

# School climate can affect overweight children for life

24 April 2012

Kids can be really mean - especially to other kids - and school-yard bullying can have serious immediate and long-term effects. One area of increasing concern in this regard is the possibility that overweight or obese children shoulder the brunt of bullying. With childhood obesity rates reaching unprecedented levels, this may translate into even more negative behavior being experienced by today's kids. It is also possible that children who are disliked by their peers may respond by becoming less active and more likely to overeat - compounding the issue even further. It's a vicious cycle, to say the least. Indeed, some research shows that obese children miss more school days than healthy-weight children. One reason might be because obese kids are unhappy due to being mistreated by other children; they might be avoiding school because of a negative emotional climate in the classroom.

To help address this important question and understand better the factors related to childhood obesity, researchers at Oklahoma State University and the University of Arkansas studied 1139 first-graders in 29 rural schools where obesity risk is especially high. Specifically, they tested their hypothesis that obese and overweight children are more disliked than their classmates. This study was important because, although there is evidence that obesity carries with it a stigma, this has been studied primarily by using hypothetical questions. And it has almost never been tested by directly asking children how much they liked each of their classmates, and certainly not among children as young as six years old.

Each child was weighed and measured so that body mass index score (BMI) could be calculated; this information was used to classify each child as having healthy weight or being overweight or obese. Children were then shown photos of their classmates and asked how much (on a 1-to-3 scale) they liked to play with each child, and the researchers calculated a score for each child

representing the average of their classmates' ratings. A similar procedure was used to determine how the teachers perceived each child's acceptance by the other kids in his or her classroom.

According to both the children's and teachers' reports, both overweight and [obese children](#) were significantly more disliked than healthy-weight children. The researchers concluded that, "It is important to remember that these children are only in first grade! So children with weight problems are experiencing a negative social environment very early in their educational experience. This is significant because other research shows that children who are rejected or unhappy in school have trouble learning."

"It also suggests one reason some children's weight problems increase with age: if [overweight children](#) are disliked at school, they may be less likely to play actively on the playground, during physical activity classes, and after school. They may also be more likely to engage in emotional eating as a way to cope with feeling bad at [school](#)." These findings suggest that obesity prevention programs should start very early and should involve peers, not just the overweight [children](#) themselves. In this case, it may take a classroom.

**More information:** Results from this study will be presented orally on April 24, 2012, in Room 32A at the Experimental Biology 2012 meeting in San Diego, CA.

Provided by Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology

APA citation: School climate can affect overweight children for life (2012, April 24) retrieved 28 May 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-04-school-climate-affect-overweight-children.html>

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