

Introduction

Despite multiple different programs and interventions over the past few decades, childhood obesity remains a significant public health issue. Pediatric obesity can lead to an increase in co-morbidities such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and endocrine disorders at a younger age¹. Additionally, pediatric obesity is associated with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem^{1,2}. Thus, it is important to improve the health and well-being of children affected by all these co-morbidities.

Given the crucial role family members play in implementing lifestyle modifications, understanding the difficulties parents face is essential in effectively treating childhood obesity³. There is little data on the experience of families trying to implement lifestyle modifications with young children. Previous studies have highlighted how physicians show bias towards children who are obese, but how this may affect the child's parent and their medical journeys are unknown^{4,5}. The objective of this study was to understand the stressors and difficulties that parents face as they cared for a child with early-onset obesity.

Methods

Parents of children with early-onset severe obesity (BMI greater than 99th percentile prior to age 5 years; n=10) participated in semi-structured interviews to understand how having a child with early-onset obesity impacted the family. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed using hybrid thematic analysis.

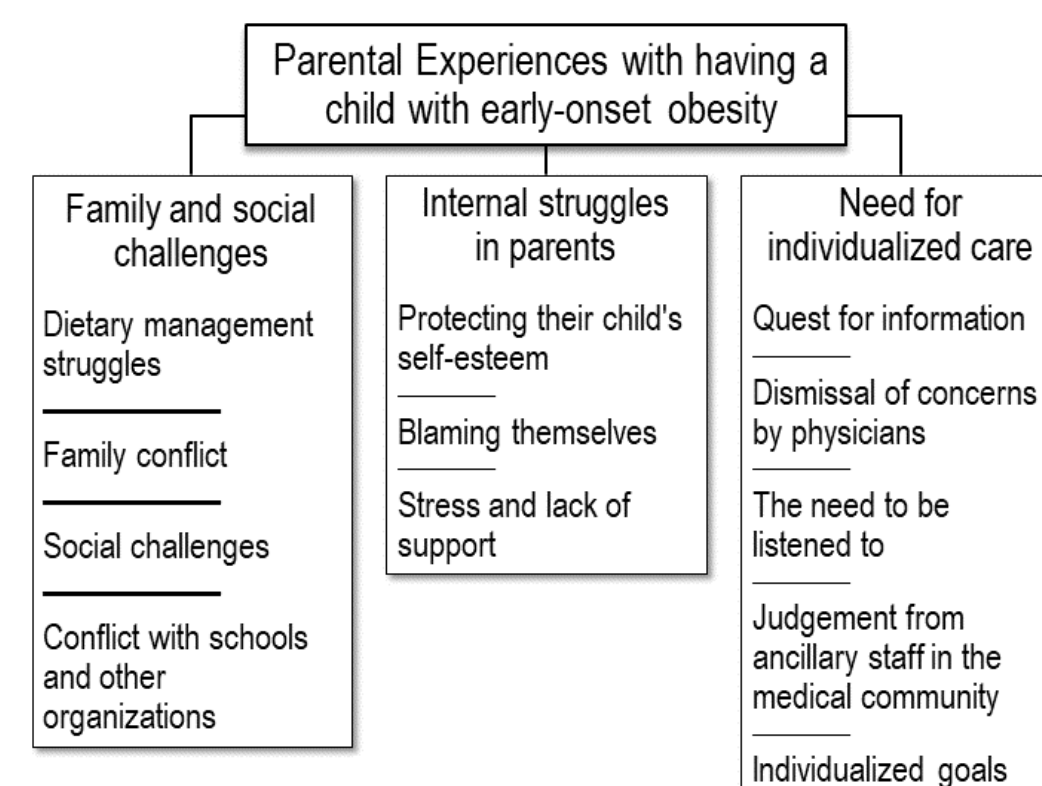
Results

Findings identified a global theme of "parental experiences" with early-onset obesity, supported by three organizing themes: (i) family and social challenges (ii) internal struggles in parents and (iii) a need for individualized care. Within each organizing theme, subthemes emerged which highlighted the struggles that parents faced when raising a child with early-onset obesity.

Key findings from our study included that implementing dietary changes resulted in conflict between siblings and family members: "I think in the beginning my son had a hard time with not being able to eat certain things that he used to eat because they weren't in the house anymore. You could tell he was kind of resentful for that." We also found that parents blamed themselves for their child's weight struggles. In addition, parents faced significant judgement from medical professionals when trying to find answers for their child's weight gain: "All these doctors we went to for years would just walk in and look at me and look at my daughter. 'You're overweight, you're obese. That's your issue.'" Parents also emphasized they placed a high value on the protecting their child's self-esteem through their journey: "What is my goal? Is for her to be able to love herself, but to also be healthy."

Figure #1

Parental experiences with having a child with early-onset obesity



Discussion

Our research confirms that parents of children with early onset obesity face multiple stressors when caring for their child. Parents were desperately seeking healthcare providers who would listen to their concerns and were open to discovering answers for their child's weight gain that were not poor diet and exercise. Parents also face significant judgement from medical professionals when trying to find answers for their child's weight gain. Weight bias is prevalent amongst physicians and advanced trainees in professional health disciplines^{4,5}. Parents were actively implementing lifestyle changes at home, despite receiving significant conflict and lack of support from their family members while doing so. Additionally, they often blamed themselves for their child's weight, despite intensive efforts to treat it. In our treatment of obesity, we often focus on the weight trajectory of a child. It is highly likely that we are missing opportunities to support and help parents overcome barriers to implementing lifestyle changes. Given that some of the parents felt their children's self-esteem needed to be protected from the medical community, there is clearly a need for more work to be done in the treatment of severe, early-onset obesity in children.

Conclusions

This study highlighted that many parents who had a child with early-onset severe obesity faced significant judgement from healthcare providers, family, and ancillary individuals. Overall, we show that parents of children with early-onset obesity face many barriers to providing care for their children and multiple additional stressors directly related to their child's condition.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the American Diabetes Association [1-17-JDF-037] to SS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Research Service [cooperative agreement no. 58-6250-6-001 to SS. SS receives funding from Rhythm Pharmaceuticals for speaking and consulting engagements.

Bibliography

- Childhood Obesity Facts | Overweight & Obesity | CDC. Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>
- Wang F, Wild TC, Kipp W, Kuhle S, Veugelers PJ. The influence of childhood obesity on the development of self-esteem. *Heal reports*. 2009;20(2):21-27. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19728582>
- Zenlea IS, Thompson B, Fierheller D, et al. Walking in the shoes of caregivers of children with obesity: supporting caregivers in paediatric weight management. *Clin Obes*. 2017;7(5):300-306. doi:10.1111/cob.12202
- Puhl RM, Luedicke J, Grilo CM. Obesity bias in training: Attitudes, beliefs, and observations among advanced trainees in professional health disciplines. *Obesity*. 2014;22(4):1008-1015. doi:10.1002/oby.20637
- Sabin JA, Marini M, Nosek BA. Implicit and Explicit Anti-Fat Bias among a Large Sample of Medical Doctors by BMI, Race/Ethnicity and Gender. Fielding R, ed. *PLoS One*. 2012;7(11):e48448. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0048448