

Parents with heavy TV viewing more likely to feed children junk food

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If your preschooler thinks a cheeseburger is healthy, you may want to reconsider how you watch TV. A recent study by researchers at the University of Michigan found commercial TV viewing, as opposed to commercial-free digitally recorded TV or other media without food advertising, in the home was related to greater junk food consumption.

Kristen Harrison and Mericarmen Peralta, both of the University of Michigan, will present their findings at the 63rd Annual International Communication Association conference in London. Harrison and Peralta interviewed over 100 parents about a wide variety of home and family characteristics, including child and parent [media exposure](#), and child [dietary intake](#). They conducted separate interviews with children in preschools to get a sense of what children thought made up a healthy meal. The goal was to see how family characteristics were associated with children's dietary intake and perceptions of healthy meals.

Using food security as a marker, Harrison found that the media-junk food link is very strong among food-secure people, and almost zero among food-insecure people. Since [food insecurity](#) is associated with limited income, it sets limits on how much people can spend on junk food. Food-secure people, on the other hand, can afford to give in to cravings when watching [food advertising](#). People in this category were more likely to consume junk food, and their children had distorted views on what constitutes a healthy meal.

Past research has linked child TV viewing to obesity in childhood, but

not during the preschool years. It has also combined commercial TV with digitally-recorded TV, so there was no way to separate the two. Little research has investigated the development of ideas about healthy-meals in the preschool years. Harrison and Peralta's research aimed to address these less-studied topics to get a better sense of what children are learning about eating before they begin to make their own [food choices](#).

"Even though parents and other caregivers are the primary gatekeepers regarding young children's food intake, children are still learning about food as it relates to health from family, media, and other sources, and may use this knowledge later on to inform their decisions when parents or other adults aren't there to supervise them," Harrison said. "The preschool years are especially important, because the adiposity rebound in kids who grow up to be normal weight tends to be around age 5 or 6, whereas for kids to grow up to be obese, it happens closer to 3. We need to know as much as we can about the factors that encourage obesogenic eating during the preschool years, even if that eating doesn't manifest as obesity until the child is older."

More information: "Parent and Child Television Exposure, Preschooler Dietary Intake, and Preschooler Healthy-Meal Schemas in the Context of Food Insecurity: A Pilot Study," by Kathleen Harrison and Mericarmen Peralta; To be presented at the 63rd Annual International Communication Association Conference, London, England 17-21 June

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