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MEDIA RELEASE

FATHERS' PARENTING STYLE LINKED TO CHILDHOOD OBESITY

Fathers may be more important than mothers in determining whether a child becomes overweight or obese, according to a ground-breaking new Australian study by the Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

The study looked at nearly 5,000 4 to 5 year olds and investigated the relationship between their body mass index (BMI) status and the parenting styles of their mothers and fathers. The study's findings will be presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies' annual meeting in Toronto between May 4 and 9.

The study found that fathers who had permissive (allowing children freedom without limits) or disengaged parenting styles were more likely to have heavier children. Conversely, fathers whose parenting was more consistent (setting clear limits, following through with instructions etc) were less likely to have a child with a higher BMI. Mothers' parenting behaviours and styles were not associated with a child's risk of having a higher BMI.

Childhood obesity in Australia and around the world is growing at an alarming rate, with an earlier study by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) finding that more than 20% of Australian preschool children are overweight or obese. Obesity is a precursor to serious diseases, both during youth and later in adulthood, such as asthma, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

"This study of a large cross-section of Australian pre-schoolers has, for the first time, suggested that fathers could be at the frontline in preventing early childhood obesity," explains Associate Professor Melissa Wake of CCCH. "Mothers are often blamed for their children's obesity, but this study suggests that for more effective prevention perhaps we should focus on the whole family.

"Given the importance of the family unit in a child's preschool years, and its influence on their nutrition and physical activity levels, it is timely to look at the parenting roles of both parents and the impact they have on a child's tendency to be overweight or obese," she said. "This makes even more sense given that more than 40% of these young mothers and more than 60% of these young fathers were themselves overweight or obese."

“We know from earlier research that childhood obesity is highly stable during the primary school years, right from school entry. For instance, the BMI of a prep-grade child has an 85% correlation with their BMI three years later. Obese school children are very likely to become obese adults,” warns Associate Professor Wake.

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Notes to editor

The Centre for Community Child Health is at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood development and behaviour and its findings are used to inform public policy, service delivery and professional practice. The Centre is a department of The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne, a key research centre of the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and an academic centre of the University of Melbourne.

CCCH’s Policy Brief on childhood obesity, summarising the research evidence and the implications for public policy, will be released in May 2007 and will be available to download from: www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm

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