

Childhood obesity linked to emotional issues

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Boys suffering from obesity are at higher risk of developing relationship problems. Credit: monkeybusinessimages

Schoolchildren suffering from obesity are at higher risk of developing psychological problems than their slimmer counterparts, according to new research.

The Monash University-led collaborative study of over 2000 Taiwanese schoolchildren aged 6–13 years, examined whether [emotional disturbances](#) (ED) such as inappropriate behaviour, [relationship problems](#), depression, or an inability to learn, was associated with obesity.

Using the Scale for Assessing Emotional Disturbance (SAED), researchers from Monash University, the National Health Research Institutes, Taiwan, the China Medical University, Taiwan and the National Defense Medical Centre, Taiwan, investigated whether ED was associated with obesity by gender. SAED is a rating scale designed to assist identifying students who may be experiencing emotional and/or [behavioural difficulties](#) at school.

Co-author, Emeritus Professor Mark Wahlqvist from Monash University's Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine and the Monash Asia Institute, said the [negative consequences](#) of [childhood obesity](#) on physical health are well-recognised as are, increasingly, its associations with psychosocial and [mental health problems](#).

"Childhood obesity has been associated with psychological problems, but little is known about its association with ED in the educational setting, especially by gender," Professor Wahlqvist said.

"Knowledge of how emotional disturbance and obesity might be linked is currently limited, especially in Asia where [child obesity](#) is on the rise; and where societal and parental focus is often intense in regard to schooling; frequently with gender favouritism."

The research found boys (16.5 per cent) were significantly more likely to be obese than girls (11.7 per cent), however, while ED becomes more prevalent as children move up through the grades, [obesity prevalence](#) remains fairly constant.

The research found the occurrence of relationship problems was higher among obese (23.5 per cent) than among normal weight (14.4 per cent) and overweight (14.8 per cent) children. Conversely, the prevalence of obesity was higher among children with emotional disorders such as inability to learn and unhappiness or depression (16.9 per cent), than

without these issues (13.7 per cent).

"In boys we found they struggled with relationship problems and in girls it was inappropriate behaviour," Professor Wahlqvist said.

"However, obesity doesn't automatically mean young children will suffer from ED. Where obesity exists at the same time as psychological problems, prevalence of these problems increased as students progressed through the school grades."

The researchers said the findings suggest there are extensive and complex interactions between body composition and emotions during child development.

"The early identification of children at risk of developing these combinations of physical and mental health problems may enable interventions that can help to prevent progression to more serious physical and mental health problems in later life," Professor Wahlqvist said.

"The results highlight the need for further studies of child health in relation to [obesity](#) and psychological problems."

The results of the research were recently published in *Research in Developmental Disability*.

More information: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...
ii/S0891422213002722](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0891422213002722)

Provided by Monash University

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