

Could your relationship with your mom increase your child's chances of obesity?

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Could the quality of your attachment to your parents affect your own child's risk for obesity? A new University of Illinois study says it can.

"If your mother regularly punished or dismissed your anger, anxiety, or sadness instead of being sensitive to your distress and giving you strategies for handling those feelings, you may be insecurely attached and parenting your [children](#) in the same way. A child who doesn't learn to regulate his emotions may in turn develop eating patterns that put him at risk for [obesity](#)," said Kelly Bost, a U of I professor of human development and family studies.

The U of I study documents the association between a parent's insecure attachment and their child's consumption of unhealthy foods, leading to weight gain, she said.

"We wanted to discover the steps that connect attachment and obesity. Scientists know that a person's attachment style is consistently related to the way he responds to negative emotions, and we thought that response might be related to three practices that we know are related to obesity: emotion-related feeding styles, including feeding to comfort or soothe; mealtime routine; and television viewing," she said.

According to Bost, children form secure attachments when their caregiver is available and responsive. That attachment gives the child a secure base to explore his environment, protection in times of distress or uncertainty, and a source of joy in everyday interactions.

When that secure base isn't there, an insecure attachment can result, and children who are insecurely attached often experience feelings of anxiety and uncertainty in [close relationships](#). As adults, they are especially at risk for ineffective parenting surrounding some of the factors that are implicated in pediatric obesity, she said.

In the study, 497 primary caregivers of 2½- to 3½-year-old children completed a widely used questionnaire to determine adult attachment, answering 32 questions about the nature of their close relationships. They also rated themselves on a scale that measured depression and anxiety.

Parents then responded to questions about how they handled their children's negative emotions; whether they engaged in emotion-related, pressuring feeding styles known to predict obesity; frequency, planning of, and communication during family mealtimes; and estimated hours of television viewing per day.

The families are part of the university's STRONG (Synergistic Theory and Research on Obesity and Nutrition Group) Kids program, a cells-to-society approach to the study of childhood obesity. The children are enrolled full-time in 32 child-care centers.

"The study found that insecure parents were significantly more likely to respond to their children's distress by becoming distressed themselves or dismissing their child's emotion. For example, if a child went to a birthday party and was upset because of a friend's comment there, a dismissive parent might tell the child not to be sad, to forget about it. Or the parent might even say: Stop crying and acting like a baby or you're never going over again," she said.

That pattern of punishing or dismissing a child's sad or angry emotions was significantly related not only to comfort feeding but also to fewer

family mealtimes and more TV viewing, which led to children's unhealthy eating, including self-reported sugary drinks, fast foods, and salty snacks, Bost said.

"One explanation might be that insecure moms are more easily overwhelmed with stress, find it more difficult to organize [family mealtimes](#), and allow their children to watch more television as a coping strategy," she suggested.

The study's findings provide valuable information for health professionals who are working with parents and children, she noted.

"Clinicians can help address children's obesity by giving parents practical strategies to help kids deal with [negative emotions](#) like anger, sadness, and boredom. That means helping them describe what they're feeling and working on problem-solving strategies with them," she said.

Also, telling a child to "clean your plate" or "eat just three more bites and you can have dessert" sends the wrong message, she said.

"In fighting [childhood obesity](#), one of the most important lessons we can teach children is to eat when they're hungry and recognize when they're full. We want to encourage children to respond to their internal cues and encourage parents not to promote eating under stress or eating to soothe," she added.

It's also useful to give busy working parents practical plans for establishing a routine for mealtime planning, she said.

More information: "Associations Between Adult Attachment Style, Emotion Regulation, and Preschool Children's Food Consumption" is available online in the January 2014 issue of the *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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