Popular characters can help kids eat healthy foods too

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Branding tactics used to sell junk food also may be used to promote better nutrition, research shows.

(HealthDay) -- Superheroes and other popular kids' characters have been used to sell junk food, candy and other sugary treats to children for decades, but new research shows they also can be used to promote healthier eating habits.

In a new study, researchers found the strategy can be used in schools to help students improve their nutrition.

"Nutritionists and school-lunch planners can turn the tables on children's poor eating habits by adopting the same 'branding' tactic used by junk-food marketers," study lead author Brian Wansink, professor of marketing at the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management

at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., said in a university news release.

In conducting the study, the researchers let children choose between cookies and apples. Some children were offered plain apples and cookies. Others were told to select either cookies or Elmo apples, which had stickers of the popular *Sesame Street* character on them. The study found that Elmo got more kids to choose the apples over the cookies.

"Branding has tremendous potential to promote healthier eating," Wansink said. "We tend to associate mascots and characters with junk food, but they can also be used to build excitement around healthy foods. This is a powerful lesson for fast food companies, food activists and people involved in school food service."

The study was published recently in the journal Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

More information:
The U.S. National Library of Medicine has more about child nutrition.