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Parents can't always tell if their kids are overweight, CR survey finds

Many parents have trouble telling if their children are overweight, according to a *Consumer Reports* June phone survey that polled 609 parents of children ages 5 to 17.

Only 4 percent of survey respondents described their children as being 20 percent or more above their ideal weight or obese. But *Consumer Reports* found that 19 percent of those children fell in that category, using the reported weight, height, and sex of each child to calculate the body mass index (BMI)—ratios that help determine body fat. And while 21 percent of respondents described their children as being at least slightly overweight, *Consumer Reports* estimates that number at 36 percent of those surveyed.

According to the BMI calculations, younger children were more likely than teens to tip the scales, while 38 percent of boys and 33 percent of girls were overweight. Nine percent of the children were underweight.

Though BMI can be a reliable indication of body fat for most children and teens, it's not a diagnostic tool. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend using it to screen for possible weight problems in children. But to really determine if a child has excess fat, a doctor would need to do further assessments, such as skin-fold-thickness measurements.

Overweight children differed from ideal-weight children on a number of key lifestyle measures. According to *Consumer Reports'* survey, overweight kids were more likely to:

Eat fewer than four vegetables a day.

Drink three or more sweetened beverages a day.

Eat breakfast and lunch in school.

Eat dinner outside the home.

Have takeout food, fast food, and packaged or frozen dinners several times a week.

Ask their parents to buy foods or go to restaurants they see on TV.

Spend significantly more time playing video games and less time in other play, exercise, or doing sports.

Have parents with their own weight issues.

Despite the fact that overweight children ate more snacks and drank more sodas and sweetened drinks than children at ideal weights, one-third of parents said their overweight children were actually trying to lose weight.

Many families are not getting much help from their pediatricians in addressing their children's weight. Only 51 percent of parents whose children were significantly over their ideal weight reported that a physician had recommended their child shed pounds.

Lack of regular exercise, too much time spent in front of the TV and computer, and unhealthy snack choices were seen by parents as the major causes of childhood obesity. More than half (58 percent) also blamed food and beverage ads that target kids (See the Consumers Union report, "Out of Balance" for more on how the marketing of soda, candy, and fast food drowns out healthful messages). While 25 percent of children and teens ask their parents to buy foods or go to restaurants they see on TV, overweight children are particularly vulnerable to ads. Thirty-five percent of them respond to food and beverage commercials, while just 21 percent of kids at an ideal weight do.

One solution favored by parents is taking soda and vending machines out of schools. Nearly 71 percent say that soda machines should not be allowed in schools and 55 percent say the same for snack vending machines. Parents also responded strongly that schools should be free of ads: Seventy-eight percent said they objected to food and beverage marketers in school.

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