

# New e-tool provides wake-up call for parents of children with excess weight

January 31 2017

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Jillian Byrne shows how the RIPPLE e-tool works. Based on a 15-minute survey, it creates a simple report on a child's weight, recommends diet or activity changes and suggests online resources. Credit: Alberta Innovates

Sometimes we see only the best in our kids—even when a potential health risk is physically apparent.

An innovative new e-tool, developed by University of Alberta researchers, not only lifts the blinders for [parents](#) of children with excess [weight](#), it offers them much-needed and welcomed support.

"We wanted to help moms and dads become aware of their child's weight, if they aren't already, and give them some information and resources to help their family and home be as healthy as possible," said Geoff Ball, professor of pediatrics at the U of A and director of the Pediatric Centre for Weight and Health at Alberta Health Services' Stollery Children's Hospital, who created the new e-tool.

The e-tool is a 15-minute electronic survey that includes a screen of children's weight status, one of four [health](#) interventions (on either diet or activity) and a menu of online resources and community services.

For a recent study, Ball and his team enrolled 226 parents who clambered to fill out the electronic survey while waiting with their children to see a pediatrician.

"The effect is simple, but can be powerful," said Ball. "The e-tool asks questions about parents' perceptions of their child's diet and activity habits that are contrasted with Health Canada recommendations."

The vast majority of parents spoke to their pediatrician about their child's weight after using the e-tool, and 85 per cent of them asked for resources that were offered, including handouts on obesity prevention such as sleep, snacking and body image.

This is particularly relevant, said Ball, because many parents do not accurately estimate their children's weight, and even among those who acknowledge their child is overweight, only 50 per cent encourage healthy lifestyle changes.

"Based on a follow-up survey, almost half of parents said they used the resources they selected," said Jillian Byrne, a medical researcher at the U of A. "There's really strong evidence that this e-tool has the potential to encourage parents of children with [excess weight](#) to make healthy lifestyle changes."

Tracy Lebel said participating in the study reinforced her desire to get help for her two boys, Paul, 13, and Marc, 9, who are both overweight.

"It was a great source of additional information and it reinforced that I was right to be concerned and that I needed additional help," she said.

Lebel had been trying for years to watch what the boys ate and monitor their activity levels, without any lasting results.

"I figured we must not be doing as much right as we needed to. The tool gave us lots of useful resources. I helped the boys reduce screen time and eat healthier snacks."

Lebel's doctor also referred her boys to the program at the Pediatric Centre for Weight and Health.

"It's such a struggle all the time," she added. "I find it incredibly hard to keep the boys in activities and eating right. Kids are different from adults because you can't get them to deprive themselves. That's why getting outside help like this keeps us focused."

Ball added that his study, which was published in *Pediatric Obesity*, shows that e-tools like this could be used in numerous ways to provide practical health information to a large number of people in different settings at times when they might be most receptive to receiving such information, not unlike the do-it-yourself blood pressure testing units at most pharmacies.

**More information:** J. L. S. Byrne et al, A brief eHealth tool delivered in primary care to help parents prevent childhood obesity: a randomized controlled trial, *Pediatric Obesity* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/ijpo.12200](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijpo.12200)

Provided by University of Alberta Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry

Citation: New e-tool provides wake-up call for parents of children with excess weight (2017, January 31) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-01-e-tool-wake-up-parents-children-excess.html>

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