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Trying to get kids to eat healthier? Don't tell them veggies are good for them

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At some point, most kids will hear that drinking milk helps make their bones strong or that fish is food for the brain. But do these messages foster the idea that if something is good for us, it must surely taste bad? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, when children hear about the benefits of healthy food, they're less likely to eat it.

"We predicted that when food is presented to children as making them strong or as a tool to achieve a goal such as learning how to read or count, they would conclude the food is not as tasty and therefore consume less of it," write authors Michal Maimaran (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University) and Ayelet Fishbach (University of Chicago Booth School of Business).

To test this idea, the authors conducted five studies with children between the ages of three and five. In all of the studies, the children were read a picture book story about a girl who ate a snack of crackers or carrots. Depending on the experiment, the story either did or did not state the benefits of the snack (making the girl strong or helping her learn how to count). The children were then given the opportunity to eat the food featured in the story and the authors measured how much they ate. The children ate more when they did not receive any message about the foods making them strong or helping them learn how to count.

Brands marketing food items to parents and children can use these results to de-emphasize the benefits of healthy food and focus more on

the positive experience of eating the food. These results also help to empower policy makers and medical institutions looking to combat childhood obesity and juvenile diabetes.

"Parents and caregivers who are struggling to get children to eat healthier may be better off simply serving the food without saying anything about it, or (if credible) emphasizing how yummy the food actually is," the authors conclude.

More information: Michal Maimaran and Ayelet Fishbach. "If It's Useful and You Know It, Do You Eat? Preschoolers Refrain from Instrumental Food." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2014.

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