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Call for national strategy to chart child growth and combat obesity



A national strategy is needed to improve the monitoring of child growth, because excessive weight gain in early life is an indicator of the risk of obesity in later life, specialists urged today at the launch of a new educational initiative on charting child growth and development.

Speaking in London at the launch of *Open Book on Growth*, several eminent specialists in child health and nutrition called for a clearer understanding and more coherent strategy for monitoring the growth of toddlers between the ages of one and three. Together with guidelines on charting child growth and development this could help the Government achieve its stated ambition to reduce childhood obesity and thereby become 'the first major country to reverse the rising tide of obesity and overweight in the population.'¹

Overweight and obesity in children is diagnosed using body mass index (BMI) which can only be calculated after measurement of the child's weight and height. Growth measurements are therefore essential to identify those children who are gaining weight too quickly.

Regular measurements of growth during the toddler years can also help identify developmental problems such as feeding problems, faltering growth, food intolerance and allergies. Yet there is currently little national guidance on when and how the growth of young children should be measured. Children are routinely weighed and measured during the first year of life and then again when they go to school. However, this leaves a two to three year window when measurements may be conducted haphazardly or not at all. Health and childcare professionals clearly need more guidance on measuring and charting growth during this key period.

A recent survey² of health visitors, school and community nurses who carry out growth measurements revealed that most use their professional judgement rather than follow any policy guidelines when deciding which children to measure, what measurements to take and how often. One in five had had no formal training on taking child growth measurements and over 90 per cent of those surveyed felt there should be a national standard governing child measurement procedures.

Most worrying was the fact that 48 per cent did not feel confident in calculating and assessing children's BMI, the key diagnostic indicator for overweight and obesity. This concurs with an online survey³ of over 1,000 parents conducted by the Mumsnet website. Only six per cent of the parents said their child's BMI had been calculated between the ages of one to three. In fact, parents seemed to be more anxious about their children being underweight than overweight.

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‘Over 20 per cent of two-to-three year olds in the UK are currently overweight,’ said Atul Singhal, deputy director at the MRC Childhood Nutrition Research Centre at the Institute of Child Health in London. ‘Over ten per cent are obese. Many of these children will go on to become obese adults and suffer serious health consequences such as heart disease and diabetes. If we are serious about halting the obesity epidemic then we must identify those at risk as early as possible and that means taking regular and accurate measurements of height, weight and BMI, right the way through childhood.’

‘Regular measurements of child growth are absolutely essential, not only for the individual child but also for our overall understanding of obesity and overweight,’ agreed Dr Pauline Emmett, senior research fellow at the University of Bristol. ‘The only reason we know that the BMI of today’s children is higher than it was 30 years ago is that we have been taking those measurements. But it is high time there was a standardised procedure.’

‘Surveys of health visitors have shown there is an urgent need for information and training on the measurement of child growth. *Open Book on Growth* fills this need by providing evidence-based guidance and practical tools that health and childcare professionals can use to improve their day to day practice,’ said Dr Robert Coombs, consultant neonatologist, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals.

Produced by the Infant & Toddler Forum, the *Open Book on Growth* is an online and interactive training aid designed to support the current Government and WHO strategy of monitoring early growth to ensure that every child’s health and nutritional needs are met, that every child is given the best possible start in life and that early signs of disease such as faltering growth and obesity are detected.

Issues covered include:

- the importance of monitoring and assessing post-natal growth
- what measurements to take
- how to measure children of different ages
- when to seek medical advice
- how to advise parents
- the tools necessary to monitor and assess child growth.

Open Book on Growth is available free to all health and childcare professionals. Register at www.infantandtoddlerforum.org

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Notes to editors

1. Health weight, healthy lives: a cross-government strategy for England. DoH January 2008.

'The Government has set itself a new ambition: of being the first major country to reverse the rising tide of obesity and overweight in the population by ensuring that all individuals are able to maintain a healthy weight. Our initial focus is on children: by 2020 we will have reduced the proportion of overweight and obese children to 2000 levels.'

2. Survey of 160 health visitors and nurses in England and Scotland carried out by the Infant & Toddler Forum and www.healthvisitors.com. Results showed that:

- **94%** routinely measured children's weight
- **71%** routinely measured children's height
- **62%** used professional judgement to decide when to take measurements
- **92%** agreed there was a need for national standards on child growth measurement
- **19%** had no formal training in child growth measurement
- **46%** said they were very confident in using growth charts
- **50%** said their confidence in using growth charts varied according to circumstances
- **48%** said they were not confident in calculating a child's BMI and assessing if they were overweight or obese

3. Online survey of 1,091 parents carried out in April 2008 by Mumsnet.com and the Infant & Toddler Forum. Key findings were:

- **63%** didn't have concerns about their child's growth - of those with concerns, **51%** were about the child not gaining enough weight
- Child's weight recorded 7.3 times under one; 3.4 times when aged 1-3 years
- Child's height recorded 3.9 times under one; 2.3 times when aged 1-3 years
- **72%** say checks done as part of routine assessment
- **6%** cent say BMI calculated between ages of 1-3 years
- **69%** asked health professionals for advice on diet/growth (mainly health visitors); **40%** asked friends; **33%** consulted parenting websites; **25%** used specialist publications. **13%** had no advice.

The Infant & Toddler Forum

- The Infant & Toddler Forum is a multi-disciplinary team of experts and practitioners who share a common professional interest in infant and child health, growth and nutrition
- Its aim is to improve the access of healthcare professionals to reliable, evidence-based information relevant to their practice, which will equip them to advise and support the parents of infants and young children
- The Forum is supported by an educational grant from Nutricia Ltd
- The views and outputs of the Forum are independent of Nutricia and its commercial interests.

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