

## How Do Friends Affect Teenagers' Health Behaviours?

Wencke Gwozdz (Copenhagen Business School)  
[wg.ikl@cbs.dk](mailto:wg.ikl@cbs.dk)

**How friends affect one another's health and behaviour has been gaining attention in public and academic debates around obesity and health in general.**

Identifying how peers influence one another is valuable because it implies that policies to combat obesity can have a 'social multiplier effect.' Existing evidence suggests that peers do affect one another's weight status. But most studies have been in an Anglo-Saxon context and look only at adults.

In I.Family we explored this influence among European children – both its extent and the ways in which it occurs. We looked at the two most important routes through which teenage friends could affect one another: first, norms about acceptable and desired weights and second, weight related behaviours such as eating and physical activity habits.

We also considered some wider peer effects, going beyond friendship circles and looking at some effects among parents.

### What we found

For children, teenagers and adults, we found that people's body weight was related to those of their peers. This was true right across Europe. Such similarities occur at several different levels.

Using the widest possible definition of 'peers,' meaning all the people in a similar age group in a country, we found a weak relationship. At the more local level, grouping together all children in the same kindergarten/school and of the same sex and age, we found a stronger relationship.

In addition, by asking teenagers who their friends were, I.Family was able to go into more depth than previous studies and look at peers, in the narrower sense of friendship groups.

We have found several pathways through which peers influence one another:

1. On a national level, we find stronger associations between peers' body weight in collectivistic societies, as compared to more individualistic societies. As we would expect, in societies where the community is more influential, groups prove more important than individuals.<sup>1</sup>



Collectivistic and individualistic countries included in the study

2. Parents' perception of their child's weight is influenced by how much other children weigh. Parents perceive their child to be thinner than he or she is when other children around are heavier. The opposite effect occurs when other children around are slimmer.<sup>2</sup>
3. We found that teenagers' unhealthy food consumption is strongly associated with their friends' unhealthy food consumption (sugar sweetened beverages, fatty foods, food high in sugar and fast foods). However, this is not true for healthy foods (vegetable/fruit consumption, fibre rich foods).<sup>3</sup>
4. Patterns of sedentary behaviour and leisure time activity also tend to be more similar between teenagers and their friends.<sup>3</sup>

### Insights for policy

Greater knowledge about how peers affect one another's weight has important practical implications. It also helps to understand how parents' perceptions are affected.

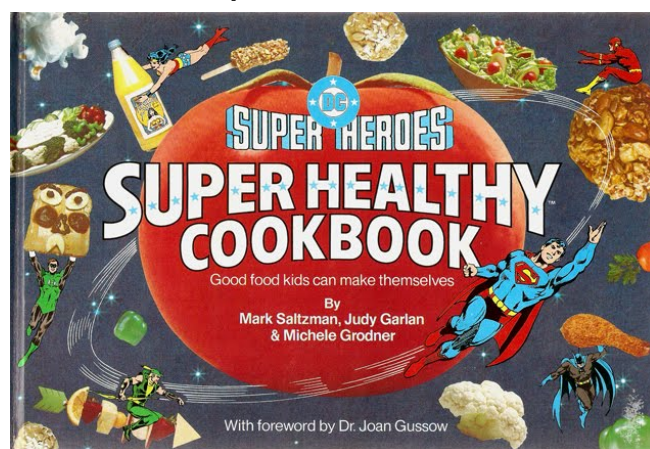
- **We should tailor interventions to the relevant social norms and value systems.** In collectivistic societies, it makes more sense to target the group and social norms. In individualistic societies, interventions should address the individual.

#### Example for collectivistic societies



Social norms marketing campaign at Evanston Township High School (2001)  
<http://www.socialnormsresources.org/casestudies/evanston2.php>

#### Example for individualistic societies



Cover of DC Super Heroes Super Healthy Cookbook (1981)

<https://playingwithresearch.com/2011/03/31/awesomest-cookbook-ever/>

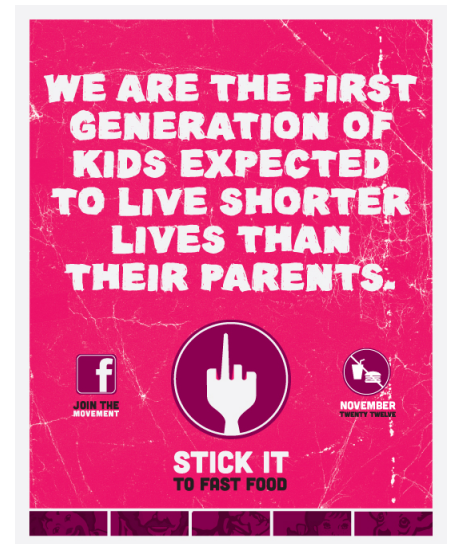
- **Make parents aware of misperceptions**, for example, by showing how common childhood obesity is in general or in their community.

Article in *theravive* entitled 'Obese Enablement: A Gut Check for Families of Overweight Children' (20 Sept 2013)  
<http://www.theravive.com/today/post/Obese-Denial-A-Gut-Check-For-Parents-of-Overweight-Children-0000215.aspx>

"In 2010, nearly one third of all kids through age 17 in the United States were overweight or obese."  
**Childhood Obesity Month 9/13**  
 also more prone to develop  
*theravive*

- **Use social norms to discourage unhealthy eating and sedentary behaviour.** The illustration to the right gives one example of an attempt to decrease fast food consumption among adolescents.

**Grassroot campaign 'Stick it to Fast Food' by the Ontario Student Trustees Association (2012)**  
[http://www.ottawafamilyliving.com/stick\\_it\\_to\\_fast\\_food\\_](http://www.ottawafamilyliving.com/stick_it_to_fast_food_)



<sup>1</sup> Nie et al. 2016. Values, Norms and Peer Effects on Weight Status. Unpublished I.Family report, to be submitted for publication.

The diagram of European countries' value orientations is based on Hofstede et al. 2010. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Third Edition. McGraw Hill.

<sup>2</sup> Gwozdz et al. 2015. Peer Effects on Obesity in a Sample of European Children. *Economics & Human Biology* 18: 139-152.

<sup>3</sup> Gwozdz et al. 2016. Peer Effects on Weight Status, Dietary Behaviour and Physical Activity among Adolescents in Europe: Findings from the I.Family Study. Paper in submission.