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Abstract Title:

The influence of family environment on nutrition, physical activity and screen-time in socioeconomically disadvantaged primary school-aged children in Malta

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Abstract

Research abstract

Background

There has been a sharp rise in the global prevalence of childhood obesity in recent decades (1). Childhood obesity is a major public health challenge in Malta, which has been identified as having the highest rates of obesity in 11- and 13-year-olds among countries participating in the 7th round of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study (2). Families of lower socioeconomic status bear the burden of overweight and obesity disproportionately, as evidence for the WHO European Region (3) and for Malta (4) shows. The family environment is seen as the formative setting in which children's weight-determining behaviours are molded. A greater understanding of the family environment may therefore help to explain these socioeconomic differences.

Methodology

Main care-givers of primary school-aged children from socio-economically disadvantaged families were recruited to participate in this multi-case study via social workers from Appogg, who work with vulnerable families. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews explored various aspects of the family environment such as health knowledge and beliefs, parenting and family routines as they related to children's diet, physical activity and screen-time. The researcher also recorded her observations and reflections after each interview. Data analysis was carried out using NVIVO software and interviews and observations were coded inductively. A further step in analysis, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is planned. This will enable cross-case comparisons through the application of Boolean logic and set theory.

Results

15 interviews were held with caregivers of children attending primary school. These included families with diverse family structures, origins and areas of residence. Initial qualitative analysis identified several aspects of the family environment as important influences on children's weight-determining behaviours. The over-arching influences identified were family knowledge and norms,



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parenting behaviours, family resiliency and barriers to healthful behaviours patterns. Further analysis is ongoing.

Conclusions

This study aims to provide greater insight into the Maltese family environment of primary school-aged children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families with regards to the dietary patterns, physical activity and screen-time.

Message

An improved understanding of the factors of the family environment that influence weight-determining behaviours will help to inform the design and planning of targeted interventions for child obesity prevention that are tailored to the local context.

(References not included due to word limit, available upon request.)