

# Parents' behavior during playtime may affect toddler's weight later on

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Parents who positively engage with their children during play time—and gently steer them to clean up afterward—may help toddlers with low-self regulation have lower body mass indexes (BMIs) later on as

preschoolers.

In a study, researchers found that toddlers who had poor self-regulation skills—the ability to control their behaviors and emotions—went on to have lower BMIs as preschoolers if their [mothers](#) engaged with them during playtime and then helped direct them during clean up.

Cynthia Stifter, professor of human development and psychology, Penn State, said the results—recently published in the *International Journal of Obesity* — suggest that when [parents](#) help their [child](#) develop regulatory skills, it may help the child maintain a healthy weight.

"If parents can help their kids learn to self-regulate, that child can then use those skills in many other situations, including eating," Stifter said. "Good self-regulation may help a child stop themselves from throwing a tantrum, but it may also keep them from eating too much. Building those skills is a process that isn't going to develop on its own, so that's where parents can step in."

According to researchers, 17.5 percent of children in the U.S. are obese. The researchers said it's important to identify risk factors for childhood obesity, which is linked to such conditions as [high blood pressure](#), diabetes, and breathing problems like asthma. It also increases the chance of being obese as an adult.

Kameron Moding, a postdoctoral fellow at University of Colorado Denver who received her doctorate in [human development](#) and family studies from Penn State, said research on how parenting behaviors—beyond how parents feed their kids—affect children's weight has been varied.

"One possible reason for the inconsistent results so far is that child characteristics, such as self-regulation, are not often considered,"

Moding said. "These studies have mostly focused on the parents. We wanted to know whether associations between general parenting behaviors and children's weight outcomes could depend on the children's self-regulation."

The study's participants included 108 mothers and their 18-month-old toddlers. During their first lab visit, the children were weighed and participated in tasks designed to measure their temperament and regulatory skills.

The mother and child were then allowed to [free play](#) for five minutes before a researcher signaled it was time to clean up. The researchers noted how "responsive" the mothers were during free play, defined as when the mothers followed the child's lead during play. They also measured how often the mother guided the child during clean up in a positive or neutral tone, referred to as "gentle control."

When the children were 4.5 years old, the mother and child pairs returned to the lab. The children were weighed again, and the researchers calculated their BMIs.

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that when mothers were more responsive during free play and showed more gentle control during clean-up, their child was more likely to have a lower BMI at 4.5 years of age if that child also had poor regulation skills.

But, they found that children who started the study with good regulation skills were actually more likely to have higher BMIs as preschoolers if their mothers showed high levels of gentle control during clean up.

Stifter said the study demonstrates that while parents have an influence on their child's behavior, the child also affects his own development.

"Children are partners with their parents in their development," Stifter said. "In this case, we found that the level of self-regulation a child possessed at 18 months was a factor in their BMI as a preschooler. So it wasn't just the mother's actions that mattered."

Stifter added that the study underscores the importance of parents being responsive and using gentle control to guide their children when possible.

"It's understandable that parents can't always be positive and gentle when controlling situations," Stifter said. "But in situations where you can, this study implies that this way of parenting will teach the child a skill that they can apply in many situations, including waiting to eat or eating a less desirable food. This skill—complying when asked to do or not to do something—is one of the most important developmental tasks of early childhood."

Moding said that in the future, she and the other researchers are hoping to explore whether parent-child interactions and child self-regulation also have implications for children's eating behaviors and weight gain in slightly older [children](#).

**More information:** Kameron J. Moding et al, Interactive effects of parenting behavior and regulatory skills in toddlerhood on child weight outcomes, *International Journal of Obesity* (2018). [DOI: 10.1038/s41366-018-0162-6](#)

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