Parent-only interventions in the treatment of childhood obesity: a systematic review of randomized controlled trials

Childhood obesity has been established as a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, respiratory diseases, as well as musculoskeletal and psychological disorders. In addition to significant health effects, obesity also has strong economic repercussions. Given the World Health Organization’s classification of obesity as a global epidemic in 1997, it is urgent to find effective treatment options. Family-based interventions have been shown to be effective and are considered the current best practice in the treatment of childhood obesity. However, these interventions also have the potential to be costly. Parents, however, play a key role in the food choices and physical activity choices of their children. Consequently, it is possible that interventions targeting parents only could reduce intervention costs. This systematic review aimed “to add to the current knowledge in this area by including comparisons of parent-only groups with parent-child or child-only intervention groups for children aged 5-12 years.”

Eight studies met the inclusion criteria for the review. Overall, “this study sets out to determine whether parent-only interventions are effective in the treatment of obesity in children aged 5-12 years compared with child-only or parent and child interventions. While two studies showed an increased reduction in the degree of overweight in the parent-only groups compared with parent-child and child-only interventions, the other four studies’ results suggest that parent-only interventions are at least as good as parent-child interventions with regard to their effectiveness in the treatment of childhood obesity.”

Previously, studies have shown that family-based interventions are an effective option in the treatment of childhood obesity. This study suggests that parent-only interventions might have a comparable impact as parent-child interventions in treating childhood obesity.