Fact sheet 1.2 Importance of healthy nutrition and exercise

Learning aim B: Physical development from birth up to eight years

Obesity

According to the Obesity Profile (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) around 63 per cent of adults are above a healthy weight and around 30 per cent of these are obese. One in three children who leave primary school are overweight.

Research suggests that the highest prevalence of obesity is in those living in the most deprived areas and/or those on low incomes.

Studies have shown that childhood obesity can negatively affect a child's mental health and wellbeing and their educational outcomes. Some studies have shown a small trend among adolescents with obesity failing to complete tertiary education. Studies have also shown there is an impact of obesity on children's ability to make friendships, particularly girls, where it can negatively affect their emotional wellbeing.

Obesity also impacts upon a child's physical health as there are risks associated such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some forms of cancer.

While lifestyle factors are a major predictor of obesity, significant events can also have an impact. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic saw an almost doubling of obesity rates but some studies have since noted a decline in these levels, suggesting effects can be reversed. The UK government put forward plans for tackling obesity, including non-promotion of food and drinks with high fat, salt and sugar content; however, these have yet to be implemented.

The socioeconomic status of parents can also affect the likelihood of obesity; those from low-income families find the rising cost of food impossible to meet and therefore rely often on processed cheaper alternatives. Families may live in areas that are deprived, and children may have limited opportunities to be outside and get exercise, especially if they are living in flats or areas where there are no local parks or other facilities.

It is therefore important that professionals working in early years settings ensure they support the healthy development of children and engage the children in activities that will promote healthy lifestyles. There are a number of ways that professionals can do this including:

- preparing nutritious meals for children in day care
- discouraging children from eating snacks high in sugar and carbohydrates
- providing activities and resources to promote children's awareness and participation of healthy eating and physical exercise
- supporting parents and carers to meet children's nutritional and exercise needs by ensuring positive links are made between home and setting environments.

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