

Study finds parents can help kids eat healthier by knowing their own sense of self-control

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Young children naturally like sugar and salt in food and develop food preferences based on what their parents serve them, but new research

suggests that how parents view self-regulation also is a contributing factor.

Food systems with calorie-dense and nutrient-poor meal offerings are a major factor contributing to global obesity and are a major challenge to parents of young [children](#), notes study lead author T. Bettina Cornwell, Phillip H. Knight Chair and head of the Department of Marketing in the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

The research, published online ahead of print in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, explored the underlying dynamics of parental [food preferences](#) and how they are passed along to children by example at family mealtime.

"A parent's preference for sugar, fat and salt in their diet influences the amount of junk food they provide children in a typical week and in turn, this influences the child's preference for sugar, fat and salt," Cornwell said. "We show that regularly providing three- to five-year-old children with junk food influences their preferences for the same tastes. It also makes them less willing to eat vegetables."

In the research, the four-member team developed two studies to explore how rigidly set parents are toward strategies of growth, learning and toward [self-control](#). These mindsets, or lay theories, underlie everyday ideas about behavior, Cornwell said. At play is how limited or unlimited self-control is seen and whether it is fixed or malleable.

In the first study, researchers used self-report surveys from the parents of 81 preschool children to assess whether the frequency of exposure to junk food helps transmit parental tastes to the children. A solid connection was found, Cornwell said.

The second study dug deeper to see if parents' lay theories influenced

how often parents exposed their children to junk food and what their children ate at school. Researchers drew from survey responses from 122 parent-children pairs and direct observations of preschoolers choosing vegetables during their lunchtime.

Again, the researchers identified strong results. Children who were often exposed to fast and highly processed food at home were less likely to eat vegetables at preschool.

"A parent's preference for sugar, fat and salt in their diet as well as their views of self-control come together to influence their choice to regularly give a child junk food," Cornwell said. "Parents with a lower [preference](#) for sugar, fat and salt and with a growth mindset regarding developing self-control tend to limit the amount of [junk food](#) they provide to their children."

The overall findings, Cornwell said, are clear: What parents do at home when it comes to meal selection influences the food choices their children make away from home.

Parents, she said, should explore their own beliefs about self-control to understand how they influence their children's developing food preferences. Doing so, she said, may help [parents](#) improve their own diets in a way that benefits how their children eat.

There also are implications for the food industry.

Food manufacturers and brand managers, meanwhile, need to recognize that their heavy reliance on hyperpalatable products—those high in fat, salt and sugars that combine to override the ability to control consumption—often make it hard for children meet guidelines for healthy daily diets.

"Eating even a single fast [food](#) or processed meal as currently found in the marketplace makes it hard, if not impossible, for children to fall within the U.S. dietary guidelines for the entire day," Cornwell said. "Products should be reformulated to be less hyperpalatable and new healthier products should be developed."

More information: T. Bettina Cornwell et al, Parents, Products, and the Development of Preferences: Child Palate and Food Choice in an Obesogenic Environment, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0743915620939581](https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620939581)

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