

Children's snacking habits mirror their parents'

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New research into children's snacking habits has found that big snacking parents may inadvertently influence their children to eat more. The researchers behind the study believe that encouraging parents to snack

less could improve children's diets.

The Murdoch Children's Research Institute's paper, "Food Choices: Concordance in 11- to 12 year-old Australians and their parents," has been published in *BMJ Open*.

The food study was part of Growing Up in Australia's Child Health CheckPoint, a one-off health assessment of 1,800 [children](#), and one of their parents. The children and parents participated in 20 health assessments over about three-and-a-half hours.

Murdoch Children's Research Institute researchers studied what participants ate during a 15-minute snack break between the other health assessments.

One of the paper's authors, Dr. Jessica Kerr, said children and adults should only consume energy-dense snacks occasionally—they do not need to be part of daily energy intake.

"But the reality is that Australians typically get around 30-40 percent of their energy intake from [snack foods](#)," Dr. Kerr said. "And extra snacking is linked to obesity."

For the study, the children and parents were given a snack box containing non-perishable items such as crackers, cheese, a muesli bar, biscuits, a tub of peaches and chocolate. Children and parents ate separately and at different times, so children were not supervised by their parent.

Researchers then recorded how much food each child and parent left in the box uneaten, and calculated the amounts of sodium, fat and kilojoules consumed.

"To the best of our knowledge, this is the largest study in the world assessing snack intake at a population level by measuring what people eat rather than completing a survey or a diary about food intake," Dr. Kerr said.

"Some people ate nothing, while a quarter of participants ate everything in their snack box."

Dr. Kerr said there were definite parallels between parent and child snack consumption.

"For example, a child whose parent's snack energy (or kilojoule) intake was in the top 10 percent ate on average 230 kJ more (equivalent to a treat-size small chocolate bar) than a child whose parent's snack energy intake was in the bottom 10 percent," Dr. Kerr said.

Dr. Kerr said it is unclear if the similarities between child and parent snacking patterns were learned behaviours or under the influence of genetic factors such as metabolism and appetite.

"What the study shows is that targeting parent snack behaviour could also help improve their children's diet," she said.

However, the researchers also acknowledge that [snack](#) choices are influenced by factors other than [parents](#), such as individual preferences, the presence of peers, availability of food and advertising.

"All of these need to be targeted if we want to improve children's eating behaviour," Dr. Kerr said.

The aim of the CheckPoint is to provide health research data that will help governments, health workers and researchers come up with strategies to keep Australians healthy in the future.

Provided by Murdoch Children's Research Institute

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