

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

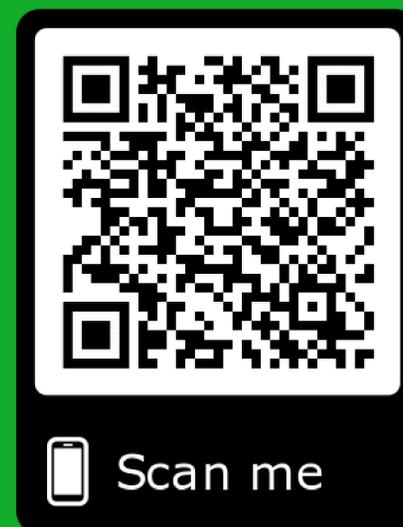
- Individual, in-depth qualitative interviews.
- Participants included:
 - Children with ASD aged 10-18, verbally fluent, attending a tertiary psychopharmacology clinic, with a Body Mass Index > 85th percentile.
 - Parents of participants, who spoke English.
 - HCPs who worked at the clinic (any discipline).



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

- Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyze verbatim transcripts.
- Emerging themes were discussed with multi-disciplinary team including a parent of two children with ASD.

Children, parents and HCPs need to work collaboratively to positively impact the health status of children.

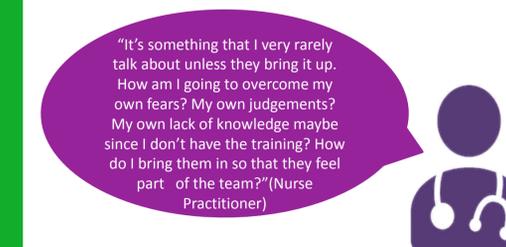


RESULTS: Three main themes

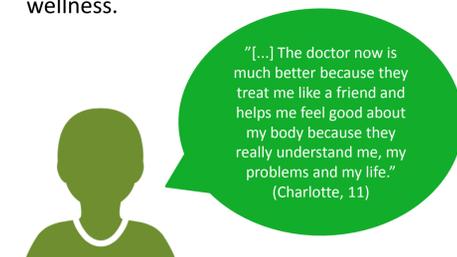
1. **Layers of complexity:** Weight and health issues were complicated by ASD symptoms, medication side-effects and social dynamics. Parents and children wanted these complexities acknowledged, but often felt blamed.



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:
 - Acknowledging complexities.
 - Engaging child in the discussion when possible/desired.
 - Establishing a trusting relationship with the family.
 - 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- This work was funded by the The Centers for Leadership in Child Development with the support of the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital Foundation.