

Pediatricians: How to discuss weight with parents of overweight children

When treating an overweight or obese child, much of your clinical intervention involves interactions with the child's parents, to equip them with tools to improve the health of their child, and the whole family. As part of these efforts, it's important to provide parents with appropriate information and to address the topic of weight with sensitivity. Here are some issues to consider:

1. Many parents do not have an accurate perception of their child's weight, or what is considered "overweight" or "obese." As a provider, it is important to educate parents about BMI, and to explain the associated health risks at different BMI levels.
2. Many parents also feel blamed by physicians for their child being overweight. There is a certain "stigma" towards parents of overweight children, who are often blamed in society, and by health providers, for causing their child's obesity. When parents feel blamed, they are less equipped to help their children, and more likely to be dissatisfied with the health care of their child. It needs to be communicated to parents that they are an important part of the solution to improve their child's health, but providers should avoid using language that places blame on parents.
3. Talking about weight with parents, and in front of children, is a sensitive issue. Certain words that are used to describe body weight can be offensive, or interpreted as pejorative. As a provider it is important to be mindful of the language you use, and to address the topic of weight with sensitivity. Asking the parents and child for their permission to discuss the child's weight is a sensitive way to initiate the discussion. You can also ask the child for preferred terms to describe his/her weight (e.g., "BMI" or "weight" versus "obesity," "fatness," etc.)
4. Many parents know that their child needs to lose weight, but lack the information to determine how best to help their child. There is so much nutritional and dietary information available, that many parents don't know which information to believe, or where to start. Providers need to guide parents to appropriate resources, and suggest specific steps that parents can implement to improve their child's eating habits and physical activity.
5. It is difficult for a child to successfully improve their eating and exercise patterns if parents are not doing the same. Thus, an important goal for providers is to encourage parents to make healthy lifestyle changes as a family, rather than imposing a certain health plan only on the child.
6. Give parents examples of appropriate behavioral goals to set for their child, and for the family (e.g., eliminating intake of sugared sodas, or increasing consumption of vegetables). Explain the importance of setting realistic goals, and monitoring progress.
7. Emphasize to parents the importance of focusing on healthy behaviors in their child, rather than just how much their child weighs. It is difficult to lose weight, and focusing only on the number on the scale will likely lead to feelings of shame in the child, and frustration for the parents. Providers need to communicate to parents the importance of providing ongoing reinforcement for improvements in their child's health behaviors.