

Overprotective mums hinder children's health

July 18 2014, by Rebecca Graham



Overprotective parents could be limiting their child's physical activity by not letting them walk to school or play sports independently. Credit: Paw Paw

Children whose mothers are highly protective are more likely to be overweight or obese by 10–11 years-old, according to research from the Telethon Kids Institute.

The [longitudinal study](#) investigating maternal protectiveness and child BMI also found the most protective mothers experienced the greatest

levels of socioeconomic and environmental disadvantage.

For lead author Kirsten Hancock, the impact of highly protective parenting and child health and wellbeing was a relationship that needed exploring.

"Rates of child obesity have increased over the last 30 years or so, and across the same time we've seen changes in levels of parent fear and the number of children who get driven to school, for example," she says.

"But so far there hasn't been any research that demonstrates a direct relationship between protectiveness and child overweight and obesity."

Using data collected in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, which followed a cohort of 2596 children every two years from ages 4–5 in 2004, to age 10–11 in 2010, was a means of addressing this gap.

Maternal and family socioeconomic characteristics were collected at each stage, along with maternal protectiveness using the Protectiveness Parenting Scale.

Protective mums likely limit independent physical activity

They discovered that mothers who scored moderately-high on the protective scale were 13 per cent more likely to have children with an overweight or obese BMI, while those at the highest end of the scale were 27 per cent more likely.

"However, we only found this pattern once [kids](#) reached the age of about 10-11 years."

"This could be to do with the amount of independence and physical activity that kids get."

"At 10–11 years some kids will be allowed to walk or ride to school on their own, or with friends, or participate in sport... others will be driven around and have greater restrictions."

"So while some kids have many options for [physical activity](#), kids with an overprotective parent might miss out, [which] could explain why we found higher rates of [overweight and obesity](#)."

They also found higher protective scores across mothers from greater socioeconomic and environmental disadvantage, which Ms Hancock says is understandable.

"If they're living in areas with increased traffic congestion, or in neighbourhoods that are less safe, then we need to remember that... it isn't as simple as saying 'let your kids be more active' if the opportunities aren't there."

She says future research needs to include fathers to fully investigate the relationship of family dynamics and protectiveness on [child](#) BMI.

More information: Hancock KJ, Lawrence D, Zubrick SR (2014) "Higher Maternal Protectiveness Is Associated with Higher Odds of Child Overweight and Obesity: A Longitudinal Australian Study." *PLoS ONE* 9(6): e100686. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0100686](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0100686)

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