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Laurier researcher studies changes in parenting articles on obesity and kids' leisure time over past 30 years

WATERLOO – Linda Quirke is like many parents, spending Saturday mornings in a hockey arena watching her six-year-old son learn to stickhandle. But she's also different from many parents because she studies kids' leisure time and physical activity as an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Quirke is starting a new research project involving a review of magazine articles in *Today's Parent* from its first issue in 1984 up to current day. She is specifically looking at the kind of advice it gives to parents about how kids spend their leisure time, as well as issues related to weight and nutrition.

"I've always been interested in the way people parent, and whether that has changed over time," says Quirke. "I think it is important to look empirically at what was being discussed in the 1980s, and see if it's really different from the messages out there today."

In an initial smaller-scale study, she looked at articles that included the word "obese" or "obesity" and that were published in the mid-to-late 1990s, and in the last three years. In the articles published in the 1990s, the message to parents with a child who might be considered obese or overweight was that they had a responsibility to protect their kids' self-esteem.

"The underlying message to parents seemed to be that your child is going to be teased and suffer these negative outcomes, so you should make them feel better," says Quirke. "There were also great quotes that said 'Every body is a good body,'" and general references to eating a balanced diet and getting exercise."

Fast-forward a few years, and the message is very different. There is a heightened concern over obesity for all children, even those of a typical body weight. The more recent articles are often written in journal style, with parents submitting diaries of what their children have eaten over the course of a day. A pediatrician or dietician then weighs in.

"One big culprit that was mentioned over and over again was chocolate milk. And it's framed like, 'Aha! You thought that was safe. Well, it's not, because of the sugar,'" says Quirke. "It almost seems as if the tone of these articles — when you take them together — is that you need to be very, very concerned because even foods you thought were safe are harmful."

Ultimately, Quirke's research will inform a larger study in which she will talk to parents about how they make decisions about nutrition and leisure time, and what role physical activity in schools can play.

As for Quirke, she is very thoughtful about how her family spends its leisure time because she knows there are pitfalls to overscheduling her children.

"So it is a very odd experience because I know all of that literature, and I see myself doing it and I'm thinking — here I go! I just signed a cheque to minor hockey."