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Overview

Almost 1 out of every 5 children between 6-11 years old living in the United States have obesity. Rates of obesity are higher among children whose parents have lower income or fewer years of education. Obesity can lead to poor physical and mental health. There is little information about what approaches can prevent childhood obesity.

Researchers wanted to know

Can parent-focused lifestyle coaching lead to meaningful weight gain prevention and increase adoption of healthy behaviors among children?

The researchers also studied the impact of lifestyle coaching on parents.

Study

Two hundred forty-seven (247) parent/child pairs from 9 elementary schools located in under-resourced areas of Worcester, MA, USA participated in the study. Parents with children in some schools received lifestyle coaching and parents of children in the other schools received parenting coaching (comparison condition). Both types of coaching were done by a trained community health worker. The coach spoke with individual parents by phone or in-person up to 8 times over two years (in English or Spanish). At the end of two years, the two groups were compared.

The Bottom Line

Non-intensive lifestyle coaching of parents may be an effective approach for preventing obesity and fostering the adoption of healthier behaviors among children. Training community health workers to coach parents using evidence-based approaches is promising.

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Source

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Spotlight on Results

After 24 months, when compared to the comparison condition, the lifestyle coaching:

- Led to meaningful weight gain prevention in children. (Measured by the BMI z-score, $\beta = -0.17$, 95%CI: -1.92 to -0.36; $p=0.057$)
- Led to the adoption of a greater number of healthy behaviors among children, such as healthier eating and physical activity. ($\beta=0.57$, 95%CI: 0.08 -1.06; $p=0.02$)

There was no significant change in parent weight gain or adoption of healthier behaviors.

Call for Action

As this approach has been found effective in helping children adopt healthy behaviors and shows promise in weight gain prevention, it should be adapted on a larger scale with diverse families who live in under-resourced neighborhoods.

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