

Harness children's competitive streak to drive healthy eating habits

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Introducing a competitive edge at school meal times could increase the number of children eating fruit and vegetables by up to a third, according to a new briefing published today (Monday 6 October) by our Institute for Policy Research (IPR).

From this September, children in Reception, Years 1 and 2 across England have been offered free school meals as part of the Government's Universal Infant Free School Meal Programme.

Yet whilst schools are legally required to provide meals that comply with the School Food Standards to ensure that children get the nutrition they need, parents and teachers know all too well of the challenges of getting children to actually eat fruit and vegetables.

According to the World Health Organization, poor diet in many developed countries is the primary cause behind the rising cost of healthcare and related to three of the five highest mortality risks in the world: [high blood pressure](#), [high blood glucose](#) and obesity.

To counter the health challenges of poor nutrition among [young people](#), the researchers at Bath, along with colleagues at the Universities of Edinburgh and Essex, show in their new paper funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation how an element of competition could be used to incentivise healthy eating behaviours.

Dr Jonathan James from the Department of Economics, explains: "Our study looked at ways in which we can better target interventions that change young people's eating habits in favour of them choosing and eating more fruit and vegetables.

"Through our research we found that introducing an element of competition at lunchtime could have larger effects on children's eating habits than using an incentive scheme that was based only on their own choices. By using a different approach, we found that the proportion of children trying fruit and vegetables could be increased by up to a third."

The researchers conducted a randomised controlled trial in 31 schools involving over 600 pupils in years 2 and 5. Two incentive schemes (individual based and competition) were compared to a control group, where no incentives were provided. In both incentive schemes pupils were given a sticker if they chose a portion of fruit or vegetables at lunch time, or brought it in their packed lunch.

Pupils in the individual scheme were given an additional reward, such as a highlighter pen, on each Friday if they had collected four or more stickers over the week. In the competition scheme pupils were randomly assigned into groups of four where the pupil with the most stickers was

given an additional reward.

The researchers found that boys responded to both competitive and individual schemes, while girls mainly responded to the competition.

Dr Patrick Nolen, from the University of Essex, added: "Interestingly, unlike in other work on competition, we find girls – rather than boys – respond more favourably to the competitive incentive. This means that girls, who generally eat more healthily than boys, increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables even more under our new incentive."

Professor Michèle Belot, of the University of Edinburgh, suggests: "Using incentives, particularly with children, is often controversial. Yet many parents use incentives to encourage positive behaviour from their children. Our research shows that certain incentives do work, and in particular work for groups of children that typically respond little or not at all to other health-promoting interventions, such as boys and children from poorer backgrounds."

The researchers monitored the dietary choices of [children](#) at lunchtime over a period of 6 weeks, with interventions carried out in two-thirds of participating schools. The remaining schools carried on as normal so as to provide a comparison where no intervention took place.

They now hope that the results of their findings can be taken on by policy-makers and health officials looking to improve the dietary choices of young people across the UK.

More information: The research briefing is available online: www.bath.ac.uk/ipr/our-publications/dietary-incentives.html

The study is available online: www.bath.ac.uk/economics/research/dietary-incentives.html

[014-papers/25-14.pdf](#)

Provided by University of Bath

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