

Getting children to embrace healthy food

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Credit: Wikipedia.

If the packaging has an appealing design, primary school children also reach for healthy foods. This was revealed in a study in cooperation with the Research Institute for Child Nutrition in Dortmund under the direction of scientists from the University of Bonn. The results are being published in advance online in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*. The final version will be published shortly.

Children are especially eager to reach for snacks if the [packaging](#) has an appealing design. "The food industry has a lot of experience in using marketing effects to increase product sales amongst [children](#)," says Prof. Bernd Weber from the Center for Economics and Neuroscience (CENs) of the University of Bonn. "By comparison, there is very little knowledge about how such marketing effects can be used to better promote healthy food products to children." This gap was addressed by a

study performed by a team working with Prof. Dr. Weber from the CENs and Prof. Dr. Mathilde Kersting from the Dortmund Research Institute for Child Nutrition (FKE).

Three different packaging designs for an identical product

A total of 179 boys and girls from primary schools in Dortmund participated in the research project. The children, aged eight to ten, could choose between three identical yoghurt -fruit- cereal snacks, that fulfilled nutritional requirements according to the FKE guidelines. Critically, only the packaging designs differed: The first was a plain standard packaging, the second packaging depicted additional health information and the third packaging included cartoon characters and an attractive product name – the latter packaging probably more enticing for children, compared to the other two designs.

How big is the primary schoolers' motivation to receive a particular snack from among the three choices? This is what the researchers determined, using a special measuring device that measures hand grip strength. It indicates the strength with which the children squeezed their hand in order to receive their desired muesli package. "Using this handgrip dynamometer, we were able to determine the effort that the children were willing to exert to receive the respective product," explains lead author Laura Enax from Prof. Weber's team. Then the children were also allowed to sample the snacks in the different forms of packaging.

Health information is less popular amongst children

The results show that the children's motivation was greatest for the snack in the packaging with the enticing cartoon characters. The measurements

with the dynamometer revealed that children significantly provided more effort to receive the child-oriented snack. Also in the taste test, the snack with the playful [cartoon characters](#) scored best. The standard packaging as well as the packaging appealing to health were far less favored by the children. The results of the survey as well as the measurement of handgrip force both helped to explain the later product selection. This indicates that merely asking the children for their taste preference was not sufficient on its own to explain the childrens' choices, says the researcher.

"This is a classical marketing placebo effect," says Prof. Weber. As in the case of a placebo medication, effects ascribed to certain products, which are not justified by the ingredients. In the study, each cup contained the same yogurt and fruit cereal snack, however, the primary school students believed that they could discern a difference in the flavor of the snack in the different packages.

The method is ready to be used for school meals

"Attractively designed food packaging can tempt children to pick unhealthy foods," says Prof. Kersting from the Dortmund Research Institute for Child Nutrition. "However, marketing effects of this type can also be used to promote healthy food products to children." The method developed in the study can be used, for instance, to investigate how the appeal of school milk or whole-grain sandwiches can be increased. The scientists want to investigate in additional studies whether significantly overweight children in particular are especially receptive to marketing placebo effects on packaging.

More information: "Food packaging cues influence taste perception and increase effort provision for a recommended snack product in children," *"Frontiers in Psychology"*, [journal.frontiersin.org/article...
.2015.00882/abstract](http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00882/abstract)

Provided by University of Bonn

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