



**Childhood Obesity: Really?  
A Response.**

The editorial of the preceding issue of the Revue phénEPS-PHENex Journal on the subject of childhood obesity prompted an interesting reaction by a well known scholar in the area of physical education, Dr Michael Metzler. We therefore decided to share Dr. Metzler's response with the readers. We reproduce the editorial followed by Dr Metzler's response.

This time as an editorial I want to write on a subject that is bugging me and has been for some time. It is a subject closely related to physical activity, physical education and recreation: childhood obesity. It bugs me because my everyday life and experiences are so different from the media and research message. I would dare to write the "apocalyptic" message. Is there really a "childhood obesity epidemic?" Is "this generation going to die before their parents?" Really? I must admit my skepticism when I hear or read such messages.

My primary contact with childhood comes through my visits with my five grandchildren, three boys and two girls, ages 1 to 7. None of these 5 children are either overweight or obese. I am also in contact with childhood and adolescence through my supervision of student teachers as I see many groups of children from kindergarten to grade 9-10. I rarely see overweight or obese children or adolescents. At the same time, I am told that overweight and obesity are becoming more and more common among preschool-age children in Canada. Two independent reports from separate regions in Canada indicate that the prevalence of obesity in children aged 2 to 5 years is between 8 and 11%. National surveillance data show that 15.2% of 2-to 5-year-old children are overweight, and 6.3% are obese. (Active Healthy Kids Report Card, 2010)

I am quite sure that in recent years many of you have heard or read the expression "childhood obesity epidemic." I get very confused when what is said or written about the "weight" of children is so different from my personal experiences. What is going on? Am I living on the moon??? I can hear you saying, "Yours is a personal experience and the scientific data provides a more global picture of the situation." Conceded.

But let's go a step further. How can we be so certain that the "scientific data" are valid and give a precise global picture of childhood obesity? For such a picture to emerge, the data presented has to rely on a valid measure of obesity. After all, you can only have confidence in the numbers on obesity if measured appropriately.

I started reading "The Obesity Epidemic – Science, morality and ideology" by Michael Gard and Jan Wright (2005). These authors write "...there are many questions that we should ask before putting our faith in the idea of an obesity epidemic" (p.3). I thought to myself, "Finally another skeptic." Amongst these numerous questions, the one about the validity of the measure of obesity is treated in detail. Many of us have heard about "body mass index" (BMI). BMI is the most widely used measure of obesity in English speaking countries. So my question (as well as theirs) becomes, "Is the BMI a

valid measure of fatness in children and adolescents?” Without such a valid measure this entire message about the “obesity epidemic” would be groundless.

According to Gard and Wright (2005) “BMI is a highly problematic measure of fatness...in general”(p.92). Furthermore, “it is not suitable for assessing body composition in children, does not account for what seems to be natural age-related changes in body composition...” (p.93). I personally have been intrigued for a long time about how a measure like BMI can be used when age-related growth in height and weight is so “uneven.” Well, I have Gard and Wright’s answer: it should not. And almost every parent, grandparent, and children or adolescents themselves, would agree growth comes in spurts. In many instances, BMI is influenced more by growth than by accumulated fatness.

Childhood obesity is an important topic. It is a topic too important to not be careful and to not question what we read about it.

Those are my grandchildren and I love them.

Pierre Boudreau, Professor  
Faculty of Education  
University of Ottawa  
[pboudrea@uottawa.ca](mailto:pboudrea@uottawa.ca)

#### Response from Dr Michael Metzler

Debating the existence of an obesity epidemic directs our attention away from what I think are more scientifically valid and documented needs for a rapidly growing number of children and youth in developed countries. Those issues stem from a very strong base of evidence that too many children lead lives with insufficient levels of physical activity, putting too many of them at risk for a large number of childhood and adult illnesses correlated with low levels of physical activity in the developmental years. In addition, new research shows that other facets of children’s lives are also negatively affected—cognitive function, academic performance, and some psychological states (e.g., depression).

Children’s weight, expressed as BMI or any other metric, is a result of the way they move (or not), eat, and make other health-related decisions. Obesity is merely one of many symptoms that manifest from the underlying problem of too little physical activity in too many children’s lives today.

Rather than debating the existence of an obesity epidemic (real or perceived) we should be focusing our attention on designing and implementing school programs that can lead children to become and stay more physically active—regardless of their BMI (or any other measure of weight). So, we should not let ourselves get caught up in a debate that: a) really doesn’t matter to children, and b) keeps us from pursuing more legitimate questions about the goals of PE in schools today.

Mike Metzler  
Georgia State University  
[mmetzler@gsu.edu](mailto:mmetzler@gsu.edu)

You have an opinion on either one of these positions? You want to participate in the debate?  
Please feel free to do so using our emails.

Have a great summer! I will.  
Riding my bike with my wife and grandchildren!

Sourires ☺ ☺

*Pierre*