Prevalence of Childhood Obesity Is Growing Steadily

Prevalence

Class I Obesity

Class II Obesity

Class III Obesity

Source: NHANES, Skinner et al, Pediatrics 2018
Growth in Severe Childhood Obesity Is Most Significant

“Building on our previous work, we have been able to document the steadily rising levels of severe obesity, modeled on adult criteria of class I, II, and III obesity, with the rise of children with severe obesity having been the most significant.”

- Skinner et al, Pediatrics, 2018

Eugene, photograph © Garen Dibartolomeo
But Bias Drives Policy Decisions That Affect Clinical Care

“Prevention obviously has to be the primary strategy for dealing with obesity, because there’s just too much obesity to treat.”

Nathalie, photograph © Garen Dibartolomeo
Only 37 Clinics for 5 Million Children with Severe Obesity

Source: http://conscienhealth.org/2017/02/childhood-obesity-treatment-programs-serve-many/
Obesity Is Well-Established as a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease

Body Mass in Twins

Monozygotic Twins (Intrapair Correlation = 0.66)

Dizygotic Twins (Intrapair Correlation = 0.26)

Source: Borjeson M, The aetiology of obesity in children, 1976

The American Journal of CLINICAL NUTRITION

Obesity—still highly heritable after all these years

Solomon K Musani, Stephen Erickson, David B Allison

AJCN, February 2008
Study Objectives

- Document public perceptions
- Regarding causes of severe childhood obesity
- In four different countries
  - United States
  - United Kingdom
  - France
  - Italy
Web and Smartphone Samples Obtained via Google Consumer Surveys

Primary Sample Size

- **4,018 adults**
  - 1,001 U.S.
  - 1,001 U.K
  - 1,001 France
  - 1,015 Italy
- Fielded in April 2019
The Primary Question

What do you believe is the primary cause of severe obesity when it occurs in young children?

- Poor diet and exercise habits
- Genetics and physiology
- Poor parenting
- Excessive marketing of junk food
Follow-up Questions in a U.S. Sample Regarding Blame

Secondary Sample Size
• 1,003 adults
• Split between two questions
• Fielded in May 2019
• Each respondent only answers one question
Secondary Blame Question

When poor diet and exercise habits cause severe obesity in young children, what do you believe is most often responsible?

- Poor parenting
- Genetics and physiology
- The children themselves
- Few options for healthy food and exercise
Secondary Question on Blaming Parents

How strongly do you personally agree or disagree?

Parents are at fault when severe obesity occurs in young children.

Strongly disagree ⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐

Strongly agree
In the U.K., U.S., and France Most Respondents Blamed Bad Habits

What do you believe is the primary cause of severe obesity when it occurs in young children?

- **U.K.**
  - Poor diet and exercise habits: 55.5%
  - Poor parenting: 18.8%
  - Excessive marketing of junk food: 16.1%
  - Genetics and physiology: 9.7%

- **U.S.**
  - Poor diet and exercise habits: 52.7%
  - Poor parenting: 20.8%
  - Excessive marketing of junk food: 16.4%
  - Genetics and physiology: 10.2%

- **France**
  - Poor diet and exercise habits: 49.9%
  - Poor parenting: 13.9%
  - Excessive marketing of junk food: 23.7%
  - Genetics and physiology: 12.6%
In the U.K., U.S., and France
Most Respondents Blamed Bad Habits

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- **France**
  - Poor diet and exercise habits: 49.9%
  - Poor parenting: 13.9%
  - Excessive marketing of junk food: 23.7%
  - Genetics and physiology: 12.6%
In Italy, More Respondents Blamed Junk Food Marketing

What do you believe is the primary cause of severe obesity when it occurs in young children?

- Poor diet and exercise habits: 32.6%
- Poor parenting: 26.9%
- Excessive marketing of junk food: 34.8%
- Genetics and physiology: 5.7%
Most American Respondents Believe Parents Are Responsible for Severe Obesity in Children

When poor diet and exercise habits cause severe obesity in young children, what do you believe is most often responsible?

- Poor parenting: 53.8%
- Few options for healthy food and exercise: 29.6%
- Genetics and physiology: 10.7%
- The children themselves: 5.9%
Most American Respondents Agree with Blaming Parents for Severe Obesity

How strongly do you personally agree or disagree?

Parents are at fault when severe obesity occurs in young children.

- Strongly disagree: 7.6%
- Strongly agree: 27.6%
Conclusions

• The public blames bad habits for childhood obesity, especially in the U.S. and the U.K.

• In Italy and France, excessive marketing of junk food is seen as a bigger factor

• The public sees genetics and physiology as relatively unimportant in all four countries

• American respondents readily blame parents

Eugene, photograph © Garen Dibartolomeo
More Information

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For these slides:
Public Presumptions That Severe Childhood Obesity Is Simply Caused by Bad Habits
Theodore K. Kyle, a Joseph Nadglowski,b Nathalie Dumas,c Daniele Di Pauli d

Background
A growing body of research demonstrates that obesity is highly heritable and severe childhood obesity is largely the result of genetic risk factors interacting with environmental factors that promote obesity. However, public opinion generally holds that obesity results primarily from poor choices and a failure of personal or parental discipline. The present research had a goal of documenting public perceptions about the causes of severe obesity in young children.

Methods
In April 2019, we surveyed a total of 4,018 adults in the U.S., U.K., France, and Italy. Google Consumer Surveys collected representative online samples in these four countries. Each respondent completed only one of two survey questions asking what they believe is the primary cause of severe obesity when it occurs in young children. Respondents could choose between poor diet and exercise habits, poor parenting, excessive marketing of junk food, and genetics and physiology.

Results
In the U.K., U.S., and France, the largest number of respondents identified poor habits as the primary cause of severe obesity in young children. The highest percentage of respondents in the U.K. (56%) made this choice. In Italy, that number was 33%. The most common response in Italy was excessive marketing of junk food (35%). The least common response was genetics and physiology (6-13% of respondents).

Conclusions
Public opinion lends substantial support to the discredited idea that severe childhood obesity is primarily a simple matter of bad dietary and physical activity habits. Conversely, the public seems mostly unaware that genetics and physiology are important factors.

References

aConscienHealth, Pittsburgh, PA; bObesity Action Coalition, Tampa, FL; c Université de Montréal, Montréal, QC; dVerona, IT

Presented at ObesityWeek 2019, November 5, 2019, T-O-2008