

The overweight debate and reactions to it

International study of school-aged children (HBSC). Many adolescents – especially girls – regard themselves as overweight even if their body mass index (BMI) contradicts this assertion. This finding, along with a number of other insights of relevance to effective prevention, has been brought to light by a study of dietary and physical activity patterns in 11–15 year olds.

In 2006, as part of the international study of «Health Behaviour in School-aged Children» (HBSC), dietary and physical activity behaviour was surveyed in a total of 9,791 Swiss schoolchildren aged between 11 and 15. The survey reveals an inconclusive picture for Swiss adolescents. Of particular concern is the distorted body image found in many kids/juveniles. The topic of (over)weight appears to be making a profound impression on this age group – and not just in a positive way.

Many in the normal weight range feel overweight

Every third girl aged between 11 and 15 feels overweight, compared with every fourth boy. In most cases, however, this subjective rating does not tally with the reality. 15 year olds in particular rate their bodies too critically: BMI does not indicate overweight in 63% of the boys and 83% of the girls who rate themselves as overweight or obese. On the other hand, incorrect self-ratings in the other direction are rarely seen: only 8.4% of boys and 1.6% of girls who report being satisfied with their weight are, by any objective measure, overweight. The proportion of boys who feel too thin is 16.5%, compared with only 10.8% of girls.



More and more schoolchildren want to lose weight

In 2006, 10.6% of boys and 15.9% of girls in the 11–15 age group went on a diet or took other action to lose weight. The proportion of school-aged children who consciously want to lose weight at this age grew significantly between 2002 and 2006. 15 year old boys tend to favour sport for this purpose, while girls of the same age prefer to diet. 28.3% of boys and 63.8% of girls who are overweight go on a diet. However, 5.9% of boys and 18.2% of girls who are of normal weight or even slightly underweight also diet.

Inconclusive findings for Switzerland by international standards

Compared with the 40 other European countries participating in the 2006 HBSC, the dietary and physical activity behaviour of Swiss school-aged children shows a mixed picture. According to the current guidelines of the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) and the Federal Office for Sport (BASPO), children and young people should be physically active for at least one hour each day. In Switzerland, only 15.2% of boys and 10.5% of girls in the 11–15 age group comply with these guidelines. In this respect Switzerland is therefore very poorly positioned in the international ranking: among the 41 countries, it has the lowest percentage of 11 year olds who engage in a physical activity for at least one hour each day. It is second from the bottom for 13 year olds and in 31st place for 15 year olds.

Surprisingly, despite their relative lack of physical activity, Swiss 11 year olds are the least overweight. Across all age groups, however, the study shows – as expected – a positive correlation between physical activity and bodyweight. The proportion of children who are overweight declines as physical activity increases. 17.5% of inactive children are overweight – almost twice the figure (6.7%) for children who engage in a physical activity for at least one hour a day on six days of the week.

Unpopular breakfast, popular fruit

Switzerland is one of the 15 countries in which children are least likely to have a daily breakfast. Yet it is also among the 15 countries with the highest consumption of fruit and vegetables. The findings are less positive when it comes to daily consumption of soft drinks, a ranking in which Switzerland hold a middle position. However, the daily consumption of cola and other soft drinks that contain sugar fell significantly among both boys and girls in all age groups between 2002 and 2006. But there was no change in the daily consumption of sweets or chocolate. A majority of children eat potato crisps (chips) and fast food only occasionally.

On the whole, dietary patterns vary to an appreciable extent according to gender and age. Girls, for instance, eat healthy food – particularly fruit and vegetables – more often than boys do. The same applies to younger as opposed to older children. On the other hand, a daily breakfast is commoner among boys and younger children than among girls and older children.

Prevention must avoid stigmatisation

What conclusions can be drawn from the HBSC study in terms of prevention?

The HBSC survey of school-aged children

The study of «Health Behaviour in School-aged Children» (HBSC) is conducted every four years under the aegis of the WHO Regional Office for Europe. The study focuses on dietary and physical activity patterns among 11-15 year olds. The latest survey, in which 41 countries participated, took place in 2006. The study is conducted in Switzerland by the Swiss Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Problems (SIPA) and receives financial support from the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH).

On the one hand, the very great differences with regard to age and gender mean that prevention work must allow for differentiation. On the other, the large number of adolescents who consider themselves fat despite being of ideal weight shows that prevention has to tread carefully when addressing the problem of overweight. Excessive dramatisation can easily lead to stigmatisation and trigger overreactions among adolescents in the form of unnecessary concern about their figure or even eating disorders. It is still mostly girls who are affected, but an unhealthy slimness ideal also seems to be taking root among boys as well.

The Federal Office of Public Health is aware of this risk. Consequently, a great effort is being made to ensure that the measures taken under the Swiss Nutrition and Physical Activity Programme 2008–2012 (NPEB) do not stigmatise overweight and obesity. The aim of the NPEB is to motivate people, particularly the young, to eat healthily and take more exercise. This motivation should not be driven by fear of putting on weight but by enjoyment of healthy food and physical activity.

The full report on the 2006 HBSC study (in German) is available free of charge on the FOPH's website, under Themen -> Ernährung und Bewegung -> Forschung -> Forschungsberichte, and from www.sfa-ispa.ch, under -> Forschung -> Aktuelle Projekte

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