

San Francisco Chronicle

Weight, temper linked in new study Difficult children may be at higher risk for obesity

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Friday, July 9, 2004

Youngsters who throw temper tantrums and are easily frustrated seem to be at a higher risk for becoming overweight, especially if their parents are already heavier than they should be, according to a new study out of Stanford University.

It could be that parents of these difficult children try to soothe them with food, said Dr. W. Stewart Agras, professor of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine and lead author of the study. But it could also be that they try to put too many limits on their child's eating habits.

"Our own theory is that parents find these kids difficult and may over-control their feeding and not allow the child to moderate his own feeding, to get used to taking the right amount, so he doesn't learn to handle food (normally)," Agras said.

Public health officials have sounded alarms in recent years about the obesity epidemic among both adults and children. The percentage of children who are considered severely overweight has doubled in the last 20 years, to 15 percent, and the majority of those kids will carry the extra weight into adulthood, setting themselves up for a wide range of health problems.

Agras and his colleagues followed 150 children born at three Bay Area hospitals for an average of 9 1/2 years to come up with their findings, published in today's edition of the Journal of Pediatrics. Researchers have long known that overweight parents are more likely to have overweight kids, but their study found that correlation was exacerbated if the child had a difficult temperament.

In another finding, the researchers noticed the overweight children in the study got, on average, less sleep than their normal-sized peers, confirming results from some previous studies in Japan and Europe. It may be that overweight kids are less active and therefore less tired, Agras said.

That sounds right to Joanne Ikeda, a nutritionist with the UC Berkeley Center for Health and Weight, who said the connection warrants further attention by researchers.

"I do notice that children in the United States are not getting enough sleep," Ikeda said. "Most children these days are awoken fairly early because most parents work and the children have to get up and go to day care or to school. ... If they're fatigued, they're not going to be running around, skipping and jumping."

Ikeda and Agras agree that the way parents deal with their children's eating habits early in life can make a big difference in whether they can maintain a normal weight as they grow up.

"The ideal situation is a division of responsibility in the feeding relationship -- the parent provides regular meals and snacks of high nutritional quality, and it's up to the child to decide how much to eat of the food available at those times," Ikeda said. Forcing children to clean their plates or making certain foods taboo can set up problems later on, she said.

Other pieces of advice for new parents: breastfeed, start serving a wide variety of fruits and vegetables early in life, and model eating healthy foods yourself. Ikeda said it's normal for toddlers to be afraid of new foods, and that it usually takes many encounters with something different before they become comfortable with it.

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