

# Parent confidence is key to keeping kids from unhealthy foods

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As the countdown to a new school year begins, many parents will soon find themselves facing the often-arduous task of filling the school lunchbox which, despite the best of intentions, often ends up containing

more junk food than nutrition.

Finding the right balance between 'always' and 'sometimes' foods is a common challenge for [parents](#), but with unhealthy foods comprising more than a third of the daily energy intake of four to eight-year old Australian children, it's an issue that must be addressed.

Cutting kids' consumption of unhealthy [food](#) is the focus on a new study by the University of South Australia and Flinders University, where lead researcher and Ph.D. candidate Brittany Johnson says there is clear connection between parents' motivations, and their children's intake of unhealthy foods.

"Parents hold the purse strings to the family pantry, which means they can help make a big difference in improving children's diets," Johnson says.

"But with statistics showing that kids are eating up to eight times the recommended serves for unhealthy foods— most commonly, cakes, biscuits, savory pastries and takeaways—and, that less than five percent of Aussie kids eat the recommended daily amount of vegetables—there is certainly scope for changes."

The imbalance of healthy to unhealthy foods in children's diets is a serious problem that is contributing to the alarming rise in childhood obesity. Already, one in four Australian children (aged 2-17) are overweight, with global estimates currently at 340 million for children and adolescents (aged 5-19).

Johnson's research assessed the motivations and behaviors of 495 parents (of three to seven-year-olds) finding that only 50 percent of parents intend to cut back on their kids' consumption of unhealthy foods. Johnson says this distinct knowledge-behavior gap can be improved by

boosting parents' confidence, intention and planning.

"Parents need to believe that they can make changes and remember they are in control. Repeating in your head that you can reduce how much unhealthy foods kids eat and practicing this can help," Johnson says.

"This can be as simple as making a plan before you go to the supermarket, avoiding the confectionery aisle, and being mindful when selecting off-the-shelf school snacks which, while convenient and appealing, are typically jam-packed with fat, sugars, salt and little else.

"To improve children's diet quality and reduce the risk of chronic conditions we need novel, scalable and effective interventions.

"We must better support parents to make positive changes. This can include providing clear information about [unhealthy food](#) recommendations, appropriate portion sizes, the benefits of children eating healthier foods and the impact of unhealthy choices.

"We can all help by making changes to reduce how many unhealthy foods we buy and consume. Only then will we start to see change."

**More information:** Brittany J. Johnson et al. Examining Constructs of Parental Reflective Motivation towards Reducing Unhealthy Food Provision to Young Children, *Nutrients* (2019). [DOI: 10.3390/nu11071507](#)

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