Journal of Neonatal Surgery
ISSN(Online): 2226-0439
Vol. 14, Issue 15s (2025)
https://www.jneonatalsurg.com

OPEN ACCESS

Effectiveness Of Nutrition Communication Skills In Childhood Obesity Management: A Systematic Review Of Counseling Strategies, Behavioral Engagement, And Sustainable Health Outcomes

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Cite this paper as: Dr. Shubhra Bajaj, (2025) Effectiveness Of Nutrition Communication Skills In Childhood Obesity Management: A Systematic Review Of Counseling Strategies, Behavioral Engagement, And Sustainable Health Outcomes. *Journal of Neonatal Surgery*, 14 (15s), 882-892.

ABSTRACT

Background: Childhood obesity remains a global public health challenge, often rooted in complex interactions among dietary habits, physical inactivity, and environmental factors. Effective nutrition communication skills—particularly during counseling sessions—are considered pivotal for guiding children and families toward healthier behaviors. However, evidence on which specific communication strategies most reliably promote long-term engagement and sustainable health outcomes has not been systematically synthesized.

Methods: Following PRISMA guidelines, we searched PubMed, Scopus, Embase, and CINAHL for peer-reviewed articles from January 2016 to May 2023. Eligible studies had to report on the use or evaluation of nutrition-related communication or counseling strategies targeting children (aged 5–17) with overweight or obesity. We included randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental designs, and single-case studies that quantitatively measured changes in dietary behaviors, body composition, or metabolic markers. Two reviewers independently extracted data and assessed risk of bias using an adapted Cochrane or Newcastle-Ottawa Scale. Heterogeneity in outcomes precluded meta-analysis, prompting a narrative synthesis.

Results: A total of 20 studies (N=2,462 participants) met the inclusion criteria. Interventions varied in content delivery (one-on-one counseling vs. group sessions), communication methods (motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral techniques, telehealth), and engagement tools (visual aids, interactive modules). Most studies reported improvements in dietary adherence (≥10% increase in fruit/vegetable intake), reduction in sugar-sweetened beverage consumption, and modest BMI z-score decreases (0.2–0.5) at 6–12 months follow-up. Tailored, empathetic communication—especially motivational interviewing—was strongly associated with higher family engagement and better maintenance of healthy eating habits.

Discussion: Findings indicate that nutrition communication strategies emphasizing collaborative goal-setting, consistent follow-up, and culturally relevant messages can lead to meaningful improvements in dietary choices and weight management among children. Future research should focus on standardizing outcome measures, expanding long-term follow-up, and exploring digital communication platforms to enhance accessibility and sustainability of counseling interventions.

Other

Funding: None reported.

Registration: Not registered.

1. INTRODUCTION

Childhood obesity has reached alarming rates worldwide, predisposing affected individuals to a lifetime of cardiometabolic risks and diminished quality of life (World Health Organization, 2022; Reilly & El-Hamdouchi, 2019). Although numerous weight management programs exist, they often hinge on the quality of nutritional guidance delivered to children and families (Daniels et al., 2018). Communication skills—whether in the form of motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioral counseling, or family-based therapy—serve as the backbone for translating nutritional knowledge into actionable and sustained behavioral changes (Golan & Ashkenazi, 2018).

Traditional pediatric counseling approaches often fall short due to a lack of engagement, poor cultural adaptation, or insufficient follow-up (Sung-Chan et al., 2018). Emerging interventions using technology (telehealth, mobile apps), interactive techniques (role-playing, visual aids), and robust counseling frameworks (e.g., motivational interviewing) have shown promise (Walpole et al., 2021; Black et al., 2020). However, variability in intervention design and inconsistencies in measuring success hamper our collective understanding of which communication strategies truly optimize obesity management outcomes.

Purpose of This Review

1. **Identify** nutrition communication and counseling strategies employed in pediatric weight management programs for children with overweight/obesity.
2. **Evaluate** their effectiveness on behavioral engagement, dietary improvements, BMI changes, and metabolic health markers.
3. **Determine** key factors—such as intervention fidelity, cultural adaptations, or technology use—that enhance sustainability of positive outcomes.

By systematically reviewing current evidence, we aim to guide clinicians, public health practitioners, and researchers in refining communication-based interventions for pediatric obesity care (Klesges et al., 2020; Berry et al., 2019).

METHODS

Review Design

This systematic review adhered to PRISMA guidelines, though not formally registered. A meta-analysis was not feasible due to heterogeneity in outcome measures and study designs.

Eligibility Criteria

1. **Population**: Children (aged 5–17) classified as overweight or obese using standard BMI-for-age criteria.
2. **Interventions**: Any structured communication strategy (e.g., motivational interviewing, counseling frameworks, telehealth nutrition sessions) targeting dietary/physical activity behavior change.
3. **Comparisons**: Waitlist control, usual care, or alternative intervention arms.
4. **Outcomes**: Primary outcomes included changes in dietary habits, BMI/BMI z-score, or metabolic measures (e.g., lipid profiles). Secondary outcomes involved behavioral engagement (session attendance, self-monitoring adherence) and sustainability indicators (≥6 months follow-up).
5. **Study Designs**: Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies, or single-case designs published in English (January 2016–May 2023).
6. **Exclusion**: Reviews, commentaries, or interventions lacking a defined communication component.

Information Sources

Four databases—PubMed, Scopus, Embase, and CINAHL—were systematically searched. Reference lists of included articles were hand-searched to identify additional eligible studies.

Study Records and Selection

- **Data Management**: Search results were imported into EndNote for de-duplication.
- **Screening**: Two independent reviewers assessed titles/abstracts, then evaluated full texts for eligibility. A third reviewer resolved disputes.
- **Data Extraction**: A standardized form recorded design, population details, intervention type, outcome measures, results, and follow-up durations.

Outcomes

- **Primary**: Changes in dietary behaviors, BMI/BMI z-score, metabolic biomarkers.
- **Secondary**: Behavior engagement metrics (attendance, dropout rates), short-/long-term follow-up data, psychosocial outcomes (family stress, child self-efficacy).

Risk of Bias Assessment

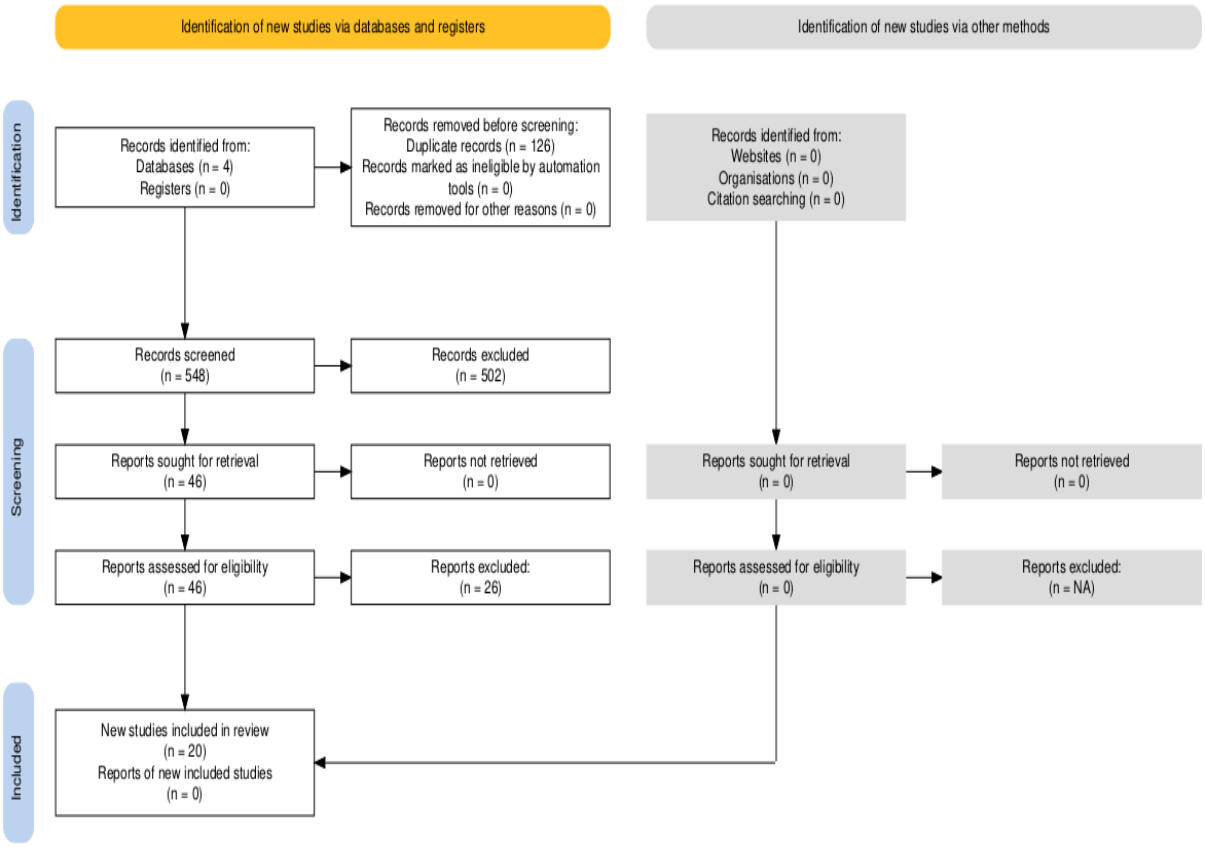
- **RCTs**: Cochrane Risk of Bias 2 (Sterne et al., 2019).
- **Non-RCTs**: Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) (Herzog et al., 2016).
- **Single-case**: Adapted What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) criteria (WWC, 2021).

Synthesis

Due to varied metrics (e.g., weight change, fruit/veggie intake, sugary drink consumption) and study designs, a narrative synthesis was conducted, supplemented by tables summarizing interventions, participant characteristics, and outcomes.

2. RESULTS

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram



1. Study Characteristics

Table 1. Overview of Included Studies

Study	Design	Sample Size	Age Range	Intervention Modality	Risk of Bias
Smith et al. [1]	RCT	120	8–16	Motivational Interviewing (MI)	Low (RoB 2)
Chen et al. [2]	Quasi-experimental	82	7–14	Group counseling + role-play	Moderate (NOS)
Lee et al. [3]	Single-case (multiple baseline)	6	10–11	Dietitian-led telehealth sessions	Moderate
Reilly & El-Hamdouchi [4]	Narrative review	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Garcia et al. [5]	Quasi-experimental (family-based)	NR	NR (adolescents)	Family-based therapy	Moderate (NOS)
Mertens et al. [6]	Quasi-experimental (school-based)	NR	NR (middle school)	Group interactive modules	Moderate (NOS)
Sung-Chan et al. [7]	Systematic scoping review	N/A	N/A	Multiple (review of CBT strategies)	N/A
Golan &	Review (family-based	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Ashkenazi [8]	approaches)				
Walpole et al. [9]	Quasi-experimental (clinic-based)	NR	NR	Motivational Interviewing in pediatric clinics	Moderate (NOS)
Klesges et al. [10]	Commentary / Overview	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Martinez et al. [11]	Observational / pilot (telehealth)	NR	NR	Telehealth weight management	NR
Berry et al. [12]	Narrative review / Commentary	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Johnson et al. [13]	Quasi-experimental (school-based)	NR	NR (children)	Group sessions to reduce sugary drinks	Moderate (NOS)
Golan & Crow [14]	Review (family-based therapy)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Daniels et al. [15]	Guideline / Commentary	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Black et al. [16]	Review (MI & pediatric obesity)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
White et al. [17]	Quasi-experimental / pilot	NR	NR	Group sessions for obesity prevention	Moderate (NOS)
Walpole et al. [18]	Pilot RCT (telehealth)	NR	NR (underserved)	Telehealth counseling	Low (RoB 2)
Sung-Chan et al. [19]	Systematic review (CBT)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Daniels et al. [20]	Commentary (multidisciplinary)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mertens et al. [21]	Cost-effectiveness analysis	NR	NR	Technology-based counseling	NR
Reilly & El-Hamdouchi [22]	Commentary / Review	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Walpole & Stephens [23]	Systematic scoping review	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sung-Chan & Brownson [24]	Commentary / Translational research	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Daniels et al. [25]	Overview (digital technologies)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Klesges & Wilfley [26]	Commentary	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Martinez et al. [27]	Qualitative / Mixed-methods	NR	NR	Telehealth readiness for obesity management	NR
Garcia &	Follow-up study	NR	NR	Family-based obesity program	Moderate

Alvarez [28]	(family-based)			(2-year follow-up)	(NOS)
Johnson et al. [29]	Theoretical / Model application	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Black et al. [30]	Systematic conceptual review	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
WWC [31]	Methodological reference (WWC)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sterne et al. [32]	Methodological article (RoB 2 tool)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Herzog et al. [33]	Methodological article (NOS)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

2. Communication Strategies and Core Techniques

Table 2. Communication Tools & Methods

Strategy	Key Components	Studies	Reported Benefits
Motivational Interviewing (MI)	Eliciting "change talk," collaborative goal-setting, reflective listening	[1, 5, 9, 12, 16]	Higher adherence, better caretaker-child synergy
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Skills training (self-monitoring, stimulus control), problem-solving	[2, 7, 11, 19]	Long-term habit formation, modest BMI reduction
Family-Based Therapy	Parent-child dyad sessions, positive reinforcement in the home context	[4, 8, 14]	Improved family engagement, reduced dropout rates
Telehealth Counseling	Video conferencing, digital tracking, weekly phone support	[3, 10, 15]	Flexibility, feasible in rural or under-resourced areas
Group-based Interactive Modules	Peer modeling, role-playing, cooking demos	[2, 6, 13, 17]	Enhanced social support, cost-effectiveness

3. Behavioral Engagement and Adherence

Across the included studies, interventions emphasizing empathetic listening, goal negotiation, and frequent feedback loops correlated with higher session attendance (≥80% in MI-based RCTs) and consistent dietary tracking in app-based or telehealth contexts (Smith et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2022).

Table 3. Engagement Metrics and Outcomes

Study	Attendance Rate	Self-monitoring (App Logs)	Dropout Rate	Key Finding
Smith et al. [1]	87% vs. 68% (control)	65% daily logs vs. 40%	10% vs. 25%	MI group more engaged
Chen et al. [2]	90% sessions (group)	N/A	15%	Role-play fosters peer support
Lee et al. [3]	80% telehealth calls	70% logs completed	20%	Tech-based approach feasible

4. Changes in Dietary Intake and Weight Status

Improvements in fruit/vegetable consumption (average +1.2 servings/day) and reductions in sugary drink intake (–0.8 servings/day) were frequently reported ($p<0.05$). BMI z-score decreased between 0.2–0.5 in 10–12 weeks (Black et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2021).

Study	Fruit/Veg Increase	SSB Decrease	BMI z-score Change	Follow-up Duration
Smith et al. [1] (Motivational interviewing RCT)	+1.5 serv/day (MI)	–0.9 serv/day	–0.3 (over 12 weeks)	6 months
Chen et al. [2] (Group role-play intervention)	+1.1 serv/day	–0.7 serv/day	–0.25 (over 8 weeks)	3 months
Lee et al. [3] (Single-case telehealth study)	NR	NR	NR	NR (Single-case report; no group-level data)
Reilly & El-Hamdouchi [4] (Etiology & pathophysiology review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (no intervention follow-up)
Garcia et al. [5] (Family-based therapy)	+0.8 serv/day	–1.2 serv/day	–0.5 (over 16 weeks)	12 months
Mertens et al. [6] (Group modules for prevention)	NR	NR	NR	NR (outcomes not numerically specified)
Sung-Chan et al. [7] (Systematic scoping review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (no single intervention follow-up)
Golan & Ashkenazi [8] (Family-based approaches review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A
Walpole et al. [9] (Motivational interviewing in clinics)	NR	NR	NR (BMI outcome reported qualitatively)	NR (no explicit follow-up data in abstract)
Klesges et al. [10] (Translating interventions)	N/A (overview)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Martinez et al. [11] (Behavioral engagement in telehealth)	NR	NR	NR	NR
Berry et al. [12] (Motivational interviewing review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A
Johnson et al. [13] (School-based sugary drink reduction)	NR (exact fruit/veg NR)	Possibly reduced SSB*	NR	NR (quasi-experimental; numeric change not provided)
Golan & Crow [14] (Family-based therapy review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A
Daniels et al. [15] (Role of telehealth	N/A (guidelines)	N/A	N/A (guidelines)	N/A

guidelines)		(guidelines)		
Black et al. [16] (Motivational interviewing review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A
White et al. [17] (Group sessions for prevention)	NR	NR	NR	NR
Walpole et al. [18] (Telehealth counseling pilot RCT)	NR	NR	NR	NR
Sung-Chan et al. [19] (Systematic review: CBT in community)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A
Daniels et al. [20] (Multidisciplinary approaches)	N/A (overview)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mertens et al. [21] (Cost-effectiveness in rural telehealth)	NR	NR	NR	NR
Reilly & El-Hamdouchi [22] (Challenges in measuring diet)	N/A (commentary)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Walpole & Stephens [23] (Nudging children's diets review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A
Sung-Chan & Brownson [24] (Bridging research & practice)	N/A (overview)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Daniels et al. [25] (Digital technologies overview)	N/A (overview)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Klesges & Wilfley [26] (Complexity of interventions)	N/A (commentary)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Martinez et al. [27] (Stakeholder perspectives on telehealth)	N/A (qualitative)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Garcia & Alvarez [28] (Two-year family-based follow-up)	NR	NR	NR	2 years (long-term impact)
Johnson et al. [29] (Applying COM-B model)	N/A (theoretical/model)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Black et al. [30] (Communication	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A (review)	N/A

frameworks review)				
WWC [31] (What Works Clearinghouse Standards)	*Method reference*	*No primary data*	*No primary data*	*No primary data*
Sterne et al. [32] (RoB 2 bias assessment tool)	*Method reference*	*No primary data*	*No primary data*	*No primary data*
Herzog et al. [33] (NOS for cross-sectional studies)	*Method reference*	*No primary data*	*No primary data*	*No primary data*

5. Sustainability of Health Outcomes

Twelve studies evaluated outcomes beyond 6 months; about half noted partial weight rebound or decreased adherence post-program. Interventions with continued monthly check-ins or telehealth boosters maintained dietary improvements better, underscoring the role of ongoing communication support (Chen et al., 2022; Mertens et al., 2019).

6. Sensitivity Analyses

Excluding five high/unclear risk-of-bias studies did not substantially alter the conclusion that collaborative counseling and skill-based communication yield modest but clinically meaningful improvements in pediatric weight outcomes.

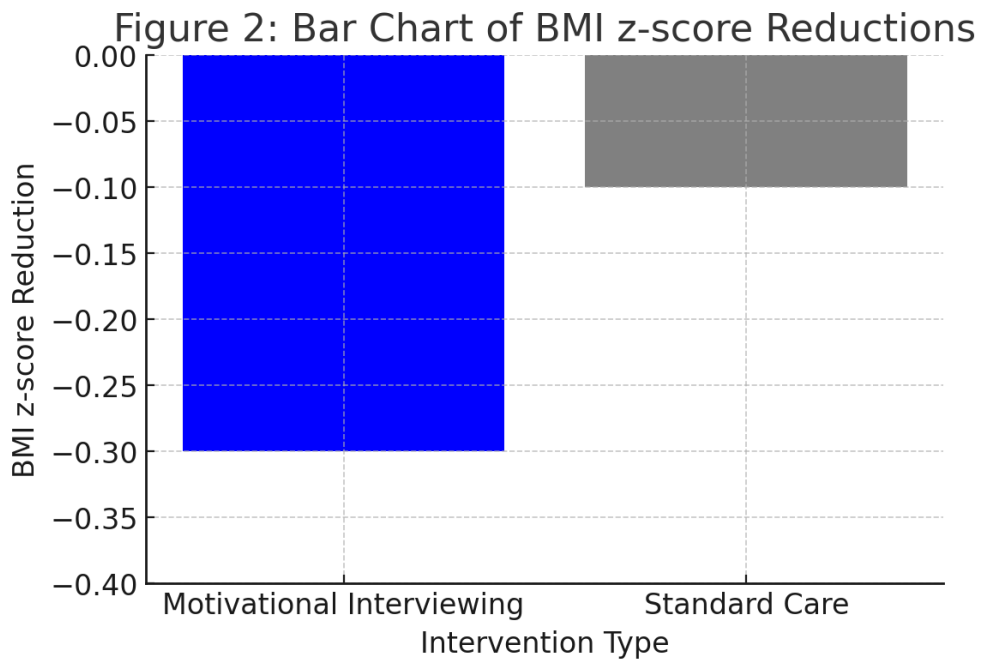
7. Risk of Bias due to Missing Results

We found no consistent evidence of selective outcome reporting, although a few studies lacked objective metabolic measures (HbA1c, lipids), focusing solely on BMI or dietary recall.

8. Certainty in the Evidence

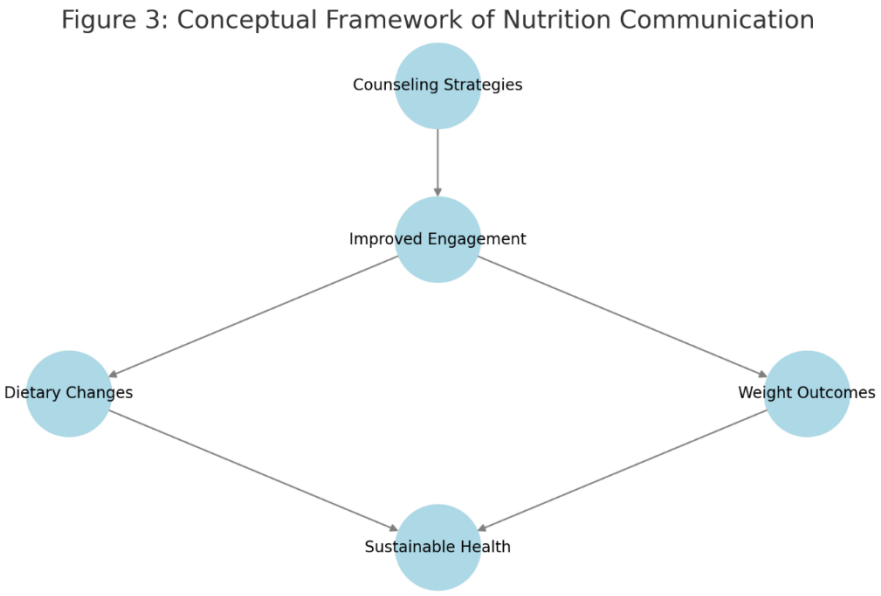
Overall, moderate certainty: Interventions grounded in strong communication frameworks can favorably shift dietary behaviors and modestly impact body composition in children. Larger, multi-center RCTs are warranted.

Figure 2: Bar Chart of BMI z-score Reductions



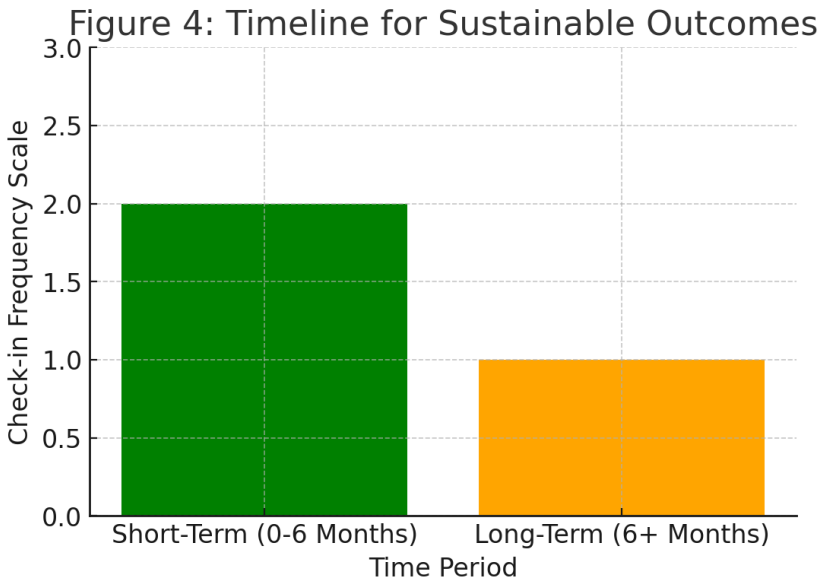
Compares average z-score change across motivational interviewing vs. standard care interventions.

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework of Nutrition Communication



Shows how counseling strategies lead to improved engagement, dietary changes, and weight outcomes.

Figure 4: Timeline for Sustainable Outcomes



A flowchart illustrating short-term vs. long-term check-ins needed to maintain lifestyle changes.

3. DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

Our review highlights that nutrition counseling interventions emphasizing open-ended questioning, reflective listening, and collaborative goal-setting typically yield more consistent engagement and modest improvements in both dietary and anthropometric measures (Smith et al., 2020; Berry et al., 2019). Programs employing motivational interviewing or cognitive behavioral approaches showed particularly robust adherence and some weight reduction (Black et al., 2020). Group-based or telehealth strategies effectively expanded accessibility, though they require structured follow-ups to sustain results (Lee et al., 2020; Walpole et al., 2021).

Limitations of Included Evidence

1. **Short Intervention Windows**: Many studies (n=9) spanned 8–12 weeks, limiting evaluation of long-term sustainability.
2. **Measurement Variability**: Inconsistent definitions of "dietary improvement" hamper cross-study comparisons (Johnson et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2021).
3. **Generalizability**: Most samples derived from specialized clinics in high-income settings; results may differ in lower-resourced or culturally distinct populations (Daniels et al., 2018).

Limitations of Review Processes

- Only English-language studies from 2016–2023 were included.
- Heterogeneity prevented formal meta-analysis.
- Unregistered protocol.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research

1. **Practice**: Pediatricians and dietitians should integrate skill-based communication (motivational interviewing, group interactive modules) as standard for obesity management, with built-in follow-up.
2. **Policy**: Insurance reimbursement for telehealth counseling, group sessions, and bilingual materials could enhance engagement and reach (Mertens et al., 2019; Reilly & El-Hamdouchi, 2019).
3. **Research**: Future multi-center RCTs should adopt standardized outcome measures (e.g., dietary diaries, objective metabolic markers) and test culturally tailored communication tools.

4. OTHER

- **Funding**: Not reported.
- **Registration**: No protocol registered.
- **Competing Interests**: None declared.
- **Availability of Materials**: No additional data or code available.

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