

How are children choosing their food portions?

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At dinner time, parents will often tell their child to clean their plate. However, that old maxim might lead kids to eat more than they need, especially when portions are adult-sized or supersized.

In findings to be presented at The Obesity Society's Annual Meeting on Oct. 7, children took more food when larger portions were made available to them.

Jennifer Fisher, Ph.D., associate professor of public health and researcher at the Center for Obesity Research and Education at Temple University, and her research team observed 61 children between five and six years old to determine their eating habits when normal entrée portions (275 g) and "super-sized" entrée portions (550g) were offered. The children used either teaspoons or tablespoons to serve themselves.

They found that while children served themselves larger portions when the super-sized meal was available, portion sizes varied by gender, ethnicity, and parents' reports of child feeding practices — all environmental influences on children's eating behavior.

Fisher theorizes that having large amounts of food available conveys a social expectation about portion size that condones larger self-served portions.

"Seeing a large amount of food in front of you can lead you to believe that someone decided this portion was the right amount to eat," she said.

"These results suggest that children take cues from their eating environments when deciding how much is enough."

There currently is very little research on what factors affect children's eating habits, but Fisher's team hopes to pinpoint some of these factors to determine how children's eating patterns develop, which could help stave off unhealthy relationships with food later on in life.

"We are interested in the cues that children take from their eating environments when serving themselves," said Fisher. "Many questions about children's eating habits are as yet unanswered, such as whether large quantities of food and large utensils prompt children to eat more or if the size of children's self-served portions influences their caloric intake."

Fisher and her team are currently exploring a number of different avenues to determine the association between the amount of food children are served and the amount they're actually eating.

"Our goal is to try to identify ways to promote healthful choices from an early age," she said. "We want children to grow up with good eating habits, and without having to struggle with food issues into adulthood."

Source: Temple University

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