Examining the Relation between Income and Healthy Family Behaviors affecting Pediatric Obesity Risk

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Problem: Youth from low-income households are at a disproportionately higher risk for obesity. Examining the relationship between income and healthy family behaviors may help identify future points of intervention to reduce pediatric obesity health disparities. Health promoting family behaviors may include healthy eating behaviors (e.g., minimal sweetened beverages), physical activity, and family mealtime routines. This study examined whether income was associated with weight-related family health behaviors.

Methods: Parents (N=67; 95% female; 85% white) of adolescents (12-17) completed measures assessing family health behaviors (Family Health Behaviors Scale (FHBS); α=.79); and income (M=84,676, SD=52,076) as a part of a larger study examining risks for adolescent obesity. Objective height (stadiometer) and weight (digital scale) were used to calculate parent BMI (M=29.24, SD=7.48; 66% overweight or obese) and adolescent BMI percentile for age-and-gender (M=63.95, SD=28.1; 33% overweight or obese).

Results: Hierarchical linear regression suggested that, after controlling for parent BMI, lower family income was associated with lower scores on the FHBS (β=.277; p<0.05; R2=0.31). Families below the 200% poverty threshold engaged in significantly fewer health promoting family behaviors (t(60) = 2.45, p <.05). Results showed no association between income and child BMI percentile (p > .05). Findings from this study suggest, even after accounting for parental BMI, lower family income is associated with parental report of fewer health promoting family behaviors. Considering these healthy family behaviors may be especially important given that they may protect against obesity. Future research is needed to determine whether targeted health behaviors towards lower-income families may minimize obesity risk in low-income adolescents.