Telling parents that their young child is overweight: the role of motivational interviewing

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Although one-third of young New Zealand children are overweight or obese, around two-thirds of parents have no idea this is the case. Most health professionals are also reluctant to broach the topic with parents because they are worried it may adversely affect the doctor-patient relationship, or feel they don’t have the resources to help the families make effective changes. However, although early intervention may offer a greater chance of success, it won’t happen if parents do not perceive there is an issue.

We decided to test whether motivational interviewing (MI) was a good way of informing parents that their child was overweight. MI is a way of working with people to make a change that comes from within – by emphasising their autonomy to change and increasing their self-determined (motivation from within the person rather than because of outside influences).

1093 children attended a comprehensive screening appointment of which 271 (25%) were identified as overweight or obese. Parents of overweight children received feedback about their weight status using a traffic light resource delivered using either MI or usual care. Two weeks later parents were re-interviewed to assess their understanding of the feedback process and how they found it, any changes they had made to family lifestyles,
and whether they wanted to participate in a two-year intervention. We found:

1) MI and usual care were just as effective at encouraging parents to participate in a family-based weight intervention
2) A single session of MI increased short-term parental self-determined motivation to promote healthy lifestyles in their child
3) MI did not offer advantages over usual care for feedback of weight status given the extensive training required to perform MI well
4) Feedback did not appear to result in harm but how parents talk to their child about weight screening is important
5) A simple traffic light approach to discuss weight was well received by parents (80% indicated a favourable response)
6) Parents do want to know about their child’s weight, as long as the information is delivered in a sensitive manner

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References

4. Doolen J, Alpert PR. Miller SK. Parental disconnect between perceived and actual weight status of children: a metasynthesis of


