

Mums feel blamed for preschoolers who eat too much or won't touch a thing

Australian mums feel they are being unfairly judged for their preschoolers' eating habits and weight, a new study has found.

Researchers from the University of Sydney's Centre for Overweight and Obesity held seven focus groups with mothers of 2-5 year olds to listen to their views about factors related to childhood overweight and obesity.

Led by Deanna Pagnini, the researchers found mothers feel they are judged by how their children eat and this makes them worried about their children's eating habits and weight.

Dr Pagnini said the study involving 32 mothers found mums were being made anxious because they were rewarded if their children were good eaters and criticised if their child was thin or a fussy eater.

Many mothers worry about their children being underweight and not eating enough, and mums spend a lot of time trying to get them to eat more, the researchers report in their study published online by the Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health this week.

"There's a widespread cultural perception that it's better for a young child to be carrying a bit of 'extra weight' or 'puppy fat' than for them to be 'on the thin side'," Dr Pagnini said. "Parents expect excess weight will just come off naturally as they grow, but we now know that that's usually not true."

Dr Pagnini said parents should not worry about preschoolers eating enough because encouraging children to eat more than they felt like could stop them developing a natural self-regulation of appetite.

"It's not your job to make your child eat all the food," Dr Pagnini advises parents of preschoolers. "It is your job to provide the food but it's up to your child to eat what he or she feels like."

The researchers found that mums were well aware of the need to feed their children healthily and keep them active, but it was a battle to do so because of social pressures, financial constraints, food industry and supermarket behaviour, and poor provision of play opportunities and practical advice.

Dr Pagnini said there are a number of small but important changes parents can make for their two to five year olds. These include switching to whole grain breads and low fat milk products, offering water as a drink, using small portion sizes, letting their children see them enjoying healthy foods, and resisting the temptation to give children treats every day. Turning off the TV and enjoying some active play together is also beneficial. If parents have questions about any of these issues they can get help from their GP or an early childhood nurse.

The NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity is funded by NSW Department of Health. For further information please call Dr Deanna Pagnini on 0403 755 255 or co-author Lesley King on (02) 9036 3291.