

Fathers missing in childhood obesity interventions, study finds

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The best fathers combined masculine traits with the belief they should be nurturing. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Research shows that fathers play an important role in their children's eating and physical activity habits, but a new study has found that dads

are rarely included in family-based interventions designed to prevent childhood obesity.

University of Guelph Prof. Jess Haines and her colleagues at Harvard Chan School of Public Health examined scientific studies worldwide that tested childhood obesity prevention interventions, and found fathers are nearly absent.

"This is concerning, given the strong influence fathers have on what their children eat," said Haines, a professor in the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition.

Research has shown a child is 10 times more likely to be overweight if a father is overweight than if only the mother is overweight.

"Fathers seem to have a unique influence on kids and their dietary habits, and we will miss out on this if we don't include them in our intervention work," said Haines, who worked on the study with Harvard researcher Kirsten Davison.

"We know that [family interventions](#) are more effective if they include both [parents](#). If fathers are largely missing from childhood obesity interventions, we are compromising our ability to improve children's weight outcomes," Davison said.

Published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*, the study analyzed 85 family-based interventions for childhood obesity prevention conducted around the world since 2008.

Davison and colleagues found fathers represented only six per cent of all parent participants in family-based interventions for childhood obesity prevention. When fathers were included, intervention strategies typically targeted families with elementary school-aged children. For

interventions targeting families with infants, fathers were rarely included.

Of the studies examined, one-third of the interventions focused on [mothers](#) only, one-third included mothers and fathers, and one-third did not specify parent gender. Only one per cent of interventions were geared toward fathers only.

"This study highlights the need to recruit and engage fathers of young children in [obesity](#) prevention efforts," said Haines.

Haines belongs to the Guelph Family Health Study, a research project testing new ways for kids to learn healthy habits early by involving the entire [family](#) in the process.

"If a child lives with two parents, we try to engage both parents, because we know that when it comes to children's food and activity, both parents play a role."

Still, said Haines, more mothers than fathers participate in studies.

"It seems mothers interpret the development of their child's eating and activity behaviour as their role."

But that development is influenced by both parents, she added.

"Based on these findings, it seems researchers need to explicitly ask for fathers to participate, and to set up the [intervention](#) in a way that makes it easily accessible to [fathers](#), such as ensuring participation works around their availability."

More information: K.K. Davison et al, The forgotten parent: Fathers' representation in family interventions to prevent childhood obesity,

Preventive Medicine (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.02.029](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.02.029)

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