

How do we get young men in vocational schools to eat healthy?

March 27 2017, by Nina Hermansen

It is well-documented that young people in vocational schools eat less healthy than students in upper secondary schools, and many of these habits continue into adulthood. This pattern is particularly pronounced in men. The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration has therefore asked researchers at the MAPP Centre to examine how this group relates to healthy food, and how they can be motivated to improve their eating habits.

"Students in vocational schools alternate between being in school and in a work placement, and it can be difficult to establish healthy [eating habits](#). Also, many of them haven't necessarily been taught the best habits at home, and as such they don't have the preconditions for healthy eating," explains Associate Professor at the MAPP Centre Alice Grønhøj, who conducted [the study](#) in collaboration with Research Assistant Lise Bundgaard.

The study was done based on the assumption that you will have a better tool for improving long-term public health if you can crack the code and get [young men](#) in vocational schools to improve their eating habits.

Young people do not want to be lectured

The starting point for the study is six focus groups. The participants are young men aged 16-22. It turns out that for the most part, the students reflect a good deal on eating healthy and think of themselves as healthy

as long as they do not experience problems with e.g. obesity or bad skin. Health is therefore very much tied to looks and performance.

The study also shows that the social context is particularly important to the students' eating habits, even though the students also find personal freedom very important. If they have friends or family who have either experienced the consequences of unhealthy living or have improved their health, it may have an impact on [young people](#) and help motivate them. Conversely, young people do not want to be lectured, neither by people they know or by public authorities.

"Even though the official dietary recommendations apply to everyone, you shouldn't necessarily present them to everyone in the same manner. And maybe you should pay special attention to communicating with this group of young people in unconventional ways - and if you want to communicate with them directly, you have to be very careful about how you do it," says Alice Grønhøj, adding that it is also important not to apply the same yardstick to everybody.

" That's why you obviously need to be careful about proclaiming that we have to make students in vocational schools start eating healthy, because some people will feel like they're getting steamrolled. It's certainly not of interest to everyone, either because they're already eating healthy, or because they believe it's their own business what they choose to eat."

The structural framework can make a difference

One of the places it may be relevant to encourage young people to eat healthy is the [school](#) cafeterias. The groups' participants held different opinions on the cafeteria food at the various schools, but price in particular caused many to avoid the salad bar and instead be tempted by warm hot dog rolls.

Here Alice Grønhøj suggests taking a cue from how some cafeterias and cafés in sports halls have used nudging to encourage certain behaviour.

"You can change the structural framework like cafeterias without communicating directly with the young people. This could be a place to start. But it also requires that the schools and cafeterias take an interest," says Alice Grønhøj.

Provided by Aarhus University

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