

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.
- Many families think that 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. For example, 6/10 children who were overweight/obese at 5–7 years were also overweight/obese at 15–17 years (Evenson et al., 2016).
- It is important to act now to support children to return to a healthy growth pattern.

Practical advice for nurses

Many nurses think that families will be offended if they raise the issue of weight, 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 important to use sensitive and non-stigmatising language at all times. 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 easily available and they are regularly calibrated.
- If a child is above the ‘healthy weight’ range, stress to families that the calculation of weight status is a routine procedure used to monitor the healthy development of all children and young people over time. For example: *“I’ve plotted how your child is growing on this chart. The chart shows he/she is above a healthy weight for their height and age. Have you seen your child’s growth plotted like this before?”*
- The focus of the discussion should be 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 choose to 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 then 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 important issue of weight 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: WHO charts for age 0-2 years and the CDC charts for 2-18 years.
 - [Girls WHO chart 0 – 2 year olds length](#) (PDF)
 - [Girls WHO chart 0 – 2 year olds weight](#) (PDF)
 - [Boys WHO chart 0 – 2 year olds length](#) (PDF)
 - [Boys WHO chart 0 – 2 year olds weight](#) (PDF)
 - [Girls CDC charts 2 – 18 year olds Weight for age and Height for age](#) (PDF)
 - [Girls 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/n5_5f_children_brochure.pdf
 - <https://livelighter.com.au/livelighter-for-families/>
- Handouts for families on healthy living:
 - Healthy habits and a healthy weight: tips for your child and family- https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/HNSW_223347_Healthy-weight-and-habits-fact-sheet_Web_FA.pdf
 - 8 healthy habits- https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/192901-8-Healthy-Habits-infographic-update_WEB.pdf

Reference

Evensen, E., Wilsgaard, T., Furberg, A. *et al.* Tracking of overweight and obesity from early childhood to adolescence in a population-based cohort – the Tromsø Study, *Fit Futures*. *BMC Pediatr* **16**, 64 (2016) doi:10.1186/s12887-016-0599-5

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