

"Kiddio" app may help parents get kids to eat more vegetables

July 17 2012, By Marcia Wood



Proactive actions, such as creating a home environment where kids are likely to see and be served fruits and vegetables and to see a parent enjoying eating fruits and vegetables, are believed to be more effective ways to get children to eat these healthful foods. Credit: USDA-FNS.

(Medical Xpress) -- Parents who are perplexed by their preschooler's dislike of vegetables may find help in a science-based video game that U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-funded scientists and their colleagues are creating for parents to play on smartphones.

When complete, "Kiddio: Food Fight!" will give parents of preschoolers a fun, interactive way to learn some of the best approaches for getting their [kids](#) to eat more [vegetables](#), according to Tom Baranowski, who leads the team that is developing the app.

Baranowski is a research psychologist based at the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Children's [Nutrition](#) Research Center in Houston, Texas, and a professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine, also in Houston. The college operates the nutrition center in cooperation with ARS, the USDA's chief intramural scientific research agency. Improving children's health and nutrition is a top USDA priority.

The game will offer users a series of short, interactive episodes that feature "Kiddio," an appealing [preschooler](#) who doesn't like vegetables. Parents can customize the game so that Kiddio's temperament matches that of their child.

In the course of each episode, parents will be able to select multiple options for influencing Kiddio's [eating habits](#). Some choices create effective, "teachable moments," such as when the parent says, "That's a really tasty veggie." Other choices may express a perhaps ineffective "firm discipline" approach in which the parent tells Kiddio, "You will taste it before you leave the table!"

The videogame project, funded by ARS and a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, will draw upon five studies that the Houston scientists have conducted over the past decade. These studies, involving thousands of [parents](#), kids, and nutrition-related professionals, are examples of what has become known as "behavioral nutrition," a comparatively new scientific discipline that has roots in both psychology and nutrition.

Increasing the number of vegetable servings that children consume is thought by some experts to help reduce risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers. Right now, most U.S. kids don't eat enough vegetables and fruits.

Baranowski is collaborating in the "Kiddio" research with nutrition

center colleagues Janice C. Baranowski, Alicia Beltran, Leslie Frankel, Sheryl O. Hughes, Theresa A. Nicklaus, and Teresia M. O'Connor; Amy Shirong Lu, formerly at the Houston center and now with Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.; and Richard Buday of Archimage, Inc., Houston. ARS researcher Deborah Thompson at Houston contributed to early stages of the project.

Peer-reviewed articles by Baranowski and colleagues about the use of videogames to improve kids' eating habits have been published in the [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#) and the [Journal of Diabetes Science and Technology](#).

More information: Read more about this research in the July 2012 issue of [Agricultural Research](#) magazine.

Provided by Agricultural Research Service

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