

RESEARCH NEWS



Nurture is more important than nature in childhood obesity, study finds

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A study comparing the weight of biological and adopted children to that of their parents has found that lifestyles, rather than genes, are primarily responsible for the children being overweight.¹

The researchers, from the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics and Political Science, concluded that policies to influence parents' lifestyles could help to tackle overweight in children.

For the study the researchers compiled data from 13 years of the Health Survey for England from 1997 to 2009. This annual survey measures health related behaviours in adults and children including weight, height, and body mass index. A nurse validates the measurements of weight and height, overcoming some of the problems seen in other surveys, said the researchers.

The overall sample included 13 536 observations of children in which both parents were biological and 300 observations in which both parents were adoptive.

The researchers found that, when both adoptive parents were overweight, the likelihood of an adopted child being overweight was as much as 21% higher than when the parents were not overweight. Because these children were adopted, their weight problems could be largely attributed to their parents' lifestyles rather than to their genes, the researchers wrote.

They added that, in comparison, children with two biological overweight parents were 27% more likely to be overweight, showing the relatively small influence of genetics.

When the researchers looked at the effect of only a mother or father being overweight the results were more mixed. Among adoptees, they found no effect when only the mother was

overweight; but when only the father was overweight or obese they found a small effect.

The research also showed that being obese was more strongly influenced by genetics than by lifestyle factors. And the transmission of being overweight or obese from parents to children due to lifestyle factors was not found to be affected by the children having a full time working mother.

The researchers concluded, "Overweight is passed through generations, and the pathway seems to be primarily driven by the children environment. In contrast, and consistently with the behavioural [genetics] literature, obesity exhibits a highly genetic component."



1 Costa-Font J, Jofre-Bonet M, Le Grand J. Vertical transmission of overweight: evidence from English adoptees. Centre for Economic Performance discussion paper no 1324. January 2015. <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1324.pdf>.

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