

Educating China's elderly to fight obesity in the young

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School children on the CHIRPY DRAGON scheme. Credit: University of Birmingham

Academics from the University of Birmingham, UK are engaging with grandparents in China, to help tackle the increasing problem of obesity amongst Chinese children in a trailblazing public health programme.

Although there are various factors that may contribute to the

development of overweight or obesity in children, a child's family life plays an important role. University of Birmingham research shows that Chinese children who are mainly cared for by their [grandparents](#) are more than twice as likely to be overweight or obese, compared with those who are mainly looked after by their parents or other adults.

It has been estimated that over 30million children between the ages of seven and 18 years are overweight or obese in China. However, until now, rigorously developed and evaluated prevention interventions have remained scarce.

Many grandparents in China believe that being heavy at a young age will benefit a child as they grow old and they often use food as a way to express love and care. This behaviour, coupled with the fact that many Chinese grandparents have lived through famine, perpetuates the issue of [childhood obesity](#) in China.

Chinese grandparents are increasingly the main caretakers of children in three-generation families and have a greater say in youngster's eating behaviours and physical activity. Through quizzes, interactive learning activities and behavioural challenges, the University of Birmingham academics are hoping that they can change perceptions and encourage grandparents to favour and support healthier and more active lifestyles among the young.

Over 61,000 children at 43 primary schools in Guangdong province will be involved in a project by the University of Birmingham that is hoped to eventually be rolled out across China. As well as engaging with grandparents the programme, CHInese pRimary school children PhYsical activity and DietaRy behAviour chanGe InterventiON (CHIRPY DRAGON), also involves improving the nutritional quality and taste of school meals. CHRIPY DRAGON facilitators will further encourage parents to engage in more [physical activity](#) with [children](#) at

home and better implement the national requirement for one hour of exercise per day at school.

Dr Bai Li, Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Public Health, Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the University of Birmingham is currently working in China, training up the local officers who will deliver the programme. CHIRPY DRAGON has its origins in Dr Li's PhD research, which developed culturally relevant intervention activities and implementation strategies to prevent childhood obesity in China. She said:

'CHIRPY DRAGON is a truly groundbreaking project, not least for the families that may benefit, but also for the example it sets for future higher education institutions to work together with Chinese governmental bodies and corporate partners. Taking things forward, we would love to see the developed programme being rolled out to benefit more Chinese people.

'We also hope the findings will be relevant to other emerging economies experiencing similar problems, such as India, Thailand and Malaysia, as well as countries such as Japan and South Korea, where grandparents have a more active role in a child's upbringing.'

CHIRPY DRAGON has been developed through research overseen by a group of academics at the University of Birmingham. Professor of Public Health, Peymane Adab, who leads the team, said:

'The rate of increase in childhood obesity over the last decade in Chinese urban areas exceeds that seen in many Western populations. Lessons learnt from other countries need to inform intervention now, to reduce the future burden of chronic disease in China.'

The programme has been made possible thanks to a £500,000 (nearly ¥5 million) donation from Zhejiang Yong Ning Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd. It

marks one of the first instances of a Chinese business funding resources abroad to be then invested back in to China, with academic knowledge and support in the UK reinforced by locally recruited health promotion officers.

Tianjian Ye, Deputy President of Yong Ning added:

'Yong Ning shares the University of Birmingham's passion in eradicating childhood obesity in China. This unique partnership will allow us to help Chinese families whilst nourishing friendship and encouraging more partnerships between our two countries.'

Provided by University of Birmingham

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