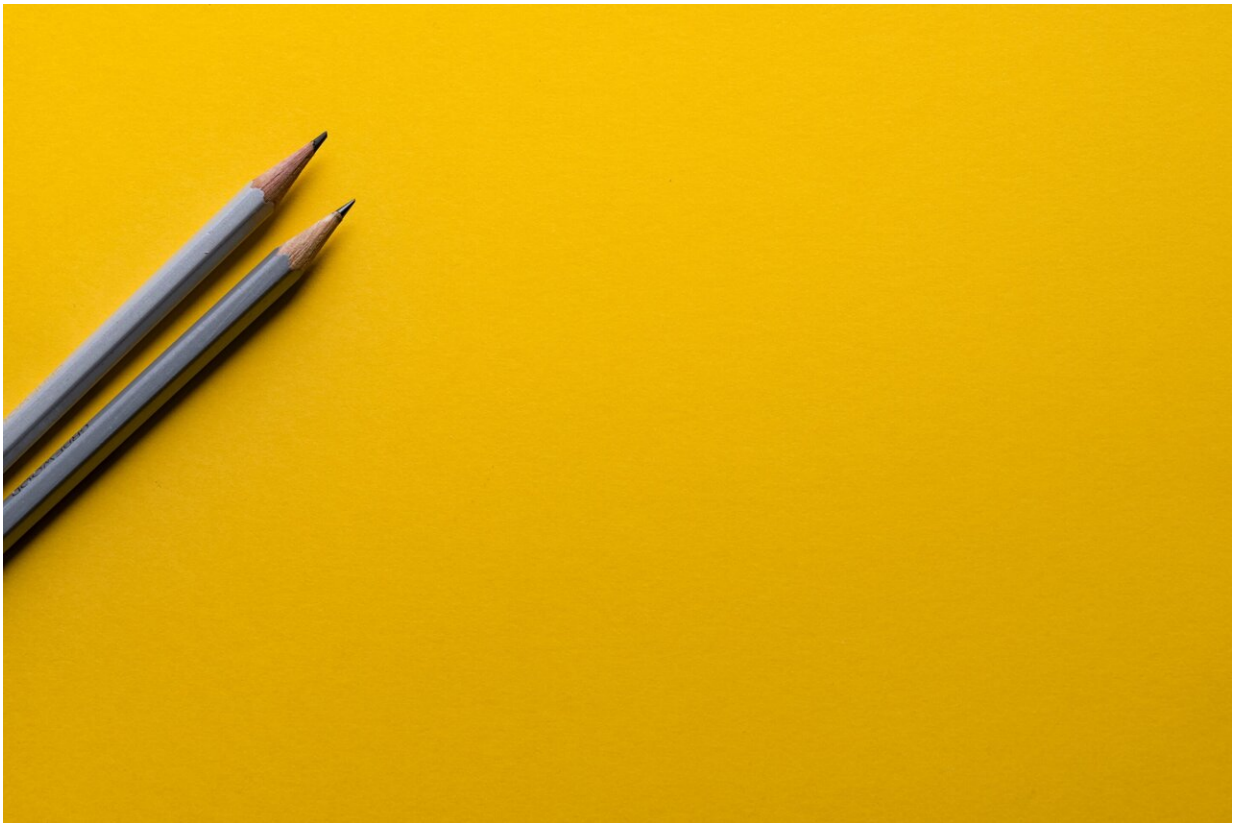


# Probing Question: Does eating while watching TV harm kids?

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Fixing a plate of animal crackers and a glass of milk for your little one to snack on while watching Dora the Explorer or Bob the Builder sounds harmless, doesn't it? After all, eating in front of the TV is part of our

American lifestyle.

But kids would be better off not picking up this habit, believe Penn State researchers Lori Francis and Leann Birch. "Mealtime should be a time for family growth and development," said Francis, assistant professor of biobehavioral health. She discourages even letting children snack in front of the TV.

TV interferes with the natural cues children's bodies send them about whether they are full, explained Francis, and can lead them to overeat or undereat. "In this culture we're living in," she said, "it's so important that kids get clear messages about food and healthy eating. Anything that distracts them interferes with a learning opportunity and their ability to pay attention to what their bodies are saying."

About 16 percent of U.S. children are overweight, an increase of 45 percent in 10 years, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Francis and Birch, distinguished professor of human development and family studies, are exploring whether there is a connection between TV-watching and childhood obesity.

In a study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* in April, Francis and Birch looked at 24 children from 3 to 5 years old. Their mothers were well-educated, in their mid-30s and their families had a mean household income of more than \$50,000. The children watched an average of 1.5 hours of TV daily, the moms reported.

Francis and Birch observed the children periodically over six weeks as they ate snacks and lunch, half the time while watching TV and half the time not. The pre-schoolers watched a 22-minute cartoon video that had nothing to do with food.

Watching TV led the children to eat slightly less of their snacks and

about 47 percent less of their lunch than they did while not watching TV, the researchers report. This finding surprised Francis, because studies on adults have linked eating while watching with overeating, and other studies on children have linked it with higher body weights.

But in some cases the children ate more. Specifically, those whose mothers said they typically watched more than 1.5 hours of TV daily ate more while watching TV under observation than they did without the TV.

"Children who are given opportunities to eat while watching TV may become less sensitive to internal cues to satiety," Francis and Birch concluded.

They continue to explore explanations for the obesity epidemic. "Kids who watch TV are more likely to be obese," said Francis. "Is it because of the lack of physical activity or because of their intake?"

It's difficult to pinpoint socioeconomic factors that may explain the epidemic, said Francis, however some studies have shown that African-American and Hispanic children report watching more TV daily than Caucasian children.

Francis acknowledged that it's difficult for parents to break the link between TV-watching and food, particularly when kids spend nearly 20 hours a week in front of the tube.

But establishing and enforcing a no-eating-while-watching rule is possible, said Francis, "once people understand how important it is to have family meal times or to use that time as a learning opportunity between parents and kids."

Source: By Lisa Duchene, Research/Penn State

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