

Intervention reduces rates of overweight tots by half

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Juan Carreño de Miranda's "La monstrua desnuda" (The Nude Monster) painting.

Mothers who practiced responsive parenting—including reacting promptly and appropriately to hunger and fullness cues—were less likely to have overweight babies at their one-year checkup than those who did not, say health researchers.

Parents should expect infants to triple their birth weight by their first birthday, but some babies gain weight more quickly than others. This

[rapid weight gain](#) is associated with risk for becoming obese later in life.

"Over 20 percent of 2- to 5-year-olds in the U.S. are already overweight," said Ian M. Paul, professor of pediatrics and public health sciences, Penn State College of Medicine. "This highlights the need to start interventions early in life."

Jennifer S. Savage, interim director of Penn State's Center for Childhood Obesity and Research; Paul; and colleagues provided a responsive parenting [intervention](#) to new moms as part of the Intervention Nurses Start Infants Growing on Healthy Trajectories (INSIGHT) study.

The researchers recruited 279 first-time mothers and their babies and assigned half of them to the INSIGHT responsive parenting intervention and the other half to a [control group](#) receiving child safety information. They followed up with each pair at regular intervals. Their results are reported today (June 6) in *JAMA Pediatrics*.

Mothers in the [intervention group](#) received responsive parenting training from nurses, focusing on feeding, sleep, emotional regulation and interactive play.

"Feeding a baby can be an easy and fast way to quiet an upset baby," said Savage, also assistant professor of nutritional sciences at Penn State. "But we don't want parents to use feeding to soothe their baby if the baby isn't hungry—crying is one of the last things a baby is likely to do if they are hungry. By getting to know their baby's temperament and establishing predictable routines early in life, parents are able to help their baby learn self-regulation."

By developing these skills, the babies in turn are learning to listen to their own body cues—such as hunger and fullness.

At one year, 12.7 percent of the infants in the control group were considered overweight, compared to just 5.5 percent of the infants in the INSIGHT group. The intervention worked equally for breastfed and formula-fed [babies](#).

"So far, there aren't any interventions that have worked, or at least lasted, in the U.S. to curb obesity," said Savage. "This study is really promising because as a package, it shows that INSIGHT works."

Both groups received initial materials corresponding to their assigned intervention two weeks after the baby's birth. Mothers were visited at home by a nurse four times throughout the first year and then visited the research center when the baby turned one.

"We hope that by teaching the principles of responsive parenting as an early intervention, the effects will be sustained throughout the child's life," said Savage.

The researchers continue to follow this cohort in order to see if the effects of the intervention are still present as the children get older.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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