

A higher risk of obesity for children neglected by parents

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Strategies for decreasing a child's risk for obesity often focus on improving eating habits and maintaining a high level of physical activity. While this is one way to address the issue, another way to reduce the risk of childhood obesity could simply come down to positive parenting, according to a Temple University study published in the November issue of *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

“This is the first study to show the association between neglect in childhood and childhood obesity. Previous studies looked at maltreatment in childhood and how it affected these individuals in adulthood,” said Dr. Robert Whitaker, the study's lead author and a pediatrician and professor of public health at Temple University.

Examples of neglect include a parent not showing enough affection to the child due to preoccupation with his/her own problems, not taking a child to the doctor when he/she needed it, and leaving a child at home without the proper supervision.

Data was obtained from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a birth cohort study of 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large U.S. cities. At age 3, 2,412 of these children had their height and weight measured, and mothers answered items on the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales about three types of child maltreatment in the prior year: neglect (such as not providing proper supervision for the child), corporal punishment (such as spanking the child on the bottom with a bare hand) and psychological aggression (such as threatening to

spank the child but not actually doing it).

Eighteen percent of the children were obese, and the prevalence of any episode of neglect, corporal punishment or psychological aggression was 11 percent, 84 percent and 93 percent, respectively.

The odds of obesity were 50 percent greater in children who had experienced neglect, after controlling for the income and number of children in the household, the mothers' race/ethnicity, education, marital status, body mass index, prenatal smoking and age, and the children's sex and birth weight. Neither the frequency of corporal punishment nor psychological aggression was associated with an increased risk of obesity.

“Corporal punishment and psychological aggression are common discipline techniques resulting from a child's misbehavior, and the child may come to anticipate them as consequences of their misbehavior,” Whitaker said.

“In contrast, the child may not understand the cause of the neglect and the child might mistakenly feel at fault,” he added.

“These experiences of neglect could translate into a great deal of stress for the child, which might, in turn, influence mood, anxiety, diet and activity. As we know, adults eat in response to stress; the same could be true for children,” Whitaker said.

“You can't make a child's life stress free, but parents can strive to be more of a buffer against stress, rather than one of the causes of stress,” he said.

Source: Temple University

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