

Kids who cook hungrier for healthy food choices

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UAlberta researchers Paul Veugelers and Yen Li Chu found that kids who help prepare meals at home are more likely to make healthy food choices. Credit: Richard Siemens

(Medical Xpress) -- Getting kids to pass up junk food in favour of healthier fruits and veggies has led to many a mealtime meltdown for parents everywhere. Now, researchers from the University of Alberta offer a simple solution: give them an apron.

A provincewide survey of Grade 5 students in Alberta suggests the best way to get your child to eat [healthier foods](#)—and actually enjoy them—is to have them help with meal preparation.

“[Kids](#) who like fruits and vegetables more tend to eat them more frequently and have better diets,” said lead author Yen Li Chu, a post-doctoral fellow in the School of Public Health. “These data show that

encouraging kids to get involved in meal preparation could be an effective health promotion strategy for schools and [parents](#).”

Published last month by [Public Health Nutrition](#) in an early online release, the study involved a survey of students in 151 schools across Alberta to learn about kids’ experiences with cooking and food choices.

Nearly one-third of children reported helping with meal prep at least once a day; another one-third said they helped one to three times a week. A quarter of children helped once a month, and 12.4 per cent avoided the kitchen completely.

In general, children preferred fruits to veggies, but children who helped with cooking showed a greater preference for both. Vegetable preference was also 10 per cent higher among children who helped cook.

The data also showed that kids who did meal prep and cooking were more confident about the importance of making healthier food choices.

Paul Veugelers, co-author and Canada Research Chair in Population Health at the U of A, said getting children to eat healthier food promotes bone and muscle development, learning and self-esteem.

“Good food is important for us. It keeps weight gain away—and more important than that, it keeps chronic disease away,” Veugelers said. “The overarching objective of our work is to lower the burden of chronic disease in our society. A healthy diet is right at the top.”

Chu said the results underscore the value of getting kids interested in mealtime activities in the home, but added there could be room for schools to get involved, too.

“You can go into schools and have cooking classes and cooking clubs to

help them boost their fruit and vegetable intake and make healthier choices,” she said.

Though this survey dealt with Grade 5 students, the lessons are equally applicable to older youth, including post-secondary students, added Veugelers.

“For many of them, it may be the first time they leave home, the first time in their lives they’re responsible for their own diets,” he said.

“There are lessons here for them too, to form groups and take turns cooking, and pay attention to good meal preparation.”

This work was part of the Real Kids Alberta evaluation funded by Alberta Health. Real Kids Alberta is a collaborative initiative between the School of [Public Health](#) and Alberta Health to provide directions to improve eating habits and activity levels in Alberta [children](#) and youth.

Provided by University of Alberta

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