

Editorial praises childhood obesity study that finds 'genes are not destiny'

October 2 2018, by Ellen Goldbaum



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University at Buffalo childhood obesity experts are praising a study published Monday in *JAMA Pediatrics* that rigorously assessed how the home environments of young children who are genetically at high risk

for obesity can influence whether they become overweight or obese.

"The study's main finding was that genetic influences on children's [body mass index](#) (BMI) depends upon their [home environment](#)," said Myles S. Faith, Ph.D., professor of counseling, school and educational psychology in the UB Graduate School of Education.

He co-authored an editorial in *JAMA Pediatrics* with Leonard H. Epstein, Ph.D., SUNY Distinguished Professor of Pediatrics in the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at UB. They were invited to write it in response to a study by Valerie Schrepft of University College in London and her colleagues.

"The study found that for kids living in less 'obesogenic' homes—for example, who had more access to fruits and vegetables and who watched less television—the size of the genetic influence was cut roughly in half," said Faith. "Thus, genes are not destiny. Healthier homes can potentially offset obesogenic genes."

The UB professors commended the researchers for characterizing the relationship between genes and the environment "as one of nature interacting with nurture rather than nature vs. nurture."

"Most genetics studies have been positioned as 'nature versus nurture' in the onset of [obesity](#) in [childhood](#), rather than nature and nurture working in combination," Faith said. "The study by Schrepft et al. took such an approach and had novel discoveries. It was an exciting opportunity to comment upon this study, and what it could mean for pediatricians and other health providers treating [pediatric obesity](#)."

According to the editorial, research has shown that children living in homes that are less "cognitively enriched"—that is, homes with fewer games, books and activities—are more likely to become obese. Faith

noted that much childhood obesity research also has demonstrated the power of family interventions and the establishment of healthier homes and lifestyles."In terms of genetic research on childhood obesity, however, direct measures of the home environment rarely have been taken," he said. "By using rigorous measures of the [home](#) environment and strong behavioral theories as a compass, the door for new genetic research opens up.

"These findings imply that homes promoting healthy eating and activity, if sustained, can partially offset children's genetic susceptibilities to obesity. This can be a powerful and empowering message to families from [health care providers](#), courtesy of genetics research."

Faith is an expert on [childhood obesity](#) and the eating behavior of kids, as well as on how parents can be agents of change for their children. Epstein is a renowned investigator in behavioral medicine and nutrition, and an internationally recognized expert on childhood weight control and family intervention.

More information: Healthy Homes and Obesogenic Genes in Young Children *JAMA Pediatr.* Published online October 1, 2018. [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.1945](#) , [jamanetwork.com/journals/jamap...cle-abstract/2703912](#)

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Editorial praises childhood obesity study that finds 'genes are not destiny' (2018, October 2) retrieved 5 May 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-editorial-childhood-obesity-genes-destiny.html>

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