

# Children's Obesity - UK - June 2010

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## What is this report about?

Three in ten children – or around 3.47 million individuals – are currently defined as obese or overweight, and research indicates that obese or overweight children have a higher risk of carrying that through into adulthood. This constitutes a threat to the health of both those children and the adults that they will become.

But the indications are that – after years of public policy initiatives – the upward trend in obesity rates may have finally flattened and even gone into reverse. Healthier eating patterns and a more active lifestyle could both be playing a part in this, and this report assesses just how much change has occurred in these two key aspects of lifestyle. It also looks in detail at parents' attitudes towards overweight and obesity, the factors that contribute to it and how it should be tackled. Implicitly this must include their responsibility for children and also children's own choices.

## What have we found out?

- There are real indications that the upward trend in overweight and obesity rates among children has halted and even started to decline. NHS data show lower rates from 2005, and projections for future obesity levels – particularly for teenagers – have been lowered significantly as a result.
- In January 2008, the former Labour government presented its Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives strategy as the first step in an ambitious programme to combat obesity, promote physical activity and, ultimately, create a healthier society. Children were targeted as the first priority for action.
- Interest and access to sporting and leisure opportunities vary greatly by gender; over half of boys spend three or more hours a week on sport compared to over a third of girls. Poorer children also spend less time on sport than wealthier children; just 38% of children in the social groups D and E spend that three or more hours a week playing sports, compared to the average 45%.
- Although the majority of parents are happy with their children's weight, a substantial minority of one in five report that one or more of their children is under and/or overweight. In either case, it is wealthier social groups (ABC1s) who are more likely to be worried, possibly resulting from better understanding or being over-sensitised to the issue.
- Almost eight in ten families still sit down together at a table for main meals, eating the same food. But underweight and/or overweight children are more likely to eat at a different time from the adults, to eat their main meals in front of the TV, and to choose their own foods.
- Parents recognise the importance of their children eating healthily and getting exercise, and in general they want fairly close control over their eating habits. Most parents do allow some flexibility though in areas such as eating sweets as well as letting their children choose how they spend their leisure time, and their pocket money.

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