



Best therapies for obesity in youth?

Behavioral treatments for families and parents top the list.

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Childhood overweight is defined as a body mass index (BMI) greater than the 85th percentile for age and gender, and obesity is defined as a BMI greater than the 95th percentile. Approximately one third of youth in the United States currently fall into one of these categories. Overweight/obesity in childhood or adolescence tends to remain consistent into adulthood and is associated with significant psychosocial and medical comorbidities, including cardiovascular problems, greater risk for the development of eating disorders, poorer quality of life, and increased depression. Furthermore, obesity in youth poses a significant economic burden to society, with over 14 billion dollars estimated to be spent on this annually, with rates expected to increase as youth who are overweight/obese become adults who are overweight/obese. Intervention in this area is crucial in order to mitigate these problems for individuals and society.

Fortunately, significant strides have been made in understanding how best to intervene with youth who have overweight/obesity. According to a recent review of treatments for childhood and adolescent overweight/obesity conducted by Myra Altman and Dr. Denise Wilfley at Washington University in St. Louis, there are four critical components to successful intervention with this age group: modifications to both diet and activity behaviors, the use of behavioral strategies to facilitate these changes, and the active engagement of parents/caregivers in treatment. Two specific treatment types - both of which incorporate all of these components - were shown to be “well-established” interventions with demonstrated efficacy in children: Family-Based Behavioral Treatment (FBT) and Parent-Only Behavioral Treatment. No treatments were “well-established” for adolescents. This review also highlights the critical need for early intervention, as greater changes can be achieved with younger children. Whereas effective interventions have been identified, these are not readily available to the large numbers of young people, and families who need them. Increasing access to evidence-based care is thus the crucial next step in the area of childhood obesity.

Source: Altman, M., & Wilfley, D. E. (2015). Evidence update on the treatment of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 44(4), 521–537.

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RESOURCES: For more information, interested readers can go to www.effectivechildtherapy.com. The website offers free videos on a variety of child/adolescent therapy topics, including videos describing various evidence-based treatment approaches; there are videos for parents and professionals.

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