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Dear Parents: Your Child Is Fat

By Jack Losh / London

School children across England will soon have their [Body Mass Index](#) (BMI) tested as part of a new effort to tackle the growing problem of childhood obesity. Parents will be sent a letter telling them whether their child is underweight, a healthy weight, overweight or very overweight. The letter will also include leaflets giving advice on eating healthily, physical activities their child might do and the risks of being overweight.

So, are parents really failing to notice their little angels piling on the pounds? Yes, says the U.K.'s Department of Health. "Today, when more children are overweight compared with previous generations, it can be harder for parents to objectively identify if their child is overweight," says a spokeswoman from the Department of Health. "Research shows that most parents of overweight or obese children think that their child is a healthy weight. Some research showed that only 10% of parents with overweight or obese children described their child as overweight."

Still, it pays to break the news of a child's problem gently. Following the advice of numerous obesity experts, the Department of Health has decided that the name of the final, portliest category — very overweight — was a more sensible choice than obese. "Preliminary findings of the survey suggest that many people who would be defined clinically as obese find the use of the term obese highly offensive and would stop listening to further advice."

The softly-softly approach doesn't please everyone. "To shrink from using the word obesity is really ducking an issue," insists Dr Colin Waine, Chairman of the National Obesity Forum. "It does not have to be used in a judgmental or insulting way: if a child is obese then the parents should know that its obese. We must make parents know that the lifestyle of the family needs to be modified."

Statistics on childhood obesity in Britain make grim reading. Figures from 2006, the most recent numbers, show that nearly a third of all children aged between two and 15 are overweight or obese, an overall increase of 11% from 1995.

The U.K. childhood obesity rate is comparable to that in the U.S., where obesity in children aged between six and

11 has tripled over the past three decades, which may be why a few U.S. states already send reports on heavy kids home to parents. The College of Natural Resources at the University of California, Berkeley, published a paper in November 2006 describing the "risks and benefits of BMI reporting in the school setting", and in May 2007, Wyoming started a program in which students' report cards came complete with their BMI.

Some worry that such information should be given more discreetly: "Our feeling is that the information should be given to parents if there is a serious health concern much like any other health concern a child might have," said Meghan Cavanaugh, a spokeswoman at the Childhood Weight Control Program, the University of Buffalo. "This information should not be included on a report card or such. Medical information should be kept separate."

Based on current growth rates, obesity is predicted to cost the wider community of the U.K. around \$100 billion a year by 2050, according to the Department of Health. "The Government must lead on action across society to tackle obesity. Engaging parents in this issue is essential to achieving success in instigating behavioral change."

"This is a really serious problem," says Dr Waine. "We're in danger of producing a generation of children with a shorter life expectancy. We can't just say that's acceptable."

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