

UC San Diego Study Helps Parents Help Overweight Kids

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Debra Kain

Nearly one in six children in the United States between the ages of 8 and 12 are considered obese, and parents play a major role in the development and maintenance of obesity in their children.

Researchers at the University of California, San Diego (UC San Diego) School of Medicine are looking at whether parent-only intervention programs - teaching parents skills to use in helping their children lose weight - might be a more effective method of targeting childhood obesity than sessions which bring parents and children together to work on the problem.

"The long-term objective of the UC San Diego program is to improve the treatment for childhood obesity in order to prevent adult obesity," said Kerri Boutelle, Ph.D., a psychologist in the UC San Diego Department of Psychiatry. Boutelle is leading a randomized, clinical trial to evaluate two five-month treatment programs for childhood obesity - parent-plus-child and parent-only groups - as part of UC San Diego's Behavioral Weight and Wellness Program.

"Today's parents have never before had to face the dilemma of turning down food for their children," said Boutelle. "They just aren't prepared to manage this incredibly difficult problem."

Parenting strategies addressed in the program will reinforce positive behaviors that result in weight-loss such as praise, rewards, daily meetings, dietary interventions and physical activity.

Parent-only treatments have been shown to be effective with a number of childhood disorders, and Boutelle hypothesizes that such treatments may be more effective in dealing with obesity in pre-adolescents because the child isn't stigmatized as "the one with the problem." The parent-only program is also easier for parents to schedule, is more cost-effective and can result in changes that are beneficial for the entire family.

"Our program focuses on changing the behaviors and home environment that contribute to the child's obesity," said Boutelle. "We're not necessarily figuring out the root of the issues, but helping participants learn to parent in a way that paves the way for their children's success."

Volunteers for the research study are asked to attend an initial two-hour appointment with their child. Following this visit, families will be assigned by chance to either parent-only or parent and child groups, where parent and child attend separate meetings. Groups meet for one hour, once a week for three months, and then every other week for two months.

Those interested in the study should phone 858-366-3200 or e-mail Kidsweight@ucsd.edu

Media Contact: Debra Kain, 619-543-6163

