low socioeconomic status. They have a four times higher chance of developing chronic obesity than children from a better socioeconomic background. This is the conclusion psychologist Pauline Jansen. With the help of an NWO grant she did research for a period of one year at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne, Australia. Her research results were published on 23 July in the open access journal *PLOS ONE*.

Jansen's research has revealed that the basis for ([socioeconomic differences](#) in) [overweight](#) is laid during childhood and that this continues into adulthood. The researcher therefore calls for overweight in children, especially those from families with a [low socioeconomic status](#), to be tackled at as early a stage as possible.

The research results have emerged from a long-term study among almost 5000 Australian children who were examined at the ages of 4, 6, 8 and 10 years. This revealed that about one in five of the toddlers were overweight; the majority (84%) of them were still too heavy six years later. The lower the socioeconomic status of the family the higher the weight of the child. Children from parents with a low income or [educational level](#) are up to four times more likely to develop chronic obesity than children from parents with high income or educational level. Socioeconomic characteristics of the neighbourhood in which the families live, such as average unemployment level and the percentage of

car and home owners were found to influence the children's weight less.

Slowing down weight increase

A small proportion of the overweight toddlers (16%) were no longer overweight by the age of 10 years. Jansen: 'Some children can clearly slow down the weight increase and are therefore no longer overweight. Genetic factors might play a role in this but a change in lifestyle could equally lead to a normal weight.' Follow-up research is needed to determine which characteristics or behaviours contribute to a sustained decrease in weight at a young age so that this information can be used in the treatment of overweight children.

The researcher expects that the research results are also applicable to other Western countries such as the Netherlands. The research article can be consulted online free of charge via the [website of PLOS ONE](#).

Emotional problems

In another research article published in the International Journal of Obesity, the psychologist investigated the relationship between overweight and psychological problems in children. It was found that the relationship between weight and psychological health among the 5000 children investigated only developed around the age of 8 to 9 years. Overweight was mainly found to result in emotional problems and problematic relationships with contemporaries. However, these problems are rarely a cause of overweight. Therefore the timely treatment of overweight and maintaining a healthy weight will not only reduce the risks of health problems later in life but might also favourably influence the psychological well-being of children.

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