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Perceptions of Infant Physical Activity and Weight: A Parents Perspective



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Abstract

Background: Approximately 10% of infants and toddlers in the U.S. are already overweight. One modifiable factor that may impact weight is physical activity (PA). Historically, society has thought that infants (0-1 year of age) are “active enough” and not in need of efforts to promote PA to expend energy. However, increases in technology have led to less PA in children of all ages. There is a vital need to improve knowledge about factors that may impact the promotion of PA to infants. Since parents are the primary caregivers for infants, their beliefs about weight and PA may influence the amount of time infants are given to be active or time spent in restrictive devices. **Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to explore parents’ perceptions of: 1) the weight status of their infant and 2) promoting PA to their infant. **Methods:** Parents who participated in a pilot study examining the relationship between infant PA and postural control in normal weight and overweight infants took part in a semi-structured interview (n=25). Interview questions explored parents’ perceptions of their child’s weight as well as knowledge and beliefs of promoting PA. Data were analyzed by two trained researchers using the process of immersion/crystallization. **Results:** Overall, all parents felt their child was a healthy size and many thought infants could be overweight due to overfeeding and/or formula. Over half of mothers had heard comments from others about the large size of their infant and most thought these comments were positive. A majority of mothers thought infants could be physically active and described PA in terms of general mobility. When discussing how they planned to promote PA to their child as they grow, parents discussed promoting outdoor activities, sports, and general play. **Conclusion:** Results provide preliminary evidence that parents do not believe their infants can be overweight but may be aware of how to promote PA in early childhood. Additional research is needed to see if similar results are found with parents who are not currently active and who primarily formula-feed their child.

Introduction

Approximately 10% of infants and toddlers in the U.S. are already overweight. The first year of a child’s life can make a significant impact on his/her long-term health, as rapid increases in weight during the first 6 months have been associated with increased risk for obesity at age 3. One modifiable factor that may impact weight is physical activity (PA). Historically, society has thought that infants (0-1 year of age) are “active enough” and not in need of efforts to promote PA to expend energy. However, increases in technology have led to less PA in children of all ages. Specifically in infants, 40% of 3-month olds regularly watch TV or videos and may spend up to 60 hours a week in restrictive devices such as high chairs or car seats limiting their ability to be active. There is a vital need to improve knowledge about factors that may impact the promotion of PA to infants. Since parents are the primary caregivers for infants, their beliefs about weight and PA may influence the amount of time infants are given to be active or time spent in restrictive devices. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore parents’ perceptions of: 1) the weight status of their infant and 2) promoting PA to their infant.

Methods

- Participants were part of a pilot study examining infant PA and postural control in overweight (n=10) and normal weight (n=15) infants.
- At their third visit (~6 months of age), parents took part in a semi-structured interview.
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into QSR NVivo10.
- Data were analyzed by two trained researchers using immersion/crystallization.
- Mothers were primarily white (92%), breastfed their infant for 6 months or longer (76%), and were an average age of 31.4.

Results

Parents Perceptions of Infants’ Weight

- All parents felt their child was a healthy size, and no one reported being told by their physician that their infant was currently overweight.

When she was little they told me that she was obese...then I was at the pediatrician by myself with her and I told her about her Dad’s side (big) and they were like oh never mind.

Another mom mentioned why her child could not be overweight:

I guess just because he’s mine

- 15 mothers thought infants could be overweight primarily due to overfeeding (n=6) and/or formula (n=5).

I met parents that, every time their baby cried or made a noise, just gave him 8 ounces of formula and you gain weight really quick that way.

- 14 mothers, 10 of which had overweight infants, mentioned that people had commented on the large size of their babies, 11 thought this was positive and 3 viewed this as negative or had mixed feelings.

I’m glad she has rolls on her legs.

Sometimes they can say that he’s hefty or husky. Which to me, they just don’t know what they are looking for...we’re not necessarily real thin. But we’re healthy...so that can sometimes feel a little irritating but when...you know, he’s a baby and honestly you want him to be a little bit bigger. Having some fat on them is healthy.



Photo Credit: Ryan Henrikson

Results Continued

Parents Perceptions of Infants PA

- A majority of mothers thought that infants could be physically active (n=22) and described PA in terms of general mobility

Oh he’s moving all the time. He likes to roll and crawl and flail his arms and kick and jump.

If they’re allowed the time to kind of be not in restrictive devices and they’re able to roll around and move around and uh, sometimes he seems like he’s on crack and um, and is really really active and waves his arms and legs a lot. Sometimes he’s just kind of mellow.

- Only 5 mothers mentioned using “tummy time” to promote PA.
- The most frequently used play materials included: exersaucers/jumpers (n=9), grab and shake type toys (n=8), and balls (n=6).
- All parents were aware of motor development, emphasizing movement (n=16) and milestones (n=12).

Just the development of movement, the walking, the pinching, the grabbing, that stuff.

- Plans to encourage PA as children grow varied between outdoor activities (n=12), sports (n=11), and general play (n=11).

Um, yeah I mean just get outside and play and once he can move around more, um, his dad really likes soccer so he, I’m sure he’ll teach him how to play soccer. Um, I don’t know we’ll just do all kinds of stuff, going to the park, go swing, playing the playsets, go out to visit the YMCA where I work.

- A majority of mothers were currently participating in PA to some extent (n=17) ranging from 2-6 times per week.

Um, 4 [days] right now. I want to increase it but it’s just...I don’t get enough sleep so...It’s hard to get up in the morning.

- 12 mothers discussed that their current family behaviors would further promote PA.

His mom and dad are both very physical active. Um, his older brother is too. So, it’s just kind of our lifestyle.

Discussion

Similar to other research mothers in this study did not believe their infant was overweight or at-risk for overweight. Similar to other studies, mothers thought promoting PA was important and mothers were currently promoting PA to their infants through a variety of activities but few mentioned using tummy time. It is important to note that the use of exersaucers/jumpers for PA and motor development have not been fully studied. More research is needed to see if this type of toy promotes motor development or deters it. Additionally, a majority of the sample was breastfed and many mothers were physically active, two known factors that can reduce childhood obesity and promote PA to children. More research is needed to see if similar results are found in mothers who primarily formula-feed and are not currently active. Efforts are needed to educate mothers and physicians on key factors that can contribute to risk of obesity (i.e., rapid weight gain).