

Intervening to tackle child obesity: meet the Glugs

Tam Fry of the Child Growth Foundation introduces a new teaching aid to counteract obesity and a training programme for health professionals

Tam Fry
Honorary Chairman, Child Growth Foundation
 London

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Childhood obesity is now recognised as a significant and increasing public health problem in the UK. Obesity in young children is more likely to lead to permanent weight problems and the illnesses associated with them. Both the Government and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) have been concerned about the issue for several years, but training to help health professionals tackle the problem and effective health education materials to use with parents and children have been lacking.

“Mothers want their health professionals to understand how difficult it is to manage a child’s obesity – the emotional aspects and the impact on family life”

Hopefully things are about to improve and for child obesity, 2007 may well become the Year of the Glugs. As the illustration above shows, the Glugs are a likeable group of animal characters that, when animated, can be used by health professionals



when working with families of children who are either overweight or at risk of becoming so.

The Glugs are the brainchild of a London arts studio employed by Professor Mary Rudolf, a leading paediatrician in the management of childhood obesity, to deliver healthy lifestyle messages to both children and parents. They are part of a wider scheme involving training for health workers and intervention with families as early as the first few months of a baby’s life, or even with obese mothers during pregnancy.

Her team, working in Leeds under the auspices of the RCPCH and funded by the Child Growth Foundation, has been exploring the views of health professionals and mothers about overweight. When Dr Laurel Edmunds, a childhood obesity researcher and a specialist advisor to the House of Commons Select Committee’s enquiry into obesity, conducted three focus groups of health visitors in Leeds, the health visitors told her that they needed more training and resources to work with parents and children on this issue. They also thought that three months is too early to raise the question of overweight and that six months would be a better age, although there is evidence that the first four months of life may be a critical time during which it would be appropriate to try to prevent adult overweight and the diseases that go with it¹.

When Dr Edmunds explored the views of mothers in Leeds, she found that what mothers want from their health professional is not

nutritional information so much as to be listened to and understood. They wanted their health professionals to have emotional competencies and to understand how difficult it is to manage overweight. Having an overweight child impacts on many areas of the family’s life. For example, women find that people stare and criticise, and they feel they are being blamed for being bad mothers. During her work with obese families, Dr Edmunds has come across a case where parents moved house to escape the bullying resulting from obesity, and another where a child was so obese that she had to have a pushchair specially made to fit her. One three year old was so obese that she had to have special shoes made to support her weight.

Many mothers have already tried giving the child less food and found it does not work. There is a need for a more structured approach which emphasises that physical activity is as important as nutrition. Health professionals need training in how to manage obesity and in psychological as well as physical approaches. Like the rest of society, some professionals may be prejudiced against overweight and privately feel it is the individual’s or the family’s own fault. Training will help them to explore their own attitudes and use constructive, non-judgemental ways to help the family.

Professor Rudolf has resolved that the gap in professionals’ knowledge and training has to be bridged if anything is to be done for parents who are either in denial that their children are fat or

unable to appreciate that they have a toddler with a weight problem. Her solution, launched at the 2006 Annual Conference of the CPHVA in Harrogate, focuses on the first year of life. Other research has identified the first year as being a significant risk factor for later obesity and that the speed at which infants climb through the weight centiles is an indicator of worse to come². It is not for nothing that 2007 will also see the Department of Health introduce an 8 or 12 months' life check at which a full physical examination should be a requirement. Although two-thirds of children will probably be in perfect shape at the check, a significant number of UK children are likely to struggle to pass it on grounds of weight.

Family partnership model

The Family Partnership Model is the system selected by Professor Rudolf for working with families to reverse the weight trend³. It is tried and tested and, in the context of counteracting obesity, will be rolled out in training courses across the country beginning at the end of January. The philosophy of the model is to work with the parents or carers and to explore their concerns and strengths in partnership with them. This is a skill that Professor Rudolf's team found under-developed in primary care staff. The model package

includes not only the training courses but a handbook, a toolkit – and the Glugs.

The Glugs

The animal characters of the Glugs will be used to capture the children's imagination through stories on CD and DVD, recipes and specially designed reward schemes. Through the Glugs, children will learn about listening to their own bodies for cues about hunger and fullness, healthy eating and the social importance of mealtimes. They will learn about exercise and moderation as well as sharing and patience. The aim is to capture young children's interest and divert their pester power to healthier ends. In this way the risk of developing an unhealthy weight will be reduced and parents' efforts to create a healthy home environment supported and enhanced.

The Glug family live on Glug Island, the most fertile, bounteous and fun place on earth. As in the average nursery class, the Glugs learn to play and be together. They pick the vegetables, cook the fruit from the trees, till the soil, milk the cow, collect the eggs and reap the harvest. And they cook it all, too!

Training

Professor Rudolf's team have developed and

trials a training course for health professionals, focusing on listening skills, understanding parenting and feeding styles, family eating and activity habits, the challenge of change and the importance of parents' (and health professionals') own well-being. (For further information, see *Resources*).



References

1. Dennison BA, Edmunds LS, Stratton HH, Pruzek RM. Rapid weight gain predicts childhood overweight. *Obesity* 2006; 14(3): 491-499
2. Yanovski JA. Rapid weight gain during infancy as a predictor of adult obesity. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2003; 77(6): 1350-1351
3. Davis H, Day C, Bidmead C. Working in partnership with parents: the Parent Advisor Model. London: The Psychological Corporation, 2002

Resources

Training courses

Two-day training courses (£320) will be held during 2007.

The first two are in Yorkshire on 31 January–1 February, and 8–9 March. An additional free summary day will follow each course.

For further information, see Diary Dates on p.199 or access the "Glugs" button at the www.healthforallchildren.co.uk website set up for use by both the RCPCH and CPHVA.



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