**Pediatric obesity and brain functioning: the role of physical activity – A novel and important expert opinion of the European Childhood Obesity Group.**

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**Key Words.** Cognitive Function; Brain Health; Pediatric Obesity; Physical Activity

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**Running title.** Physical activity and Cognitive functioning in pediatric obesity

**Acknowledgements.** ECI, FO, JJR and TD wrote the first draft of the manuscript. MP, MA, EE, FA, VE, CM, BE and WD significantly reviewed the draft and participated in the writing of the final version of this manuscript.

**Funding.** I.E-C is supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (RTI2018-095284-J-100)

**Abstract**

While most of the time unconsidered, child and adolescent obesity has been also associated with impaired brain health and function that can definitely affect their social interaction and integration, and then well-being and mental health. The European Childhood Obesity Group (ECOG) recently gathered experts in the field who discussed the main available and reliable evidence regarding the role of physical activity on brain health and cognitive functioning in children and adolescents with obesity and who propose here their main conclusions and recommendations.

Obesity is a major public health concern for developed and developing countries. Over the past years, paediatric obesity has more than doubled in children and tripled in adolescents worldwide (1). The consequences of childhood obesity are dramatic, leading to overweight/obesity later in life (2), future morbidity and mortality (3, 4), as well as metabolic, functional, psychosocial or quality of life impairments, among others (5, 6). While most of the time unconsidered, child and adolescent obesity has been also associated with impaired brain health, structure and function (7-10), that can definitely affect individuals’ day-to-day social interaction and integration, and even potential occupational success later in life (11).

Cognitive functioning effectively represents all mental processes that allow individuals to properly perform any task, allowing an active role in the processes of receiving, choosing, transforming, storing, processing and retrieval of information. Specifically, executive function refers to the higher cognitive processes that enable forethought and goal-directed action, and involves inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility (12). In youth, executive functions, in turn, have been suggested to predict academic performance (13). While the association between obesity and impaired executive function has been widely established in adults (14), this remains less known in children and adolescents. Indeed, while some studies support the existence of executive function deficits in individuals with overweight/obesity, others fail to observe these differences (9). As such, there is still a clear need to better identify not only the cause-effects relationships between obesity and executive function during childhood and adolescence, but also their underlying brain implications, since healthier brain may imply improved executive function, and in turn, better and healthier eating and activity choices (15, 16).

Paediatric obesity may compromise brain health by influencing both brain structure and function (8, 15, 17, 18). Structural neuroimaging studies in paediatric populations showed that obesity has been linked to smaller grey matter volume in brain regions involved in executive function, such as the prefrontal cortex (18). In addition, childhood obesity was associated with differences in white matter organization mainly in frontal and temporal brain regions (8). Resting-state functional connectivity studies identiﬁed that adolescent obesity is related to reduced global functional connectivity in the brain regions that are involved in executive function, namely the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and involved in emotional memory in the middle temporal cortex (15). A recent study moreover demonstrated that a higher BMI was associated with thinner cortex in widespread parts of the brain, examined by structural MRI, in a large sample of 3190 children aged 9 and 10 years. The strongest of the BMI associations were observed in the prefrontal cortex, which represents mental processes critical to decision-making and the planning of complex behavior. Greater BMI was significantly associated with poorer performance on several executive functions (19). In contrast, other studies found no associations or even positive associations between obesity and brain structure (e.g., cortical thickness or gray and white matter volume) (20, 21). Thus, the cause–effect relationship between obesity, brain health and executive function might be positive, negative or neutral and even exist in both directions, as neurocognitive and other psychiatric disorders may also cause obesity, and it is important to take into account the potential bi-directionallity of this association.

Collectively, children and adolescents are exposed, in parallel, to both the potential effects of obesity-related biology changes and the establishment of brain–behavior connections. Specifically, childhood and early adolescence are considered critical periods for neurodevelopment, in which youth are sensitive to experience changes in their brain’s structure and function, as well as in the executive function, since the brain matures, develops, learns, and forms connections (22). Although multidisciplinary weight loss interventions in children and adolescents with obesity have shown improved response inhibition, sustained attention and enhanced memory as well as reaction time and brain function among others (23-25), recent studies seem to suggest the particular interest of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity physical activity to improve brain health (26). A recent study demonstrated that light to moderate physical activity intensity and step-related behaviors, but not sedentary time, are positively associated to brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) in children with overweight/obesity (27). However, the available evidence regarding physical activity and other lifestyle behaviors and their influence on brain health in children and adolescents, and particularly in the context of obesity, is still scarce (28).

In that context, and in line with its main objective, that is to analyze and translate scientific evidence into daily practice, the European Childhood Obesity Group (ECOG) gathered experts in the field and dedicated a session to this topic during its 29th annual congress (Katowice, Poland; November 13-16 2019). This plenary session saw clear and in-depth presentations of the main available and reliable evidence regarding physical activity academic and brain health, including brain structure and function, executive function and academic performance, in the context of pediatric obesity.

Based on the evidence and discussions that came up from this session (figure 1), ECOG and the expert group collectively concluded that: i) brain structure and function, executive function and academic performance should be considered as important impairments related to pediatric obesity and not only as a secondary complication; ii) preventive and treatment strategies must promote daily physical activity (especially moderate-to-vigorous physical activity), favoring active settings and lifestyle, in order to maintain and improve both brain health, executive function and academic performance ; iii) school-based active strategies, such as more frequent Physical Education lessons, active playgrounds, active classes and active breaks could be encouraged and should aim at increasing the time devoted to moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. Indeed, such strategies have been shown to increase youth's physical activity level without impairing academic performance and potentially improving children's concentration and attention ; iv) physical activity interventions should focus on active games (when possible, with cognitive engagement) to increase enjoyment and adherence, and have long-lasting effects. These active games should focus not only on aerobic exercise, but also on motor skills exercise and muscular strength exercise; v) such interventions should assess potential mediators and moderators to better understand the relationship between physical activity and brain health in children with overweight/obesity; vi) further studies are obviously needed to better understand these relations between physical activity/physical fitness, brain health and pediatric obesity, and to identify weight loss intervention that can help improve brain health, executive function and academic performance in children with overweight/obesity; vii) integrative studies aiming at multiple lifestyle behaviors (e.g., eating patterns, physical activity, sedentary or sleep behaviors) for the establishment of brain–behavior connections during youth obesity are clearly warranted.

**Figure legend:**

Figure 1. Conceptual model on pediatric obesity, brain functioning and physical activity.

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