

POSITION STATEMENT: HEALTHY WEIGHT IN THE EARLY YEARS

KEY MESSAGES

- More than one fifth of children in England start school overweight or obese
- The early years is a critical period that can influence positive eating behaviours, weight status and health outcomes
- The Government's current obesity strategy is not doing enough to help tackle unhealthy weight in the early years.

The Early Years

Early Years is a term that describes the period in childhood between 0-5 years of age [1]. It is a critical period for growth and development and establishing healthy behaviours. Lifestyle behaviours adopted here become established and can be taken forward into later life [2]. Unhealthy lifestyles are associated with increased risk of later obesity and adverse effects on short- and long-term health. The early years represent an opportunity when families with young children can be supported to develop healthy eating habits, maintain a healthy weight, and engage in physical activity to support optimal growth and development.

There is limited surveillance of weight status in children under 5 in the UK. Children are measured at set points during infancy as part of the Healthy Child Programme, largely for cardiac, eyes and hearing [3]. The National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) starts at reception, aged 4-5 years old. Latest figures reported that nationally 22.6% of children start school overweight or obese. Some regions have rates above the national average; 23.9% in the North West of England and locally in Cumbria, 28.2% of 4-5-year olds [4]. These figures show that overweight and obesity is a problem before children even start school. Furthermore, if an infant or young child is identified to be at increased risk of obesity, management options are limited. Therefore, interventions to prevent obesity in the early years are urgently needed. These include multi-component, community based interventions, as recommended by NICE [5]. In addition, we must also look to the environment and settings used most frequently at this life-stage to help tackle the problem. Parental influence plays an important role, but policymakers also need to address wider determinants of health that influence overweight and obesity in the early years.

These include early years settings such as nurseries and play centres, the nutritional composition of children's food and the marketing of less healthy food and drink, such as using cartoon characters on packaging and toys as incentives [6, 7, 8, 9].

What does the evidence say?

- Most obesity is established in early life, before the age of 5, and is likely to track into later life [10].
- Overweight or obese children have an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and other health problems in adulthood [11]
- Extensive research supports breastfeeding as protective against the development of childhood obesity [12]
- High sugar intake in early years has been associated with a high demand for sugary foods in later life [13,14]
- Sedentary behaviour and poor physical activity levels in early years has been associated with poor health outcomes in later life [15].
- A recent study suggests 91% of 2-4 year olds do not meet national physical activity guidelines, attributing to playing interactive games on iPads and laptops instead [16].
- Processed baby and toddler foods often contain excessive proportion of calories consuming from sugar, which is linked to obesity and other non-communicable diseases [17]
- Differences in childhood obesity prevalence by socio-economic group are stark, and the gap widens over time. At age five the poorest 20% children are nearly twice as likely to be obese as the richest fifth [18]

Policy landscape

The Government is currently assessing whether NCMP should involve early years. First reviewed in 2006 it was concluded that the test may not be reliable enough to assess what category a child may be in, that there was a lack of evidence that childhood obesity led to health problems and whether treating children would be effective in the long term. This proposal has been revisited this year and is currently in consultation where a conclusion will be reached in late October 2018 [19].

Mandatory guidelines have been enforced by the Government for the food served in primary and secondary schools. Food must meet a criterion to ensure that healthy eating practices are promoted [20,21]. However, only voluntary guidelines apply to nurseries, meaning there is little regulation on what food early years settings can serve to children [22].

Furthermore, the Government has published two chapters of its Childhood Obesity Strategy, in 2016 and 2018 [23]. Whilst there are some promising measures that could help to form a multi-component strategy to tackle the many different causes of overweight and obesity, there has been little recognition of the early years as a way of preventing obesity. With many children already starting school overweight and obese, interventions may need to re-focus their attention to the early years.

Our position and what we will do

Policy Change: We will continue to advocate for policy changes that promote healthy weight across the life-course. We will continue to support local authorities to adopt the Food Active's Local Government Declaration on Healthy Weight, containing a set of commitments that address the drivers of obesity using a whole systems approach, including tackling the availability of unhealthy food and drink and how infrastructure may be improved to help promote physical activity.

Advocacy: In May 2018 Food Active launched the Kind to Teeth campaign, as part of the well-known Give Up Loving Pop campaign which aims to promote healthier drink choices in 0-5 year olds, given the high rates of obesity and dental decay in this age group - both of which are associated with consuming sugar-sweetened beverages.

Knowledge Share: The 2018 Food Active conference focussed on the challenges and opportunities faced by local authorities in promoting healthy weight from pre-conception to pre-school. The conference discussed how preventing obesity in the early years can help to give children the best start in life and welcomed a wide range of experts in the field to share the latest evidence. Following the event, we will produce a perspective pieces report to share best practice around promoting healthy weight from pre-pregnancy to pre-school from a range of stakeholders, such as midwives, breastfeeding support workers and public health departments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider introducing surveillance of weight in the early years or improve training for healthcare professionals in the identification of infants and preschool children at increased risk of obesity.
- Bring food standards in nurseries and other early years settings in line with primary and secondary school food standards.
- A whole system approach is recommended including interventions across the life cycle, including interventions for women of childbearing age and support for parents and young children.

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