

# Working with children above a healthy weight

## KEY INFORMATION

- Around 1 in 4 children aged 4-15 years in Australia are either obese or overweight (AIHW, 2024)
- Childhood obesity is expected to double by 2035, with rates predicted to increase by 100% among boys and 125% among girls (World Obesity Federation, 2023)
- Being above a healthy weight is linked to many health risks, including chronic conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, sleep apnea, gallbladder disease, and joint disorders (AIHW, 2020)
- A child above a healthy weight is up to 10 times more likely to become an adult above a healthy weight, increasing the risk of developing chronic disease as an adult (STOP Obesity Alliance, n.d.)
- It is important to intervene early to support children in returning to a healthy growth pattern, and nurses are ideally placed to have these discussions
- Words matter for children's development; their impact shapes who they are and who they become (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2024). Keep language positive in conversations about weight and health
- Normalising collecting and recording weight and height data and comparing to changes over time is critical to inform conversations with children and their families (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022)

## PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR NURSES

- Conversations should be guided by a framework of family-centred care relevant to the child's age and development, and discussions should include relevant family members (Hardy et al., 2019)
- It is essential to always use positive, sensitive, and non-stigmatising language. Suggested approaches include: *"It is difficult to tell whether a child is thriving just by looking at them, so it is important to measure their height and weight regularly to help monitor their growth over time"* (STOP Obesity Alliance, n.d.)
- It is essential to build an accurate picture of the child's growth with measurements recorded at every visit, regardless of presentation, by using proactive language. Phrases such as *"let us check your numbers"* may help normalise measuring weight and height
- Ensure that a stadiometer (height measure) and scales are set up, easily accessible during the assessment, and regularly calibrated
- If a child is above a healthy weight, stress to families it is routine to monitor the healthy development of children over time
- The discussion should focus on enabling a child to *"grow into"* their weight, not to *"diet"*
- Take care with the language you use. Keep terms positive and focus on *"healthy weight"* and *"growing up strong"* – avoid terms such as *"obese"* and *"unhealthy"* that potentially disempower patients and may be stigmatising (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2024)
- Think about who should be included in the conversation. You may give feedback to the family member/s alone or the family member/s and child together
- Cultural factors connected to tradition, identity and courtesies should be considered when providing consultation, especially in rural and remote settings (Heggem & Zahl-Thanem, 2022)
- Parents and guardians may feel stigmatised or blamed for their children's weight. It may be helpful to include supportive statements in the conversations, such as *"You need to know that your numbers are not a measure of who you are as a person – you are (FILL IN with positive attributes such as caring, a good friend, a great artist, smart)"* (STOP Obesity Alliance, n.d.)
- Think about small changes the family could make together, like substituting processed snacks with convenient and preferred healthy options, creating family play time, and planning and preparing meals together (STOP Obesity Alliance, n.d.)

### KEEPING THE CONVERSATION OPEN

- If families do not want to talk, do not keep going – instead, leave the door open for next time. “*We can chat about this another time if you would prefer*” (Sjunnestrand et al., 2019)
- Raising the critical weight issue is not about placing blame or judging others but an approach to support families (Hardy et al., 2019)
- Listen to concerns the child may have about their weight. Children need to feel supported and know the most important thing is knowing they are loved. Eating well and staying active can be a healthy habit for the whole family.

### 8 HEALTHY HABITS FOR CHILDREN AGED 2 YEARS AND OLDER (NSW Government, 2021)

1. Drinking water instead of soft drinks, juice, or cordial
2. Aim for five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit every day
3. Start each day with a healthy breakfast
4. Be mindful of portion size and when you feel full
5. Choose healthier (but still yummy!) snacks
6. Limit recreational screen time
7. Be active for at least 1 hour a day, every day
8. Get enough sleep

### NATIONAL OBESITY STRATEGY 2022 – 2023

The National Obesity Strategy is a 10-year framework for action to prevent, reduce, and treat overweight and obesity in Australia. It focuses on prevention but also includes actions to support support Australians who are living with obesity or are overweight to live their healthiest lives. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022).

### RESOURCES

Height and weight must be measured accurately; posters can be displayed in practice settings and shared with colleagues:  
<https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/resources/>

For examples on conversation starters for health professionals:  
<https://pro.healthykids.nsw.gov.au/conversation-starters/>

Recommended growth charts for recording height and weight:

Child growth: Growth charts ([rch.org.au](http://rch.org.au))

Healthy habits are more successful if the whole family makes changes together: Making changes as a family – Growing Good Habits ([hw.qld.gov.au](http://hw.qld.gov.au))

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