Combating Obesity and Diabetes in Kids

Practitioner Profile: Teri L. Bourdeau, PhD

Teri L. Bourdeau, PhD, came by her interest in the overlap between psychology and medical problems early – as far back as high school. As a teenager, she babysat for an infant who had undergone open heart surgery. “That was a big part of what made me go into pediatric psychology and health-related issues,” she says. “I became incredibly interested in the psychosocial aspects of different kinds of medical conditions and their impact on families.”

Today, Bourdeau is director of behavioral health clinics and a clinical associate professor of behavioral sciences at the Center for Health Sciences at Oklahoma State University’s College of Osteopathic Medicine in Tulsa. And she’s still fascinated by the psychological factors behind physical conditions, especially Type 1 diabetes, Type 2 diabetes and obesity in children.

Listening to kids

While earning a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Tulsa in 2004, Bourdeau pursued her interest in helping kids by doing an internship at Vanderbilt University Medical Center Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and followed up with a postdoctoral fellowship in pediatric psychology at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City. During this time, she began to see the importance of healthy eating and activity on kids’ emotional well-being.

Rotating through the endocrinology, oncology, adolescent medicine and other units, Bourdeau realized that eating problems were central in many medical conditions. With Type 1 diabetes, she points out, children have to take medicine every time they eat. With cystic fibrosis, they lack the enzymes needed to absorb food and are underweight as a result. With cancer, they might not be able to eat at all.

Of special concern were the increasing number of kids being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and borderline metabolic syndrome. “While they may have a genetic predisposition, their [eating] issues can be positively impacted by helping families make lifestyle changes,” says Bourdeau.

Since coming to Oklahoma State in 2007 after a year in private practice, Bourdeau has made treating kids with weight problems one of her primary areas of specialization. She even assisted in the development of a family health and nutrition clinic along with a physician, nutritionist and physical activity specialist.

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Using evidence-based strategies that focus on family and motivational factors, she teaches the families how to set limits, instill discipline, reduce screen time, practice mindful eating and find more productive ways of coping with stress than overeating. “I try to emphasize the positive aspects of eating well and increasing movement without the family feeling deprived,” she says.

A common concept Bourdeau teaches her students and other health care providers is: We are inviting patients to change. “It is important for families to feel they can gain control and work collaboratively to guide the process,” she says.

For kids with Type 1 diabetes, who make up another big part of Bourdeau’s practice, she emphasizes the head start they have over other kids. “The way I pitch it to kids with Type 1 diabetes is that eating healthy and exercising got on their radar screens early because they have to think about them more than other kids,” she says.
According to Bourdeau, these children and adults need to understand that no one can eat unhealthy foods in large quantities without it negatively affecting their health. This cognitive reframe can assist patients in feeling more positive about health management and even empower them to become role models for others.

Bourdeau directs clinical services that involve care given by herself, three other clinical psychologists and multiple students. They provide care to patients referred by university clinics as well as other programs throughout the broader community and state. Many of the physicians Bourdeau works with have grown to appreciate what psychologists have to offer, she says.

“Physicians have a tremendous amount of knowledge about what families can and should do, but they do not always have the time or training to communicate with families in ways that are effective enough to create change,” says Bourdeau. In addition to being trained observers of human behavior, she says, psychologists have time to work with patients and families on motivation, problem-solving and effective decision-making.

She points to multiple examples of how her approach differs. “I’ve got families who walk into the clinic and say, ‘We’re here because of you; we come back week after week because my child feels like you really understand the challenges he is facing,’” she says, explaining that these youth are not just obese but often somewhat depressed.

These kids do not want to be told what to do, Bourdeau explains. Instead, they talk about subjects like isolation, hopes and desires, and other topics that go beyond eating. They also talk about strengths, such as academic performance, and how the child or adolescent can build on successes in that area, and apply the same strategies to health and behavior. Most of all, says Bourdeau, her approach is about hearing what they say and making that the starting point.

“Kids don’t want to feel pushed; they want to feel invited,” she says. “I extend that invitation to change and make it so appealing they can’t wait to do it.”

Because Bourdeau and her team can’t be everywhere, she also works to educate physicians – especially the next

**APA FORMS CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINES PANEL FOR OBESITY**

The American Psychological Association’s (APA) Board of Directors has named 11 clinicians and scientists to serve on a panel that will draft guidelines for the treatment of obesity. This is the second of three development panels to be established within APA’s clinical practice guidelines development initiative.

Members of the panel are:
- Jamy Darone Ard, MD, Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center
- Gary Bennett, PhD, Duke University
- Phillip Brantley, PhD, Pennington Biomedical Research Center, Louisiana State University
- Leonard Epstein, PhD, SUNY, University at Buffalo
- Barbara Fiese, PhD, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Jane Gray, PhD, Texas Center for the Prevention & Treatment of Childhood Obesity, Dell Children’s Medical Center of Central Texas
- Maria Llabre, PhD (Chair), University of Miami
- Michelle Polfuss, PhD, RN, CPNP-AC/PC, Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin
- Hollie Raynor, PhD, RD, LDN, University of Tennessee
- Delia Smith West, PhD, University of Arkansas
- Denise Wilfley, PhD, Washington University in St. Louis

The APA guidelines initiative advances the association’s Strategic Plan goal to expand the role of psychology in the promotion of health. Guidelines development enables psychology to assume an active role in defining the value of psychological interventions. Otherwise, treatment decisions for patients receiving mental and behavioral health care will continue to be shaped by guidelines from medicine and psychiatry.

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New directions

Behrman’s personal life continues to suggest new avenues to explore in her professional life. Now 60, she experienced the death of her father a few years ago and started thinking about mortality. “I became acutely aware that people have beginnings, middles and ends to their lives,” she said.

As a result of that realization, she’s now contemplating a new direction for her practice: helping people write their memoirs. She’s considering taking a three-year postgraduate training program in writing with a psychological perspective offered by the Washington Institute of Psychoanalysis.

“It’s people have amazing stories,” says Behrman, who also hopes to pen a memoir of her own some day. “If they don’t get those stories out in time, they may be lost.”

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-generation. As a clinical associate professor, she provides direct services through clinics.

Medical students have observed her sessions, she explains, and are usually impressed by how she can get kids to open up to her. “I have had multiple students say, ‘I have seen a child shut down with other providers, but that kid just shared with you that he eats when he’s bored or emotional,’” she says. The medical student can easily see how important that sharing can be for facilitating change.

Bourdeau also gives lectures to a variety of professionals, including physicians, dieticians, other health care providers and patients. She’s also happy to consult with physicians when they have questions. And when they send patients her way, she tells them what she’s working on so that the physicians can reinforce the message in their own offices and even use some of the same language when they talk to children and their families.

Promoting psychology

Bourdeau isn’t just an advocate for psychology at work. As APA’s Public Education Campaign coordinator for Oklahoma, she’s eager to spread the word about psychology’s value. She blogs on APA’s Your Mind Your Body blog. She tweets under the name @DrTeriB. And she gives lectures on psychology topics “all over town,” she says, citing talks at the local Y and the diabetes organization JDRF as just two examples.

Bourdeau is also active within the psychology community in Oklahoma. In September, she was appointed by Governor Mary Fallin as a member of the Oklahoma State Board of Examiners of Psychology, which oversees licensure and ethics issues. Last year, as president of the Oklahoma Psychological Association, she worked to increase membership and awareness of what APA, the APA Practice Organization and the state, provincial and territorial psychological associations have to offer.

Bourdeau also represents Oklahoma psychologists as a member of the Medical Advisory Committee (MAC) for the Oklahoma Health Care Authority, the state’s Medicaid agency. “This involves a great deal of advocacy for adequate coverage of psychological services,” she says. During her time as a member of the MAC, psychologists were given approval to bill for health and behavior codes for Medicaid patients under the age of 18.

Even when Bourdeau isn’t officially on duty, she’s still working to promote psychology. In May, for example, she joined a medical mission to Nicaragua. Although her role was more group facilitation with the participants, she found herself called upon to help physicians from all over the United States with such tasks as breaking bad news to patients and helping others cope with medical conditions. “It was a great way to train medical providers about the value of psychology,” she says.

Bourdeau, a native Oklahoman, doesn’t even stop when she gets home. She has been teaching her husband Jim, a nephrologist with whom she has three adult children, how to give his patients the support they need to adhere to their dialysis regimens. She laughs as she says, “I’m really proud when he comes home and tells me he did psychonephrology.”