

Pushing child to 'clean his plate' can backfire, study warns

October 9 2008, By Susan Lang



Andrew Herman '07 and Dominique Sinopoli '11 help conduct a study on whether children whose parents encourage them to "clean their plates" at home ask for larger portions away from home. Conclusion: They do.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Telling preschoolers to "clean" their plate can backfire, resulting in the children asking for larger portions when they are away from home, concludes a new Cornell study.

"We found that the more insistent parents were to tell their 4-year-olds to clean their plates, the more likely the kids -- especially boys -- were to request larger portions of sweetened cereal for a snack at day care," says Brian Wansink, Cornell's John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing. "These consequences of belonging to what we call 'the clean plate club' have implications for how much children eat and their potential for overeating."

The study of 63 children, conducted with Collin Payne, assistant professor at New Mexico State University, and Carolina Werle, assistant professor at the University of Grenoble, France, is published in the October issue (162:9) of the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

"Parents who insist children clean their plate may be asserting excess control, and they could unknowingly be inhibiting the development of the child's self-control around food," says Wansink, who is on leave until January 2009 for a 14-month appointment as executive director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. "If true, children who have been conditioned to clean their plate may have little control over their home food environment. They might end up overreacting or 'acting out' by requesting more food when excess controls do not exist -- such as when they are away from home."

He suggests that physicians who counsel families with potential obesity issues or parents who want to avoid unwanted consequences of a clean-your-plate approach use an alternative approach: "Provide moderate portions, encourage children to at least try all foods, and then let them determine whether they want additional servings.

"The bottom line: If my kids don't want to clean their plate, it's okay with me," concludes Wansink.

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Pushing child to 'clean his plate' can backfire, study warns (2008, October 9) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-10-child-plate-backfire.html>

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