

EXPLANATORY MODELS OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY AMONG MOTHERS IN THE LOWER RIO GRAND VALLEY

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Purpose: The purpose of this study was to investigate the explanatory models of child health and growth held by mothers who are first, second or third generation Mexican American, and their views on what body sizes are preferred for their children.

Sample and Setting: Purposive sampling was used to select 30 mothers who are first, second or third generation Mexican American, and who have children who are of normal body size, at risk for overweight, or overweight. Interviews were conducted with the mothers at two Head Start Centers in the Lower Rio Grand Valley of Texas. The children were all ages 3 or 4.

Method: The children and the mothers were weighed and measured and their BMIs computed. Researchers obtained pictures from the CDC of children who are normal (BMI <85th %), at risk for overweight (BMI 85th% to 95th%) or overweight (BMI >95th%). They asked the mothers to pick the picture resembling their children, what picture showed the healthiest child, what size they preferred for their children, what foods and activities contribute to a healthy child, and what a healthy child looks like.

Findings: A minority of mothers matched the correct picture to their children's size. Mothers of overweight children thought their children were at risk for overweight or were normal size. Fewer mothers of normal size children thought their children were at risk for overweight or overweight. Mothers thought the at risk for overweight and the overweight child were the healthiest children. A healthy child was defined as one who is happy, active, plays outside and has a good smile. Body mass index did not impact on a mother's view of child health. Healthy foods were named as beans, rice, meat, vegetables and fruit. Junk food contributed to poor health and small size, according to the mothers. The mothers' low income was reflected in the food they fed their children, even though they were able to state what foods are healthy for their children.

Discussion: Mothers did not perceive the overweight child as overweight, and several mothers perceived the normal child as "too skinny". A percentile on a growth grid or a BMI does not mean the same to these mothers as it does to health care providers. Child health is viewed by mothers as child behavior that is happy and active, not in a clinical model that evaluates health parameters. WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) does have an impact on what mothers claim as healthy food, but what is actually consumed does not resemble a healthy diet. Health care professionals who stress overweight as a number on a growth grid will not communicate the seriousness of the problem

