



FI Research Summary: Fathers and Childhood Obesity

THE PROBLEM:

- 23% of 3-year-olds are overweight or obese (Hawkins et al, 2009), rising to one third of 11-13 year olds, one in six of whom have high blood pressure, and one in ten, high cholesterol (Brophy et al, 2012)

THE FATHER FACTOR – the early years

- 95% of parents are in a couple relationship or describe themselves as ‘good friends’ at the time of the birth (Kiernan & Smith, 2003)
- Fathers have substantial impact on pregnant women’s nutrition (Clift-Matthews, 2009)
- Fathers gain weight during pregnancy, mainly due to lifestyle factors (Onepoll, 2009)
- Fathers have substantial impact on whether babies are breastfed, and breastfed babies are less likely to be obese later (Armstrong et al, 2002)
- Toddlers’ activity levels are linked with their father’s (but not their mother’s) BMI (Sallis et al, 1988).

FAT FATHERS, FAT CHILDREN

- Fatter fathers have fatter children (Brophy, 2012), particularly sons (Whitaker, 2010)
- Children with TWO overweight parents most likely to be obese (Whitaker et al, 2010)
- There are more fat fathers than fat mothers: 54% of 25-34 year old males are overweight or obese, rising to 72% aged 35-44 (Health Survey for England, 2012)

FATHERS' PARENTING AND CHILD OVERWEIGHT

- Fathers' physical activity predicts adolescents' overall physical activity (Edwardson et al, 2010)
- Fathers' body dissatisfaction is correlated with monitoring of sons' but not daughters' food intake (Blisset et al, 2006) – and monitored food intake is associated with later obesity in children
- Fathers' dieting attitudes and behaviours are important predictors of both sons' and daughters' later frequent dieting and worrying about weight and (Field et al, 2001)
- Fathers who operate an authoritative parenting style are less likely to try to force their children to eat (Blisset et al, 2008)
- Overweight female adolescents perceive their fathers as being significantly more overprotective and significantly less caring (Turner et al, 2005)

THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP:

- Parents' discontent with their relationship is associated with eating psychopathology in their offspring (Espina et al. 2003).
- Mothers who report more hostile, less warm romantic relationships, also report more restriction of their children's food intake and less adaptive eating behaviours in their children (Haycraft, & Blissett, 2010)

HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND FATHERS

- Two thirds of dads are at routine antenatal appointments (Redshaw & Heikkila, 2010)
- More than 9 out of 10 are at the scans and the births (Redshaw & Heikkila, 2010)
- Yet they are fundamentally ignored by health professionals.

CONCLUSION:

- Today's lifestyle presents challenges in delivery of good early-life nutrition

However...

- Fathers' roles in delivering good early life nutrition AND encouraging child physical activity is significant
- Engaging with the dads from pre-birth, not just the mums, is likely to deliver better outcomes
- If fathers are NOT engaged with, they will often undermine.