



## **PRESS RELEASE**

6th April 2012

### **TV-watching and overconsumption of unhealthy snacks and soft drinks: a serious threat to young children's health!**

TV-watching at weekends and consuming too many unhealthy snacks and soft drinks are making pre-school children pile on the pounds, according to research conducted by scientists in ten European countries.

Obesity among European pre-schoolers is hitting record levels, with more than one in eight children overweight in northern Europe, rising to more than 25% in parts of southern Europe. Young girls in Spain show the highest levels, with 38% of them now classified as overweight or obese. This dramatic evolution not only affects the future health of Europe's population but will also exert an enormous economic burden on society.

'We need a new approach to prevent obesity,' said the coordinator of the ToyBox-study, Dr Yannis Manios, Assistant Professor at Harokopio University, Athens. 'Young children are naturally energetic and they like being physically active since for them this is a way to interact socially and make friends. However, in the opposite direction, the natural human preference for sweet tasting and energy-dense foods and drinks is leading children towards these food items whenever they are exposed to them. For these reasons, obesity prevention programmes should try to ensure that children have free time and space to be physically active, create a healthy food and drink environment but also guide teachers and parents on how they can promote such behaviours.'

Dr Manios and his team highlighted the need for health-promoting policies. 'We found that many countries are lacking clear guidelines on healthy eating and active play,' he said. 'However, there is good evidence linking sedentary behaviour (like TV watching) with subsequent obesity. Therefore, TV-watching in kindergartens should be replaced by more active, non-competitive, fun activities which will promote the participation of the whole class and help children to achieve optimal growth, health and well-being.'

‘Similarly at home, TVs in the bedroom and unhealthy snacks in the kitchen cupboard are a bad idea. Parents should also remember that their role is not only to provide healthy food and drink options but to act as a role model themselves, since kids are copying their behaviours.’

The multi-country research project is supported by a €2.9m grant from the European Commission, and will include development and testing of a new programme designed to help kindergartens in 6 EU-countries to promote healthy snacking, water consumption, physical activity and limiting sedentary activities such as TV-watching and playing computer games.

Contact Dr. Yannis Manios tel: +30 210 954 9156, email [manios.toybox@hua.gr](mailto:manios.toybox@hua.gr)

## Notes

1. The results of the first phase of the ToyBox-study are published in the March 2012 edition of the journal *Obesity Reviews*.

See <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/obr.2012.13.issue-s1/issuetoc>

2. Countries involved in the ToyBox-study are: Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Institutions involved are:

Harokopio University, Athens, Greece – Coordinating Center

Dr von Hauner Children's Hospital, University of Munich, Germany

Ghent University, Belgium

VU University Medical Center, the Netherlands

Akershus University College, Norway

University of Zaragoza, Spain

Durham University, UK

State Institute of Early Childhood Research, Germany

Children's Memorial Health Institute, Poland

Medical University of Varna, Bulgaria

International Association for the Study of Obesity, UK

NIGZ, Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, the Netherlands

AOK-Verlag GmbH, Germany

University of Roehampton, UK

University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg

3. Further details of the ToyBox-study can be found at [www.toybox-study.eu/](http://www.toybox-study.eu/)

4. The ToyBox-study is funded with a grant from the European Commission DG Research, Seventh Framework Programme. The products of the research are the responsibility of the authors: the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of them.

