

# Study sheds light on diet of children with weight issues

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Credit: University of Auckland

A new, in depth study of children and teenagers struggling with weight issues highlights that their eating habits were poor, and sugary drink consumption was at concerning volumes on a daily basis in many.

Eating habits such as comfort eating and eating large amounts of food were worryingly common, and the study revealed clear differences in diet between young people living with obesity and national averages.

The 239 tamariki in the study were assessed when they enrolled in a community-based 12-month intervention programme called Whānau Pakari. Aged 4-16, the participants had BMIs in the clinically overweight or obese range, and many had weight related health problems. Māori and Pakeha each made up 45 percent of the group, with the remaining 10 percent from other ethnicities.

Researchers found:

- Two-thirds (67 percent) of participants experienced excessive hunger and ate large amounts of food
- Half didn't feel full after a meal
- Almost two-thirds (62 percent) reported comfort eating
- Children ate 3.5 servings per day of fruit and vegetables on average, markedly below the recommended five daily servings
- Children were not eating breakfast every day

The study was a collaboration between the Liggins Institute at the University of Auckland, Taranaki District Health Board, and Sport Taranaki, with funding from the Health Research Council.

"This study highlighted that there are lots of factors affecting eating behaviour in these [children](#)," says Dr Yvonne Anderson, Liggins Institute researcher, Taranaki paediatrician and co-author of the study.

"As [health](#) professionals, when we see children with weight issues, we need to address the psychological dimensions of their eating."

Researchers also found that many of the children and adolescents were drinking [sweet drinks](#) on a daily basis (a median volume of 250ml across the group).

"While an extra 250ml of sweet drinks might not seem much, it means

these children are consuming an extra 100kcal a day of free sugar, and it's been estimated that extra energy intake of not much more than that – 120kcal a day – leads to a 50kg increase in body weight over 10 years," Dr Anderson says.

"One can of sweet drink contains three days' worth of the recommended added sugar for young children.

"It's not just about fizzy drink but all sweet drinks. Many of the children are drinking powdered fruit drinks, and these were the most popular non-dairy beverage in children when this was looked at nationally in 2002. Health policy needs to reflect this."

Obesity is everyone's problem, and we're all part of the solution, she says.

"We all need to work together to address the food and drink children have access to in their everyday lives – at home, school, events, family gatherings - and ensure that the healthy choice is the easy choice. We need to be role models for our children."

Nationally, an estimated 85,000 children aged 2-14 years are obese, and about 4,500 in Taranaki, according to the New Zealand Health Survey.

Whānau Pakari means "Healthy self-assured whānau who are fully active". The programme, which is still running, involves regular home visits and support from a multi-disciplinary team of [health professionals](#) to help whānau make healthy lifestyle changes.

The study was published in *PLOS ONE* Journal.

**More information:** Yvonne C. Anderson et al. Dietary Intake and Eating Behaviours of Obese New Zealand Children and Adolescents

Enrolled in a Community-Based Intervention Programme, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0166996](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0166996)

Yvonne C Anderson et al. Prevalence of comorbidities in obese New Zealand children and adolescents at enrolment in a community-based obesity programme, *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jpc.13315](https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.13315)

Provided by University of Auckland

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