



Working with children above a healthy weight in primary health care

ACN TOOLKIT FOR NURSES

This toolkit contains information, practical advice, and links to further resources for nurses working with children and their families.

KEY INFORMATION

Key information to share with children and families:

- Being above a healthy weight is linked to many health risks, including the diagnosis of chronic conditions in childhood, such as type 2 diabetes.
- Around 1 in 4 children aged 4-15 years in Australia are either obese or overweight (Australia H., 2023)
- Childhood obesity is predicted to double by 2035, with rates predicted to increase by 100% among boys and 125% among girls, and the rate is expected to be more rapid among children.
- In 2017–18, Australian children were found to be overweight or obese, with 24.9% being overweight and 8.1% being obese (ABS 2017-18).
- Many families think their child will “grow out of” their excess weight, but the evidence suggests that weight status in childhood is strongly linked to weight status into adolescence and adulthood.
- It is important to act now to support children in returning to a healthy growth pattern.

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR NURSES

Many nurses think families will be offended if they raise the weight issue, but research shows that families expect a health professional to say something if they see a problem. Using a framework of family-centred care and dependent on the child/young person's age, discussions on this topic should include relevant family members. It is essential always to use sensitive and non-stigmatising language. Suggested approaches include:

- *“It is difficult to tell whether a child is growing in a healthy way just by looking at them, so it’s important to measure their height and weight regularly to help monitor their growth over time.”*
- Do not avoid taking measurements (height and weight)-it is important to build an accurate picture of the child's growth with measurements recorded at every visit. It only takes a minute to weigh and measure.

- Ensure that a stadiometer and scales are readily available and regularly calibrated.
- If a child is above the ‘healthy weight’ range, stress to families that calculating weight status is a routine procedure to monitor the healthy development of all children and young people over time. For example: *“I’ve plotted how your child grows on this chart. The chart shows he/she is above a healthy weight for height and age. Have you seen your child’s growth plotted like this before?”*
- The discussion should focus on enabling a child to “grow into” their weight, not to “diet”. Think about small changes the family could make together, like replacing sugar-sweetened drinks with water.
- Take care with the language you use. Keep it as positive as possible and focus on terms such as ‘healthy weight’ and ‘healthy lifestyle.’ Avoid the terms “overweight” and “unhealthy”.
- Think about who should be included in this conversation. You may give feedback to the family member/s alone or the family member/s and child together.
- Families may not be ready to discuss the issue and may feel a sense of shame and guilt about their lifestyle behaviours. Some people can become defensive when this issue is raised. If this happens, you could say: *“It can be hard to practice healthy habits every day.”* And *“Most families could do with some support to improve their lifestyle”*. If families don’t want to talk, don’t keep going-instead leave the door open for next time. *“We can chat about this another time if you’d prefer”*.

Raising the critical weight issue is not about placing blame or judging others but an approach to support families. This information is adapted from the NSW conversation starters.

For further information, please visit <https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/conversation-starters/>

TOOLKIT RESOURCES

- Resources for nurses: visit Identifying and Managing Children Above a Healthy Weight in Primary Care (*make this a hyperlink available in 2020) for training and information.
- It is important that height and weight are measured accurately; posters can be displayed in practice settings and shared with colleagues. See <https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/resources/> for posters on measuring height and weight.
- The recommended growth charts can be accessed below:
[Girl's CDC charts 2 – 18-year-olds](#)
[Weight for age and Height for age \(PDF\)](#)
[Girl's CDC charts 2 – 18-year-olds](#)
[BMI for age \(PDF\)](#)
[Boys CDC chart 2 – 18-year-olds](#)
[Weight for age and Height for age \(PDF\)](#)
[Boys CDC chart 2 – 18-year-olds](#)
[BMI for age \(PDF\)](#)
- Healthy eating habits are more successful if the whole family makes changes together. The links below provide advice for families on food types and portion sizes:
https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/The%20Guidelines/n55f_children_brochure.pdf
<https://livelighter.com.au/livelighter-for-families/>
- Handouts for families on healthy living:
Healthy habits and healthy weight: tips for your child and family
https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/wpcontent/uploads/2017/04/HNSW_223347_Healthy-weight-and-habits-factsheet_Web_FA.pdfv
Eight healthy habits
https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/wpcontent/uploads/2019/09/192901-8-Healthy-Habits-infographic-update_WEB.pdf

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