

What three-year-olds eat affects their school performance many years later

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(PhysOrg.com) -- School dinners have come under the spotlight recently, but new research suggests that diet in the pre-school years is even more important.

It shows that children who do poorly at school are more likely to have been affected by the food they ate many years earlier, rather than the chicken nuggets they had at lunchtime.

Research from the Institute of Education, University of London, and the Children of the 90s study shows that children who ate a diet of “junk food” at the age of three, made less progress in school between the ages of six (Key Stage 1) and ten (Key Stage 2).

“Junk” was defined as highly processed foods, take-aways, and foods high in fat and sugar such as crisps, sweets and fizzy drinks.

The 25 per cent of children who ate the most junk food at age three were 10 per cent less likely to achieve the expected levels of improvement between Key Stages 1 and 2, compared with the rest of the children.

The children’s diet at later ages appears to have had less impact on their school attainment.

It might be assumed that families in which children are given junk food could have other issues which could hold back their progress at school, such as low income or poor housing.

However, the research is based on data from the Children of the 90s (ALSPAC) study, which has been following the development of 14,000 children since birth in 1991-2. This information is so detailed, it allowed researchers to adjust the statistics to take account of these factors.

After these adjustments, the association remained between poor diet at three and comparatively slow progress at school several years later.

“We are confident that this is a robust association”, says Dr Pauline Emmett of Children of the 90s. “It indicates that early eating patterns have effects that persist over time, regardless of later changes in diet.

“So it is very important for children to eat a well-balanced diet from an early age if they are to get the best out of their education.”

Citation: Dietary patterns related to attainment in school: the importance of early eating patterns. L Feinstein; R Sabates; A Sorhaindo; I Rogers; D Herrick; K Northstone; P Emmett. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 2008; 62;734-739.

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