Do Weight Management Programs Involving Health Coaches Improve Body Mass Index and Parent Empowerment for Children with Obesity or Who Are Overweight?

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What was the research about?
Childhood obesity is common in the United States. Weight problems during childhood can lead to long-term health problems, such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and high cholesterol. Children who have obesity are also at risk of having low self-esteem and depression.

In this study, the research team looked at possible ways to help children and their parents manage children’s weight. The team assigned children whose weight was higher than the healthy range to one of two groups. In both groups, children and their parents took part in a healthy weight program that included:

- Information about how to manage children's weight
- A neighborhood resource guide
- Monthly text messages

One group also got two extra weekly text messages and had six sessions with trained health coaches. Health coaches worked with children and their families to improve children's diets, physical activity levels, and motivation.

What were the results?
After one year, children in both groups had lower body mass index (BMI) scores compared with their BMI scores at the start of the study. BMI is a measure of a person's body fat based on their height and weight. Adding health coaching and extra texts was no more effective than the basic program alone in helping children get to a healthier weight.

Neither program changed the number of children who were in the highest weight category. This group included about 20 percent of the children in the study.

In both groups, parents reported that they had better access to resources to help with their children's weight than before the study. These resources included farmers' markets, recreation centers, and community support groups. Only the parents of children who received health coaching reported a better quality of life for their children.

Who was in the study?
The study included 721 children, ages 2 to 12 years, and their parents. The children had BMI scores that were higher than the scores of 85 percent of children of the same age and gender. The children were patients in a large healthcare system in Massachusetts.
What did the research team do?
The study team assigned the children and their parents to one of two groups by chance. One group received materials to help manage children's weight, a neighborhood resource guide, and monthly text messages about healthy behaviors. The materials urged parents to help their children cut back on sugary drinks, exercise more, limit screen time, and improve sleep habits. The second group received the same materials as the first group plus two extra weekly text messages and six sessions with a trained health coach. The health coaches helped families set goals for managing weight, find local places to exercise, learn to shop for and eat healthy foods, and improve sleep habits.

The research team used the heights and weights from children's medical records to figure out the children's BMIs at the start of the study and one year later. In telephone interviews at the beginning and end of the study, parents answered questions about their ability to help their children manage their weight. Parents also reported their feelings about their children's quality of life related to their weight.

What were the limits of the study?
The study included children who were patients in a large Massachusetts healthcare system. The results may differ for patients who live in other places or receive care in different kinds of medical offices.

These programs didn't decrease the number of children who were in the highest weight category. Future research could look at how best to help these children.

How can people use the results?
Doctors' offices and clinics could consider using similar weight-management programs to help children achieve a healthy weight.

To learn more about this project, visit pcori.org/Taveras024.