

Body weight linked to children's self-esteem

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Paul Veugelers

(PhysOrg.com) -- National statistics show one in four children in Canada are obese, yet very little research has been done to find out what effects, if any, being overweight has on their self esteem and well-being.

University of Alberta researcher Paul Veugelers is one of the few in the scientific world taking a comprehensive look at this issue. In his latest study he surveyed 5,000 Grade 5 students in Nova Scotia and asked questions about self esteem, measured height and weight and linked that data with the students' standardized provincial exams.

"This is a major finding," said Veugelers, who found that body weight

affects children's self esteem. But that effect doesn't go both ways like it often can in adults. Children who have low self esteem don't necessarily end up putting on weight and becoming obese, he found. His study also shows that youth who perform well in school have higher self esteem, but those with low confidence didn't seem to let it affect their learning.

"There has been research in the past that shows there are links between nutrition and learning, " said Veugelers. He said while there has been some research about physical activity and the potential effects on self esteem, no studies have analyzed the data so comprehensively.

Veugelers says he is relieved by the findings because his drive to promote health in schools would have become much more complicated had obesity affected school performance.

These studies are very important to the U of A researcher because proper health as a child has a major affect their lives as adults. Considering the correlation between high grades and better-paying careers as adults, it's important to marry good health and a positive self-image, says Veugelers. In addition, he says, self esteem is an early indicator of mental health, which means that the earlier children are encouraged to get on the right health track, the better.

"If we wait 40 years [to intervene] the delay transforms in to poor physical health, wealth and mental health," said Veugelers.

To continue Veugelers' work in this field, he's getting some help along the way from Alberta Education, who he says is on board with his study.

"They understand that this is very, very important," said Veugelers. "[It's] a good thing when government and university researchers work together."

Provided by University of Alberta

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