

Childhood obesity is linked to poverty and parenting style

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In 2013, 42 million infants and young children worldwide were overweight or obese. If current trends continue, that number will increase to 70 million by 2025, according to the World Health Organization.

It's not just genes that are the cause: socio-demographic and environmental elements are also contributing factors. Lower [socio-economic status](#), living in neighbourhoods that aren't walkable and poor

access to fresh fruits and vegetables can all increase the risk of being overweight.

With [obesity rates](#) on the rise, a team of Montreal-based researchers embarked on a study to find out how parenting styles and the broader social environment combine to affect children's [obesity risk](#).

"We thought that certain types of parenting would be associated with a higher risk of childhood obesity, and that the strength of this association would differ between children living in poverty and those who aren't," says Lisa Kakinami, the study's lead author and an assistant professor in Concordia's Department of Mathematics and Statistics in collaboration with the PERFORM Centre.

The study, published in *Preventive Medicine*, suggests that both poverty and [parenting style](#) are important predictors of childhood health.

"Successful strategies to combat [childhood obesity](#) need to reflect these independent and interactive associations on health," Kakinami says.

She and her research team used data from a national survey of Canadian youth, carried out by Statistics Canada from 1994 to 2008. They examined information on 37,577 children and compared socio-demographic and socio-economic status, family and neighbourhood characteristics, and height and weight.

The researchers also paid particular attention to the types of parenting being reported, and divided those styles into four groups:

- Authoritative—both responsive and demanding
- Authoritarian—not responsive but demanding
- Permissive—responsive but not demanding
- Negligent—neither responsive nor demanding

Results showed that, for the population as a whole, preschool- and school-age children with authoritarian parents were 35 per cent and 41 per cent more likely to be obese than those with authoritative parents.

But household income had an effect for the younger, preschool-age cohort. Among kids living in poverty (i.e., living below the low-income cut-offs established by Statistics Canada), the risk of being obese was 20% greater compared with the risk among kids not living in poverty, and this risk was regardless of parenting style. However, among kids not living in poverty, authoritarian and negligent parenting was associated with 44 per cent and 26 per cent increased likelihood of obesity, respectively.

Kakinami speculates that this could be linked to kids' ability to self-regulate their energy intake. "Authoritarian parenting may translate to parents not responding to children's cues of hunger and/or feeling full, and demanding or controlling the child's energy intake," she says.

"That results in the children's ability to regulate their own [energy intake](#) being underdeveloped. These children may be more likely to overindulge when given the opportunity."

Provided by Concordia University

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