

## **Effect of Parenting Styles on Childhood Obesity in a Low Income Household**

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### **Abstract**

Parents and environment have the ability to influence a child's life greatly. In particular, child obesity can either be influenced or inhibited depending on these factors. If the same manner of food is constantly fed to a child, his or her weight and health could be drastically affected. The environment of a low income household could play a role in childhood obesity because it could affect the quality of food provided. Parents could also be influencing factors because they directly feed their children. Disciplining a child is distinctive per parent. There are three parenting styles, however, that many parents' disciplining falls under. The focused styles are authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Each one brings about different expectations from a parent to child and a certain style may have a chance of bringing an obesity risk. The specific research question to this paper is "How do parenting styles influence levels of childhood obesity in American households of low financial status? It was investigated how obesity can be impacted by parenting style as well as a low income environment. Then there was analysis in order to find a possible answer as to how parenting style impacts obesity in low income households. The research suggested that there is a prevalence of permissive parenting styles in low income households which can increase the risk of childhood obesity. As a result of what was have learned, people will be more educated on childhood obesity. Since many parents want what is best for their child, it is extremely important for parents to be aware that certain parenting styles can influence childhood obesity when in a low income environment. Obesity at a young age will hinder children both physically and mentally so it is important to avoid this.

**Keywords: Parenting Styles, Childhood Obesity, Low Income**

### **1. Introduction**

A child's health depends on parents because they are the primary providers. In particular, child obesity can either be influenced or inhibited depending on these factors. Genetics do play a role in the likelihood that a child will have obesity issues. The rate of metabolism and how fast excess fat is burned off can be the result of genetics. However, this role is minor when compared to external influencing factors such as the surrounding environment and disciplining style administered through parents (Stang et al.2011).

Nutritious food is required in order to maintain a healthy weight. This type of food does, however, comes with a higher price. Unfortunately, there are many families who are not financially able to afford it and are left buying lesser quality food which is composed of an inefficient amount of nutritious value. If the same manner of food is constantly fed to a child, his or her weight and health could be drastically affected (Stang et al. 2011). The environment of a low income household could play a role in childhood obesity because it could affect the quality of food provided.

Parents could also be influencing factors as they directly feed their children. No one parent disciplines their child the exact same as another parent. There are three parenting styles, however, that many parent's disciplining falls under. The styles are authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Each one brings about different expectations from a parent

to child and a certain style may have a chance of bringing about an obesity risk. Parenting style may be able to strongly influence feeding practices. Parents may feed certain types of foods more frequently when administering a specific parenting style (Power 2013). The quantity of food given to a child can also vary depending on the disciplining mechanisms used.

If parenting styles and environment have the ability to influence obesity, then how do parenting styles influence levels of childhood obesity in American households of low financial status? The low income environment could increase the probability of certain parenting styles while decreasing the probability of others. When a specific parenting style is administered in a low income household, it could increase or decrease the rate of childhood obesity.

Since parents want what is best for their children, it is extremely important for them to be aware that certain parenting styles can influence childhood obesity when in a low income environment. Obesity at a young age will hinder children both physically and mentally and they have a higher risk for premature death and disability. Various negative health consequences could arise such as asthma, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, early puberty etc. These issues become gradually evident as weight in a child increases. Psychological negative outcomes could arise as well like depression. A child can have a poor body image which results in low self-esteem. There is a risk for eating disorders and learning problems if depression in a child occurs (Stang et al. 2011). It is important for parents to be educated on this topic so that their children can avoid having these health issues. Although obesity is acquired uniquely depending on the child, environment and parenting styles are major influences because they can impact the type and amount of food a child eats. Permissive parenting style, in particular, influences childhood obesity in low income households because of its negligence to pay attention to a child's needs and health.

## **2. Although External Factors Can Cause Childhood Obesity, Genetics Play a Role as Well.**

The way a child becomes obese may can be completely different to the way another child becomes obese. There are, however, certain external factors can definitely influence obesity. A child can be predisposed to the risk of certain traits, such as obesity, because of genetics. Stang and Loth (2011) state that external factors influence childhood obesity, but also suggest that genetics play a role as well. They argue that because of genetics, there are strong correlations between mother and child obesity levels. Appetitive traits can be influenced by genetics, which include responsiveness to internal cues and food. In fact, the "Nutrition Society" at Cambridge University states that 69% of eating behaviors can be genetically determined (p.1). Stang and Loth (2011) believe that genetics do play a role in childhood obesity, however, the environment plays an even greater role. A seven day study done by John M. deCastro on 39 identical, 60 fraternal same sex, and 50 fraternal opposite sex twins who were living independently found that certain food preference is increasingly linked to environmental factors rather than genetics. The types of food preference that can be linked to environmental factors include desserts, fruit, vegetables, sweetened beverages, and meat. All of these foods in either low or high quantities can cause weight gain. The findings of this particular study show that the food the parents and children ate were very similar. This means that if parents eat large quantities of junk food, then their children will too. Parents that drink many sweetened beverages incline the children to do so as well. If the parent does not serve many vegetables, then the child has an increasingly high chance of disliking and not eating them. If a child is in an environment where he or she does not have much access to sweetened items, then there will most probably be less of an urge to eat them. The children often observe their parents eating unhealthy food and then they do it as well. If parents changed the way they consumed food, it could start a lifestyle change toward themselves and their children. Because of this, parents have the ability to strongly impact the environment around a child.

## **3. The Environment Can Influence Childhood Obesity.**

The environment is capable of changing a child's life in numerous ways. Whether it be from the type of school he goes to or the type of people around, everything can impact a child either in a negative or positive way. Type of food is a changing variable when examining different social classes. Because there are price changes in food, obviously people of certain classes are able to afford more. Nutritional food is unfortunately more expensive when compared to low quality junk food or meals that are not fresh. Vegetables and fruits, especially those that are organic, have much nutrition and take much more effort to grow and harvest. Because of this, they cost more money. Also, economics is a leading reason why healthy food is so expensive. The country has so much demand for unhealthy food such as red meats and processed foods when compared to healthy foods such as whole grains and fresh produce. Because

unhealthy food is demanded more, it is made less expensive in order for the people to have quicker access to it. As a result, healthy food is made more expensive. Unfortunately, there are many families who are not financially able to afford it and are left buying lesser quality food which is composed of an inefficient amount of nutritious value. Because of this, parents who are of low income are unable to give their children the proper dietary food needed to grow in a healthy manner. When a child is in a same type of environment for some time, he or she is constantly exposed to the same types of food (Stang et al. 2011). Specifically, in a low income environment small amounts of nutritional value in food can increase the risk of obesity.

For many people, a low income household and environment is not the most ideal place to live. There are increased struggles as families are trying to support themselves because they do not have much money. (Hughes et al. 2015) studied a group of low income families and argue that stresses put upon parents in a low income family can influence feeding and lead to child obesity. It was observed that a low income environment causes parents to have more stress when compared to people of higher social classes. It is also suggested that parents who display an uninvolved parenting style are usually the ones who have high amounts of stress as well. The stress levels could be largely influenced by the fact that these families have access to less resources, which can make the quality of life hectic. The parents usually have to work multiple jobs in order to compensate for the fact that they have less money to buy essential items. Also, the stress from working can lead to negligence when monitoring what a child is eating. Trying to feed a child in an environment with poor resources is challenging and parents are not always around to make sure their child is eating healthy food. When parents are not in control of what their child is eating, it can cause malnutrition. A child who experiences malnutrition does not receive the proper amounts of nutrients and vitamins needed to sustain a healthy body. In summary, (Hughes et al. 2015) discovered that because a low income family will not have access to sufficient resources, there will be a lack of quality in the food. He also noticed depression among parents, especially mothers, is common in low income households. Diminutive amounts of satisfaction with their life is common when all they basically do every day is work long, tiring hours with hardly any free time. When a mother is depressed, it can cause inconsistent disciplining because she is not in the proper mindset. The inconsistency also applies to the feeding patterns toward a child and can hamper with the intake of healthy food.

When thinking about what food was eaten in a day, meals such as breakfast, lunch, and dinner typically come to mind. Snacks are usually not accounted for as a main source of food. Childhood obesity can, however, come about if children are eating much of snacks with little nutritional value. (Fisher et al. 2014) claim that the types of snacks offered in low income households can impact child obesity. In their research study, mothers described snacks as a convenient way to feed a child because it involves less preparation. Because many low income mothers try to balance multiple jobs and provide a living for their families, they do not have the time to prepare meals. They have a high dependence on snacks as a way to feed their children. Although snacks are easier to prepare and serve, the food is not as nutritious when compared to meals. When low income mothers were asked to describe meals, they talked about how it was important for the food to be nutritious and include carbohydrates, meats, and vegetables. When asked to describe snacks, however, nutrition was not mentioned. The snacks were described more as a way to reduce a child's hunger between meals and as a convenient way to feed a child. Nutrition may not have been mentioned when describing snacks because the snacks were not viewed as "real food". The low income mothers probably do not know that snacks contribute to 27% of a child's energy so they don't describe them with much nutritional importance (p.1). Because snacks are not considered to be important to health by low income mothers, too many of the unhealthy ones can lead to obesity in children because there would be too much sugar and fat in the body. There is a high prevalence of snacks used in low income households because it is a convenient and fast method to feed children. Unfortunately, many low income mothers do not realize that snacks are a major food source for their children. Since many kids enjoy unhealthy food, these are the types of snacks usually given to them. Large quantities of unhealthy snacks are inducing factors for childhood obesity.

#### **4. Parenting Style Can Influence Obesity.**

The parents of each of the three disciplining styles emphasize different values and place importance in different things. The terms authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parenting styles originated after developmental psychologist, Diana Baumrind conducted her child care research. She looked mainly at child behavior and parental responsiveness and demandingness. In her study, 100 middle class preschool-aged children were observed and interviewed in their usual settings. She conducted parental interviews in order to acquire a clear picture of the parents' behavior. After leading and analyzing all her research, Baumrind was able to classify the three parenting styles according to their similarities in disciplining children (Han et al. 2010).

An authoritarian parenting style is one that is very demanding with high expectations that a child must follow. Usually parents who use this style view obedience as a highly important virtue. The preservation of traditional structure is also valued as well. This is why a child usually cannot voice his or her opinion. The parent's words must be accepted because it is supposedly always correct. Much pressure is usually exerted on children in order to excel in activities whether it be in school, sports, music, etc. Because of this, many children have anxiety as they are always trying to live up to their parents' expectations. Some children also have poor reactions to frustration in which girls are more likely to give up and boys are likely to display a hostile attitude (Han et al. 2010). Praise and reward is usually not given to children in fear that they may become too full of themselves and stray off the "proper" path. There is a high demand rate with low responsiveness to children when an authoritarian parenting style is used (Han et al. 2010).

Parents who use a permissive parenting style are usually not strict at all and do not impose many rules and punishments. They are tremendously responsive of their child's needs and give them many of the items they want. As a result, permissive parents usually have spoiled children. The parents present themselves as a resource so that their child can go to them and ask for whatever they want. They do not, however, present themselves in a way where the children can go to them for advice in regard to shaping and developing their futures. Permissive parents also usually avoid the exercise of control and allow the children to regulate their own activities (Han et al. 2010). They do not want to get in confrontations and arguments with their children. There is not much encouragement to have the children obey rules and there are not specific rules and standards imposed. Reason, manipulation, and bribes might be used by parents in order to try and make their children listen to them but there is no definite control and power on the parent's part. Children are perceived as equals and are included in decision making processes. They are encouraged to discuss and communicate with parents rather than just obey (Han et al. 2010). As a result of permissive parenting, a lot of children have poor emotional regulation and can get rebellious and defiant when their wants are tested. They also have a low persistence with challenging tasks and some can even display antisocial behaviors. A permissive parenting style usually does not demand much from the children but has a high response toward their wants (Han et al. 2010).

An authoritative parenting style is said to be the best for a child because the parents combine their expectations with love and warmth. They present themselves as authority figures and expect their children to behave. At the same time, however, they are also very caring, loving, and responsive. An authoritative parent attempts to direct a child's activities but in a rational manner. There is much verbal reasoning and explanation with children about the rules and expectations so that there is a mutual understanding. Although rules are expected to be followed, there are expectations at times due to special occasions (Han et al. 2010). For example, on a weekend parents may allow their children to stay up past their bed time. The parents give an input of their own perspectives but recognize a child's interests and thoughts. Children who have authoritarian parents tend to have self-confidence and notable social skills. Parents who use this parenting style tend to have high demandingness, but also a high responsiveness toward their children.

Baumrind's work has been immensely influential in the areas of parenting and developmental psychology. Her work has been supported by many studies and continues to influence parenting practices. The research she conducted during the 1960s and 1970s has had an influence on disciplinary strategies by experts on how parents are recommended to raise their children (Han et al. 2010). Because of her, parenting styles are distinguished as what they are today and it has become easier to find trends in childhood obesity. Parents who use certain parenting styles can either increase or decrease the obesity risk in their children.

Parents can convey their emphasized disciplines and restraints when applying certain feeding practices toward their children. Stricter parents may restrict a large amount of unhealthy food when compared to parents who are not as stern. Poor feeding practices can lead to childhood obesity. (Kakinami et al. 2015) argue that permissive and authoritarian parenting styles can cause childhood obesity after comparing real life households. Children being raised in an authoritarian parenting style are all at risk of obesity irrespective of their economic status. Many parents who use authoritarian parenting style are inclined to demand much of children and not satisfy their needs. Cues of hunger are not taken seriously so the children's bodies are unable to produce much energy because they do not have enough food. This causes them to binge eat whenever they get the chance (Kakinami et al. 2015). Permissive parenting results in many children eating whatever they want, without being monitored. This causes children to make some unhealthy choices when it comes time to eat. Young children, especially, do not have much knowledge to distinguish between what is healthy and unhealthy. Also because of the permissive parenting style, poor food choices might be the only ones being offered to a child because of the parent's negligence. Moreover, parents who use permissive style tend to place little emphasis on exercise and staying active (Kakinami et al. 2015). Not getting enough exercise can cause weight gain, but the combination of that with poor food choices can cause severe negative effects toward children.

An authoritarian parenting style disciplines a child too much whereas a permissive parenting style disciplines a child too little. When it comes to feeding, the strict and calm attitudes from the parenting styles get carried over when monitoring what their children eat. Children who have authoritarian parents can get hungry often because their parents do not listen to them. The children are only allowed to eat certain foods at specific times of the day. This causes them

to eat in excess when their parents are not looking. Children who have permissive parents, however, usually can eat whatever they want whenever they want. Unhealthy food full of fats can be consumed in excess which causes obesity. Permissive and authoritarian parenting styles can increase the risk of childhood obesity (Kakinami et al. 2015).

Because a mother and child have similar genetics and are predominantly in the same environment, they are bound to share common characteristics. Research has indicated that there is usually a trend between mother and child obesity. The chance that obesity is present mutually in a mother and her child is a common occurrence. The same types of food are often being consumed by the both of them. Stress can also increase obesity in parents and cause them to use certain parenting styles. (Frontini et al. 2015) suggest that parenting styles definitely influence obesity. Her study was conducted in Portugal but the parenting styles in that country are extremely similar to the ones in America. It is suggested that parenting stress can influence the parenting style that is exerted. It is also stated that there is usually a positive correlation between the obesity rates between mother and child. Obese mothers do appear to have more parental stress than mothers of healthy weight. The healthy mothers in Frontini's study used authoritative parenting style for the most part. There were, however, a large number of permissive parenting style using mothers who were obese. Obese children's mothers were 73% obese as well (p.2). This shows a positive correlation between a mother and child's weight. Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles result in high obesity rates. Frontini's results in her experiment were closely linked to Kakinami's in that authoritarian parenting style makes unhealthy food more desirable for child because of its unavailability. This means that when there is finally access to the unhealthy food, the child will most likely over consume. Permissive parenting style tends to not pay much attention to what the child is eating. This may cause malnutrition in a child because of the low quality of food being presented since permissive parents usually do not take the time to cook proper, nutritious food for their children. Malnutrition causes obesity because the body is not receiving the proper vitamins and minerals to stay healthy. Frontini's study also revealed that there is a high chance that adolescents who experience a permissive parenting style live in a family with hardly any structure and regulations. Because there are less rules, children have the freedom to eat whatever they want. Although obesity in children is influenced largely by parents, other factors can cause it as well. (Kiefner- Burmeister et al. 2016) also concur that parenting style can cause obesity after conducting a study based on mothers and their children. It is suggested that mothers who had underweight children did not restrict food from their children. Mothers with children who were normal weight as well did not restrict food as much as mothers who had obese children. Because the underweight and normal weight children have no obesity issues, their mothers do not feel as much of an urge or inclination to restrict unhealthy food. Mothers who had children who were obese were likely to use food as a reward when compared to mothers who had underweight children. Authoritarian parents usually hide junk food and reward their children with it only at specific times. As mentioned earlier, this method backfires and the children end up binge eating the unhealthy food whenever they find a chance such as when their parents are not at home. (Kiefner-Burmeister et al. 2016) also determined that Caucasian mothers were more likely to have healthy foods in the house. Unhealthy foods were more likely to be present in houses when there were mothers who were not Caucasian. This could be a result of different cultural upbringings. It was also found that unemployed mothers were less likely to use food as a reward as compared to employed mothers. Employed mothers usually have more stress which results in them perhaps displaying a stricter attitude and using an authoritarian parenting style. Race and employment status of parents are external factors that impact childhood obesity. However, when compared to the parenting style being used, the race and employment effects are very minimal. Parenting style is one of the most direct ways a child can be impacted which is why it can either contribute or inhibit childhood obesity (Kiefner-Burmeister et al. 2016).

## **5. Certain Parenting Styles Can Influence Childhood Obesity in Low Income Households.**

A low income surrounding can bring out certain parenting styles more than others. (Rosenblum et al. 2012) suggest that mothers from low income households tend to largely use practices of permissive parenting styles. Low income mothers interviewed in Rosenblum's study thought that child obesity was the product of poor parenting. The strongest views about the issue of child obesity came from normal weight mothers who had normal weight children. Many of the normal weight low income mothers repeatedly stated that parents of overweight children do not care. They also said that parents fed too much fast food and unhealthy food while not encouraging the children to participate in physical activity. The normal weight low income mothers also believed that overweight children were constantly being fed food and they had no limitations imposed on them. Ironically, even many overweight low income parents stated that parenting can cause child obesity. However, when describing parenting styles and techniques that contribute to obesity, they described other low income parents' styles and not their own. Low income parents of overweight children were described as setting a model of unhealthy lives for the children. In fact, the parents' own obesity was seen as a

result of their own indolence and lack of self-control. This indolence and lack of self-control can be carried over and the children of these parents can have the same characteristics. Both obese and normal weight mothers in low income households believed that parenting impacts childhood obesity. Some permissive parents in low income surroundings sometimes do not take care of themselves because they are always busy working and do not have the time to exercise and cook nutritional food. If the parents are not exerting healthy habits, then the children will not as well (Rosenblum et al. 2012). Also, a permissive parenting style is frequently used in low income households because the parents are not usually present which means the children are not adequately monitored.

An authoritarian parenting style can be used by low income parents because they want their children to do better in life than they did. This style does, though, cause poor feeding practices. Some research suggests that more authoritarian styles are present in low income households. Because of the stresses that come with a low income parent, many tend to be stern with their children (Rosenblum et al. 2012). They expect their children to abide by their expectations and not add to the stresses that they already have. Many of the parents also use an authoritarian style because they believe it will help provide the base for their children to achieve much more than they did in life. Their children may have more stable jobs and be able to support themselves financially when they grow up. The authoritarian practices affect feeding style towards children as well. Many parents forced the children to eat certain nutritious foods during meals. Children who were required to eat a certain foods had a decreased preference for them as time went on. Although the parenting style tried to increase the consumption of nutritious food, the children did not increase how much of it they ate. Because of this, children experiencing an authoritarian parenting style did not consume the proper amount of vegetables they were supposed to (Rosenblum et al. 2012). They did, however binge eat unhealthy food whenever they got the opportunity.

Although an authoritarian parenting style is present in low income households, there tends to be a prevalence of a permissive parenting style. In order to use an authoritative parenting style, much time and energy is needed because the children are to be monitored and controlled continually. Low income parents usually do not have the time or energy for this. They cannot afford to do this for their kids because of their stressful lives.

## **6. Conclusion**

A permissive parenting style in an American low income household primarily increases child obesity. Many of the families do not have much money which means they cannot afford many resources. Among these resources is nutritional food. There is increased quality in nutritional food which causes it to be more expensive. Parents in low income environments also have to work many jobs to support the family. Because they are barely at home, they do not have the time and energy to cook healthy meals for their children. Unhealthy snacks are given in high quantities because it is a convenient way to feed them. Low income mothers do not know, however, that snacks are a major contributing factor to the daily food consumed by children. As a result, unhealthy snacks are given and the risk of obesity increases. Children in low income families are not monitored sufficiently as their parents are always working. Because of this, they eat a lot of unhealthy food because they do not have anyone stopping them. Many parents in low income households also do not take care of themselves properly because they are always preoccupied with other stressful things. When the parents do not take care of themselves, the children usually do not as well. Many children have permissive parents in low income households and suffer from obesity because of the lack of nutritional food and parental monitoring. An authoritarian parenting style is also present in low income families and can increase obesity. Parents who use an authoritarian style tend to expect much from their children so that they can go farther in life than they did. This style does not take into account what a child wants and desires so this can cause he or she to overconsume unhealthy food when given the chance. The consumption of healthy food is not increased even though that is the goal of many authoritarian parents. Although authoritarian styles are present, there inclines to be more permissive styles present in low income households because parents do not have the time to monitor children to the extent in which authoritarian parents do. My sources reveal that an authoritative parenting has the least chance of child obesity because it takes into account a child's needs and wants. Parents who use this style discipline their children firmly but still extend love and comfort at the same time. Their disciplining style carries over to their feeding practices and the children have the least chance of acquiring obesity. Although an authoritative style is ideal, there is not much of this parenting style exerted in low income households. Parents do not have the time or energy to use an authoritative parenting style. A permissive parenting style is often used in low income households and as a result, the chance of childhood obesity does increase.

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