

Study finds that kids are more likely to drink healthier beverages if adults speak the truth—subtly

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The school posters imploring students to “Drink Water” tested secondary slogans as well: (left to right) “Make Friends,” nothing, “Be Healthy,” and “Learn Faster.” Credit: Courtesy of Szu-chi Huang

What's the best way to persuade children to drink water instead of unhealthy, sugar-laced beverages? Do you:

- A. Tell them it will make them more popular.
- B. Tell them it will make them healthier.
- C. Tell them it will make them smarter.
- D. Just tell them to do it without explaining why.

The correct answer: B.

Turns out honesty is the most persuasive tactic, even for kids, while exaggerated claims and ungrounded mandates can potentially have a negative effect, according to new research by Szu-chi Huang, an associate professor of marketing at Stanford Graduate School of Business. The field study, performed in collaboration with UNICEF, was designed to determine the most effective way to steer schoolchildren in Panama away from unhealthy sodas and other sweetened drinks toward [drinking water](#) instead.

Cowritten with Daniella Kupor of Boston University, Michal Maimaran of Northwestern University, and Andrea Weihrauch of the University of Amsterdam, the paper will be published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* in January. The research is the first to examine the effects of associating actions with goals in a real-world environment, in this case four [elementary schools](#), where children encounter countless messages daily, Huang notes. Additionally, unlike previous research that has centered on adults, Huang's study is the first to test the effectiveness of such associations on kids.

Targeting pre-existing associations

The researchers put up posters in four elementary schools located within 10 miles of each other and of similar size and socioeconomic status. Each school had a kiosk selling [bottled water](#). In a preliminary questionnaire, the researchers found that children strongly associated water [consumption](#) with health but saw only a moderate association between water and intelligence. The children held an even weaker association between water consumption and the ability to make friends.

In the main study, each school put up posters with a message unique to its campus. At one school, the posters implored students to drink water

and "be healthy." At another, the signs said that water would help them "learn faster." At a third school, they declared that consuming water would help students "make friends," and at a fourth school the signs simply told them to "drink water," without further explanation. The posters remained on display for a month.

The researchers found that children at the school where posters declared that drinking water leads to good health increased their water consumption by 31 percent, suggesting that targeting the students' pre-existing association (that water is healthy) led them to the desired outcome, says Huang.

At the school with posters associating water with learning faster, consumption didn't change from the pre-study level. And at the school highlighting the questionable association between water and making friends, consumption marginally decreased. That decline may have occurred because the posters linking water to making friends "may have seemed dishonest or confusing," causing children to shun the advice to drink more water, Huang says.

Avoid blunt directives

At the [school](#) where posters simply advised the students to drink more water, without stating why, [water consumption](#) declined significantly, by 48 percent. Like the children who were turned off by the attempt to associate [drinking](#) water with being popular, these students also may have regarded the blunt directive to drink water as manipulative.

"People don't want to follow an order without any reason," says Huang. "This rule applies to children as well."

In the weeks after the posters were removed, [water](#) consumption generally reverted to the pre-study level.

These results suggest that children may need continuous reminders, whether in the form of posters or some other messaging, over time to alter their behavior. Regardless, Huang says, these most recent findings shed light on what kind of messaging and what mode of communication may work to encourage [children](#) to modify their habits and help them live healthier lives.

Provided by Stanford University

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