

# Obesity related to upbringing

23 May 2017



The proportion of children who are overweight has increased enormously over the past 20 years. The number has currently stabilised but even so there are still too many overweight and obese children. Could there be some connection with the way they are brought up? Roxanna Camfferman's PhD research shows that there is indeed a connection between upbringing and body weight.

This research was based on 101 families of Dutch origin with a child between 4 and 6 years of age, who were studied in their [home environment](#). The weights and heights of the [family members](#) were first measured, after which they were filmed during the evening meal to find out how the parents communicated with the children during the meal.

## Two types of upbringing

'We used video images and questionnaires to study two aspects of upbringing,' Camfferman explains. 'How sensitive [family](#) members were and how much pressure they put on their child to eat.'

Sensitivity is about the way family members respond to the needs of the child. 'This could be the reaction that a child gets when he or she points to something or indicates that they are full.' Signals that are not connected directly with the meal also count. A child might say something about the cat jumping on the sofa, for example. If family members respond quickly and appropriately, we

say that the child experiences a high degree of [sensitivity](#).

The study also looked at how often children were encouraged to eat, referred to as 'received pressure to eat'.

## Upbringing and weight

Is there a connection between the style of upbringing and the weight of the child? The results of this research indicate that [children](#) who experience more insensitive responses during an evening meal have a higher risk of being overweight.

There are two explanations for the link between being treated with sensitivity and overweight.

1. Earlier research shows that an insensitive upbringing has a negative effect on the body under stress. This has all kinds of consequences that can affect the child's weight. The [child](#) may not sleep well, for instance, and produces more hormones that increase appetite or delay the feeling of being full.
2. Sensitive training in learning to handle emotions. Children who experience less sensitivity in their upbringing have probably not learned how to deal with their emotions and they consequently use inadequate strategies, such as emotional eating if they feel sad. This can also lead to overweight.

## Mealtimes should be enjoyable

The results show that it is important to look at the quality of general family interactions during the evening meal. The results imply that current interventions for reducing [overweight](#) can benefit from improving positive and sensitive family responses during the meal.

**More information:** 'Happy Healthy Homes: The

role of parenting in early childhood overweight' by  
Roxanna Camfferman:  
[www.universiteitleiden.nl/bina ... dse-  
samenvatting.pdf](http://www.universiteitleiden.nl/bina...dse-samenvatting.pdf)

Provided by Leiden University  
APA citation: Obesity related to upbringing (2017, May 23) retrieved 23 October 2019 from  
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