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Georgia Southern study shows parents think their overweight preschool children are 'about the right weight'

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Jian Zhang, M.D., Dr.P.H.

Despite the rise of obesity in America, and despite the very public awareness campaigns that surround the problem, a new study from Georgia Southern suggests parents are getting worse at judging whether or not their children are overweight.

The study, "Change in Misperceptions of Child's Body Weight among Parents of American Preschool Children," is the brainchild of Dr. Jian Zhang, associate professor of epidemiology in the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health, and included researchers from Georgia Southern, New York University Langone Medical Center and Fudan University in Shanghai.

He says the idea for the study arose when he realized his own misperceptions about his children.

"My younger son is relatively slim compared to his friends," he said. "Both my wife and myself were concerned that the little one might have an underweight issue socially and this might not be good for a boy.

"However, when we compared the little one's weight and height with a growth chart, biologically, he is actually overweight and almost obese. Both my wife and myself are public health professionals, and we are still struggling with the discrepancy between socially and biologically acceptable norms."

According to the research, this discrepancy is prevalent in most parents.

The study compared data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from 1988 to 1994, and from 2007 to 2012. Parents were asked whether they considered their child, ages 2-5 years old, to be overweight, underweight or just about the right weight.



Andrew Hansen, Dr.P.H.

In the earlier survey, 97 percent of the parents of boys and 88 percent of the parents of girls said their children were “about the right weight.” In the later survey, 95 percent of the parents of boys and 93 percent of the parents of girls said their children were “about the right weight.”

While the percentages vary little from survey to survey, it is important to note one distressing fact about the children in the second survey: they were significantly more obese than the children in the first.

“So parents are getting worse at perceiving their child’s weight status correctly. That’s bad on so many levels,” said Andrew Hansen, Dr.P.H., assistant professor of community health behavior and education and one of the researchers of the study. “If my child is overweight and I say, ‘Well, no, they’re okay. They’ll outgrow it. All the kids look like this.’ That means as a parent I’m not in a state of readiness to say we need to make changes to our eating patterns or physical activity. And if I’m not ready, then the child’s not going to get it, and we’re perpetuating the problem.”

The problem, Hansen says, is even larger than that. While only 10 percent of preschool children are overweight, statistics show that 80 percent of those overweight children will be obese as school-aged children. If they are overweight as school children, they’re even more likely to be overweight as adults. This trend is creating ripples throughout the workforce, health care system and other vital social systems in America.

“So if we don’t target these children and their parents at preschool age, where these habits start, we’ve missed the boat,” Hansen said.

Zhang says the first step to addressing any problem is to recognize it, and he hopes the study will serve as a wake-up call to both parents and health professionals. The national media have aided the study’s exposure in this regard, and details of the research have been covered by such media outlets as *The Washington Post*, *TIME magazine*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Chicago Tribune* and the “Today” show on NBC.

Parents interested in finding out where their child fits on the Body Mass Index (BMI) can visit the [BMI Percentile Calculator for Child and Teen on the CDC Website](#). There, a parent can enter their child’s age, height and weight to find out where he or she fits among the national standards.

Once armed with the correct information, Hansen suggests parents avoid the trap of trying to make broad, extensive changes in their children’s habits. He suggests “small corrections early to avoid big problems later.”

Instead of launching a full scale overhaul of the menu, start adding vegetables to what they’re already eating. Instead of refined or processed snacks, add a fruit or a whole grain snack. Instead of

forcing a child into a cardio workout, take walks with them in the evenings or on weekends and make plans to visit the park.

Though the changes seem small, he said they'll pay dividends in the life of your child.

"Children typically follow a parent's lead," he said. "We parents often feel like they don't listen, but if they see what we do and how we value something, they'll value it, too — particularly if you start them early."