

OSU study offers strategies for combating childhood obesity

Monday, 21 July 2008

(STILLWATER, OKLA. — July 21, 2008) -- Successful childhood obesity interventions must address underlying family dynamics and not just children's eating habits, according to a study by Oklahoma State University scientists published in this month's "Journal of the American Dietetic Association."

Conducted by OSU human development and family science, psychology and nutritional sciences faculty members, the research establishes a correlation between how parents manage what their kids eat and their overall approach to parenting.

"A goal of this study was to take what is known about feeding practices from research in nutrition and what is known about parenting styles from child development research and determine if the two are related," said Laura Hubbs-Tait, professor of human development and family science. "The scientific literature shows that only 5 percent of childhood obesity interventions are effective, and our argument is the low success rate is due to interventions which are designed to treat specific behaviors.

"They're not treating these underlying parenting and family dynamics," she said.

In the study, parents of Oklahoma first-graders were administered surveys regarding feeding practices in their homes as well as questions about parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian and permissive.

"Authoritarian parenting is very controlling, but there's no warmth. It's a very bossy and 'do what I say because I say it' parenting style," said Melanie Page, associate professor of psychology. "Permissive parenting is the opposite. Parents set few if any rules so the style is very low on control.

"Authoritative parents are high in control but also high in warmth so that is a positive general parenting style and usually has the best outcomes for kids," Page said.

The researchers learned that parents' approaches to raising kids are reflected in their behavior at the dinner table, and concluded authoritative parents are most likely to positively influence their children's diets.

"Authoritative parents feel responsible. They monitor what their kids eat and feel it is their job to make sure they're eating healthfully," Hubbs-Tait said. "Authoritarian and permissive parents, on the other hand, overly restrict children's eating and pressure them to eat rather than encouraging their children and modeling healthy diet and behavior themselves."

The finding may be useful to dietitians working to improve childhood obesity intervention programs.

"Food is not a separate issue from parenting in general," Page said. "Parents aren't going to be able to be authoritative when it comes to their kids' diets when their general style is to be permissive and not set any rules."

"If we're trying to affect what or how a family eats, we can't come in and say, 'make your kids eat vegetables,'" she said. "Working with families on this requires a much broader approach. We have to address the bigger picture of parenting style."

In addition to a peer-reviewed report describing the researchers' findings, the American Dietetic Association also published an application component.

"The ADA thought these issues were so important that they asked us to describe in a separate article for nutrition and dietetic professionals the meaning of the science for their work with families," Hubbs-Tait said.

The publications are the first resulting from a multi-year, ambitious effort by a team of researchers in OSU's College of Human Environmental Sciences and College of Arts and Sciences to implement and test several versions of a childhood obesity intervention. The research group is led by Amanda Harist, associate professor of human development and family science. In addition to Hubbs-Tait and Page, it includes human development and family science assistant professor Glade Topham and nutritional sciences faculty members Tay Kennedy and Lenka Shriver.

The project began in 2004 and will continue at least through 2009. Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology and the Colleges of Human Environmental Sciences and Arts and Sciences, it involves more than 1,000 Oklahoma elementary school children and their parents.

"We are so grateful to the families because they continue to participate," Hubbs-Tait said. "And it should be pointed out that when we looked at the three styles of parenting, the authoritative — the good parenting

– was the style the majority of our parents used most.

“Oklahoma parents are trying very hard to do what they’re supposed to do. They’re really trying to do a good job and programs like ours can help them succeed.”