

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 case¹. 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 changes². However, although early intervention may offer a greater chance of success³, it won't happen if parents do not perceive there is an issue⁴.

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 change⁵ and increasing their self-determined (motivation from within the person rather than because of outside influences)⁶.

1093 children attended a comprehensive screening appointment of which 271 (25%) were identified as overweight or obese⁷. 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 intervention⁸. 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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