

Anti-fat attitudes shaped early in life

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Juan Carreño de Miranda's "La monstrua desnuda" (The Nude Monster) painting.

New findings from New Zealand's University of Otago suggest older toddlers—those aged around 32 months old—are picking up on the anti-fat attitudes of their mothers.

The study, involving researchers from New Zealand, Australia, and the US, comes on the back of studies showing that obesity [prejudice](#) and discrimination are on the rise.

Professor Ted Ruffman, from Otago's Department of Psychology, says "anti-fat prejudice is associated with social isolation, depression, psychiatric symptoms, low self-esteem and [poor body image](#)".

Previous research had indicated anti-fat prejudice could be seen in pre-school children aged slightly more than three-and-a-half years old and was well-established in five- to ten- year-olds. But the research by Professor Ruffman and his team

suggests these [attitudes](#) have an even earlier genesis.

The team showed 70 infants and toddlers pairs of photos of people—one in which the person was obese, the other where the person was in a [normal weight](#) range. Their faces were covered to put the focus on the body type. At the same time they used questionnaires to gauge the mother's attitude to obesity.

"What we found is that younger infants, around 11 months of age, preferred to look at obese figures, whereas the older toddler group, around 32 months old, preferred to look at average-sized figures," says Professor Ruffman.

"Furthermore we found that preference was strongly related to maternal anti-fat prejudice. It was a high correlation—the more the mother had expressed anti-fat attitudes in the questionnaire, the more the older toddlers would look away from the obese figure towards the normal weight one."

The researchers also looked at other potential factors such as parental BMI, education and even children's TV viewing but these were unrelated to the sort of figure the child preferred to look at. Professor Ruffman says it is not meant to be a mother-blaming exercise, but does indicate how early children begin to absorb and display the attitudes of those around them. "It's just that mothers tend to be the primary caregivers and they are just reflecting wider societal attitudes," he says.

Professor Ruffman says that "some argue this anti-fat prejudice is innate but our results indicate it is socially learned, which is consistent with findings about other forms of prejudice. What is surprising, is that children are picking up on these things so early".

Study co-author Associate Professor Kerry O'Brien from Monash University, says "weight-based prejudice is causing significant social, psychological, and physical harms to those

stigmatised. It's driving body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in underweight populations; and [social isolation](#), avoidance of exercise settings, and depression in very overweight populations. We need to find ways to address this prejudice."

The research is published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

More information: Ted Ruffman et al. Toddlers' bias to look at average versus obese figures relates to maternal anti-fat prejudice, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2015.10.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2015.10.008)

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