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Factors associated with parental underestimation of child's weight status[☆]

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KEYWORDS

Weight perception;
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Parent-child
relations;
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Child

Abstract

Objective: The aim of this study was to examine the prevalence of parental misperception of child weight status, and identify socioeconomic, anthropometric, behavioral and dietary factors associated with underestimation.

Method: Cross-sectional study. Data was collected in 14 Brazilian private schools. Parents of children aged 2–8 years ($n = 976$) completed a self-reported questionnaire assessing their perception of their child's weight status, and sociodemographic, anthropometric, behavioral and dietary information. To measure the agreement between parental perception about child weight status and actual child weight status, the Kappa coefficient was estimated, and to investigate associations between parental underestimation and independent variables, chi-squared tests were performed, followed by multiple logistic regression model, considering $p \leq 0.05$ for statistical significance.

Results: Overall, 48.05% of the parents incorrectly classified their child's weight. Specifically, 45.08% underestimated their child's weight status, with just 3% of parents overestimating. Children with higher body mass index ($OR = 2.03$; $p < 0.001$) and boys ($OR = 1.70$; $p < 0.001$) were more likely to have their weight status underestimated by parents.

Conclusion: Since awareness of weight problems is essential for prevention and treatment, clinical practitioners should help parents at high risk of misperception to correctly evaluate their child's weight status.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Percepção de peso;
 Obesidade
 pediátrica;
 Relações pai-filho;
 Sobre peso;
 Criança

Fatores associados à subestimação do status do peso da criança pelos pais**Resumo**

Objetivo: Analisar a prevalência de percepção errônea dos pais sobre o status do peso infantil e identificar fatores socioeconômicos, antropométricos, comportamentais e dietéticos associados à subestimação.

Método: Trata-se de um estudo transversal. Os dados foram coletados em 14 escolas particulares brasileiras. Pais de crianças de dois a oito anos de idade (n=976) preencheram um questionário autoaplicável sobre sua percepção do estado nutricional do seu filho e informações sociodemográficas, antropométricas, comportamentais e dietéticas. Para medir o grau de concordância entre a percepção dos pais do peso do filho e o peso real do filho, estimamos o coeficiente Kappa e investigamos as associações entre subestimação do pai e variáveis independentes, calculamos o qui-quadrado seguido do modelo de regressão logística múltipla considerando $p \leq 0,05$ para significância estatística.

Resultados: Em geral, 48,05% dos pais classificaram incorretamente o peso de seus filhos; particularmente, 45,08% subestimaram o peso do seu filho, e apenas 3% subestimaram o peso infantil. A regressão logística demonstrou que as crianças com maior índice de massa corporal (OR = 2,03; $p < 0,001$) e os meninos (OR = 1,70; $p < 0,001$) tinham maior probabilidade de ter seu peso subestimado pelos pais.

Conclusão: Médicos clínicos devem concentrar suas intervenções nessas crianças para ajudar os pais a avaliar corretamente o seu peso. A consciência dos pais sobre um problema de peso em crianças é essencial para a prevenção e tratamento da obesidade infantil e estilos de vida saudáveis.

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Introduction

Childhood overweight is a recognized public health problem. According to the most recent report about childhood obesity from the World Health Organization (WHO), in 2014, an estimated 41 million children under 5 years of age were overweight or obese. This pandemic has also reached developing nations, including those in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹ In Brazil, national surveys have demonstrated an increasing trend of overweight and obesity prevalence in children from 5 to 9 years of age. In 1974–1975, the prevalence of overweight in boys was 10.9%, and in 1989, it increased to 15%, reaching 34.8% in the last national survey in 2008–2009. A similar pattern of increase has also been observed in girls, rising from 8.6%, to 11.9%, and then to 32%. These increases in obesity prevalence in both genders follow worldwide trends in overweight,² with the WHO describing obesity as one of today's most blatantly visible – yet most neglected – public health problems.³

Excessive weight gain in childhood is the result of many factors, including unhealthy eating habits and sedentary behaviors, which are influenced by media, peers and parents.¹ Parents play a unique role as the child's first nutritional educators, shaping food environments and eating behaviors. Accurate perception of child's weight status by the parent may be an important factor in motivating the promotion of a healthy lifestyle,⁴ with parents forming potential 'agents of change' in the recognition and treatment of childhood obesity.⁵ Early intervention by parents could be critical in the prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity, as dietary patterns and eating habits are

often formed in childhood, and persist through adolescence into adulthood.⁶

However, parents can be insensitive to excessive weight in their child, only recognizing it in severe stages or when the child presents with limitations in physical activity, such as breathlessness or reduced physical mobility.⁷ Population-wide, parental underestimation may be substantially driven by rising rates of childhood obesity over the last decades, which have understandably increased the weight perceived as 'normal.'⁸ Studies have repeatedly demonstrated parental underestimation of child weight,^{9–11} with a meta-analysis reporting that the proportion of parental underestimation among overweight/obese children was 50.7%, and 14.3% for normal weight children.¹²

Perceptions are influenced by the relationship between the perceiver and the person who is perceived, as well as the perceiver's experiences, beliefs, and characteristics, which will affect thoughts, feelings and attitudes about the perceived person,¹³ as well as characteristics of the perceived person. Consistent with this, several studies have shown relationships between parental misperceptions about child weight status and parental and child characteristics. For example, one study reported that obesity in both parent and child increased the chance of underestimation, with parental concern about child overweight increasing, rather than decreasing, the risk of misperception.⁶ Another study in Chile found that mothers with lower education, mothers of boys, and mothers of older children were more likely to underestimate their child's weight status.¹⁴ However, an American study reported an association between greater

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