

APRIL

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*Effectiveness of Obesity Simulations and a Fear Message
on Parent Attitudes to Childhood Obesity*

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Effectiveness of Obesity Simulations and a Fear Message on Parent Attitudes to Childhood Obesity

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A pilot test was conducted late last year to test the effectiveness of the APRIL[®] obesity simulations on people's attitudes toward obesity prevention in young children. Participants included 9 mothers of children aged between 6-12 years. Children were of any weight because the study incorporated a primary prevention approach to obesity management (i.e. any child regardless of their weight can benefit from obesity prevention education). Parents were randomly assigned to one of two groups: a Simulation Plus Education presentation (n = 5), or an Education Only presentation (n = 4). The Simulation presentation involved a short slide show presentation providing educational information on childhood obesity, nutrition and physical activity. Parents also viewed obesity simulations of their own child at various ages across the lifespan. The Education only presentation provided the same educational information on childhood obesity, nutrition and physical activity as per the Simulation presentation, but without any simulations.

To assess the effectiveness of the two presentations, parents were asked a series of one-on-one interview questions before and after watching their respective presentation. These questions measured:

- parents fear about their child becoming overweight
- whether parents were taking steps to help their child eat healthy, do regular physical activity and reduce the amount of time being inactive
- the effectiveness of their presentation (including a rating out of 10, what features had the most impact)
- for the Simulation group, how parents felt after viewing the obesity simulations of their child, and were the simulations effective in demonstrating the potential effects overweight can have on someone)
- whether their presentation would influence any changes in the steps parents were taking to help their child eat healthy, do regular physical activity and spend less time being inactive
- if parents viewed a different presentation (so the Simulation group saw no obesity simulations of their child, and the Education only group saw obesity simulations of their child) would this have had a different effect on them

A summary of the results is provided below, with particular attention to the impact of the simulations on parents. Overall, parents found the Simulation presentation very effective (average score out of 10 was 9.3). The Education only presentation was also found to be effective, but not as effective as the Simulation presentation (average score out of 10 was 8.75).

All parents in the Simulation group said that the feature of their presentation that had MOST impact on them was the obesity simulations of their child.

In terms of how parents felt after viewing the simulations, three out of five parents experienced negative emotional responses to the simulations (e.g., sad, horrified and concerned that their child might turn out like that). Another parent said that they were thankful they were on the right track to prevent their child from looking like that.

Features of the simulations that made parents feel this way were one child's family resemblance to her overweight father, the unhealthy image portrayed (e.g., wrinkles, width of face), and the implied health effects to the rest of the body and impact on daily functioning.

In regards to whether the simulations evoked any feelings of fear about the negative effects obesity can have on their child, two parents said yes they were fearful, especially if their child was not guided in the early years. One parent said the simulations more so increased their awareness of what can happen, whilst another experienced more discomfort than fear.

All parents said that the simulations were effective in demonstrating the effects overweight can have on their child. This was because of three main reasons: the unhealthy physical effects (aged skin, unhealthy facial appearance); implied whole body effects; and visual impact (the simulations visually represented the effects of obesity well, and provided a greater visual appreciation of what could happen).

Another question was if parents viewed a similar presentation but with or without simulations (i.e., if the Simulation group had a presentation with no simulations, or if the Education only group had a presentation with simulations), would this have influenced the effectiveness of their presentation. For the Simulation group, 4 out of 5 parents said that the presentation would have been less effective without the photos, as they make it more visual, it brings a more personal front, and it makes it more shocking. Likewise, 4 out of 5 parents in the Education only group said that the presentation would have been more effective with the photos, as they make it more real and personal which brings the impact home more, you can see the visual changes over time, and you can see your child in real life into the future.

Although not many parents indicated a change to modify their child's eating habits, levels of physical activity and amount of time spent being inactive after viewing their presentation (mainly because the majority of the children surveyed were already very active and eating quite healthily prior to the study), the results provided above certainly indicate that the photos did have a positive effect on parents, even if it was just to the point of "shocking" them, helping them

“see” the “real” effects obesity can have on one’s health, and increasing their awareness about the importance of preventing this chronic and debilitating health condition in their children.

Overall, I think these preliminary pilot results provided some promising results into the use of the APRIL[®] simulation software as a tool for educating parents about the importance of obesity prevention in children. Given these positive outcomes, the pilot measures will be explored further in a larger study, which is due to be completed mid next year.