

15 May 2007 Loughborough researchers urge Government to rethink childhood obesity strategy
The Government's continued initiative to monitor the weight and height of primary school children could force the debate on childhood health to become too narrow, according to Loughborough University researchers.

Supporters say the tests, which measure the height and weight of each child to calculate their Body Mass Index (BMI) will help to increase parental awareness of obesity, while opponents claim the initiative could lead to overweight children being misinformed about their health.

The Loughborough researchers – Professor John Evans and Dr Emma Rich from the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences – agree the potentially damaging effect on the children themselves could outweigh the benefits.

“Previous attempts to carry out this measure met with limited success because some parents refused to let their children participate and some children, girls in particular refused to be weighed,” said Professor Evans.

“Even the Government's own ‘Expert Advisory Group’ states ‘screening for childhood obesity could not guarantee to do more good than harm’ and advised that ‘a screening programme was not appropriate’.

“But, ignoring the lessons of yesteryear, as well as the advice of its own advisory groups, Government is pressing ahead with the initiative.”

The researchers have also expressed concerns about the value of the BMI as a measuring tool as research suggests it is too imprecise and not a method that should be used on its own to make judgements about a person's ‘health’.

“Body Mass Index is not the bearer of incontrovertible ‘facts’ about ‘health’, particularly children's,” added Professor Evans.

“As a tool for monitoring ‘weight trends’ the BMI may have inherent merits but for screening, or use by head teachers or OFSTED to assess and make judgements on schools, or worse still, individual children's ‘health’, it is highly questionable and the benefits of such practices could outweigh the harms.”

Professor Al Ansley-Green, who is the President of the Children's Commission for England and is speaking at Loughborough University on Wednesday, has also said that BMI checks in schools could lead to parents being provided with an inaccurate and confusing picture of no benefit.

The Loughborough researchers' opinions stem from the Government's pilot programmes conducted in Birmingham, Blackburn, Middlesbrough and Hull and their own research into the experiences at school of girls and young women suffering from eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Their findings revealed that many sufferers strongly believe that their excessive exercising and dieting was nurtured and sanctioned, albeit inadvertently by the well-meaning actions of teachers and health experts in schools.

“Researchers are now regularly reporting that young people, especially young women, are increasingly feeling deeply disaffected with their body shape and size, added Professor Evans.

“Concentrating on weight and shape in schools will do little to enhance their well being and even less to support those who are trying to get young people involved in physical activity and be healthy whatever their shape and size.”