



In spite of all the press and the studies and the looming health issues, it appears parents are just not that concerned about childhood obesity.

Do parents understand the severity?

By Barbara Katz, HealthFocus International

One can't open up a newspaper, magazine or trade journal without reading about childhood obesity. It appears to be the largest global health issue occurring today.

Globally, this epidemic affects every socioeconomic and ethnic group. Overweight children have a higher risk of developing diabetes, sleep disturbances and kidney problems, and they are more likely to develop high blood pressure, high cholesterol and heart disease as adults.

Articles abound citing fast food and advertising to children as culprits. But the problem seems far more complex. While I am all for healthier foods in schools and for increasing physical education classes, it appears a fundamental piece of the solution may be missing: parental understanding. Do parents understand the impact of the problem, and do they know if it is affecting their own child?

If you ask most parents whether they are concerned about their child being overweight, the answer likely will be yes. Yet, on a global basis, one of the top drivers parents give for purchasing certain foods is they "know their child will eat it." In the upheaval of daily life, parents constantly pick their battles, and the last one most of them want to fight is over meals. So they compromise.

So, when it comes to parental concerns about weight, the real question is: "How concerned are you about obesity and overweight relative to everything else you face today?" In spite of all the press and the studies and the looming health issues, it appears that, on a relative scale, parents are just not that concerned.

I looked at childhood health concerns in the HealthFocus Trend Report across five different countries selected pretty much at random – Australia, China, Germany, Mexico and the UK. There were 22 health concerns in the study for which parents were asked to rate their level of concern. The list included such things as immunity, food allergies, sleep, appearance of skin, hair and teeth, dental cavities and so on.

In Mexico, overweight ranked as the 13th concern out of 22, and that was the highest ranking it received anywhere. People in the UK ranked it number 20, even though it is estimated up to 30 percent of boys and girls there may be overweight. In every country, even bowel regularity outranked weight as a cause for concern.

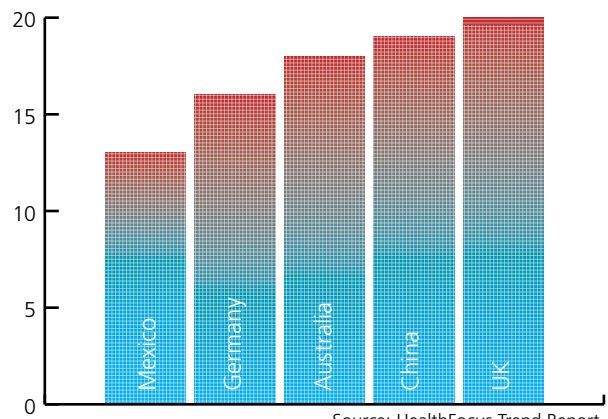
But in an interesting contradiction, in all of the countries except Germany, "protection against disease in later life" showed

up in the top five parental concerns. So parents do seem to think about the future but don't seem to register excess weight as something that will truly impact their child's future health.

One possible explanation may be they simply do not classify their child as overweight enough to be at risk. In addition, going back to priorities, it may be that if their child is safe, appears healthy, is doing well in school and is otherwise happy, getting rid of a few extra pounds is not a parental priority.


HOW CONCERNED ARE PARENTS ABOUT CHILDHOOD OBESITY?

(How it ranks among 22 possible concerns)



Source: HealthFocus Trend Report

In Arkansas, where an estimated 40 percent of children might be overweight or obese, a program was put in place to notify every parent of their child's BMI and risk of overweight. The effort included new school menus and physical activity programs. A recent update to the initiative reports a leveling off of the state's child obesity rate.

I won't pretend to simplify the solution to this complex issue. While there are many facets to the problem, the Arkansas program might indicate a greater effort to educate parents and involve them in the solution is required. 

Barbara Katz is president of HealthFocus International, a consulting and market research company specializing in global consumer health and nutrition. The HealthFocus Trend Study is available for the U.S. and 30 other countries. Barbara can be reached at info@healthfocus.com.