How should we talk about obesity and weight-related topics with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families?

Amy C McPherson, Patrick Jachyra, Catherine Petta, Susan Cosgrove, Lorry Chen, Lucia Capano, Lorena Moltisanti, Tara Joy Knibbe, Evdokia Anagnostou

BACKGROUND
• Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are at a higher risk of having obesity than their typically developing peers.
• No previous research has explored exactly how healthcare professionals (HCPs) communicate with children with ASD and their families about weight-management.

PURPOSE
• To explore the experiences of children with ASD, their families and HCPs when discussing weight-related topics in healthcare consultations.

METHODS
• Individual, in-depth qualitative interviews.
• Participants included:
  o Children with ASD aged 10-18, verbally fluent, attending a tertiary psychopharmacology clinic, with a Body Mass Index > 85th percentile.
  o Parents of participants, who spoke English.
  o HCPs who worked at the clinic (any discipline).
• Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyze verbatim transcripts.
• Emerging themes were discussed with a multi-disciplinary team including a parent of two children with ASD.

RESULTS: Three main themes
1. Layers of complexity: Weight and health issues were complicated by ASD symptoms, medication side-effects and social dynamics. Parents and children wanted these complexities acknowledged, but often felt blamed.

2. Uncertainties of communication: HCPs were often hesitant to start weight-related conversations in case they damaged relationships. Parents wanted HCPs to raise the topic, but were frustrated when realistic solutions were not offered.

3. Wellness over weight: Parents, children and HCPs all identified a need to move from focusing on weight to promoting overall wellness.

KEY MESSAGES
• HCPs should consider:
  o Acknowledging complexities.
  o Engaging child in the discussion when possible/desired.
  o Establishing a trusting relationship with the family.
  o Using a strengths-based approach.
• Tools and supports are needed.

CONCLUSION
• Children, parents and HCPs all recognized the potential short- and long-term health risks of overweight/obesity, and identified a need to work collaboratively to positively impact the health status of children.

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Children (n=8) Parents (n=8) HCPs (n=5)

“Calling me painful things won’t make me want to be healthy, it’s the opposite because they are painful words. They need to support us and not be our enemy.” Mabel, 12

“It’s something that I very rarely talk about unless they bring it up. How am I going to overcome my own fears? My own judgements? My own lack of knowledge? How do I bring them in so that they feel part of the team?” Nurse Practitioner

“[...]. The doctor now is much better because they treat me like a friend and really try to help me feel good about my body because they really understand me, my problems and my life.” Charlotte, 11

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