

Diet decisions can make teens feel good about themselves

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Key healthy food messages are giving Australian adolescents clear boundaries to set core beliefs and moral decisions about ethical eating choices and junk food risks—which even paves the way for raising their

sense of self-worth, a Flinders University study has found.

The in-depth study of the attitudes of 27 [high school students](#) from different socioeconomic backgrounds found they were generally well aware of setting their own goals and opinions about [healthy eating](#).

The study analyzed feedback from 27 South Australian youth aged 12 to 17 on their beliefs and perceptions about healthy eating from a moral and symbolic moral boundary perspective.

"This study is a good sign, since [food choices](#) established during childhood and adolescence lay the foundations for dietary habits into adulthood," the Flinders research team say.

"In the past we may have assumed that some less advantaged children had more unhealthy diets, however this might not be the case," says Christopher Bailey, whose Ph.D. is exploring adolescents' perspectives of [food literacy](#) and healthy eating.

"But these findings suggest Australian adolescents from a range of backgrounds do and can be engaged in beliefs and perceptions about [food](#), including ethical eating and sustainable food production.

"Healthy food messages clearly hold more of a [symbolic meaning](#) than just its nutritional or calorific content, so this study can help policymakers and school canteens develop effective healthy lifestyle programs."

"With less than 10% of young Australians between age two and 17 years meeting national recommended guidelines for the number of serves of both fruit and vegetables (ABS 2018), it's a great sign that teenagers are actively setting their own standards to adhere to a healthy diet," says co-author Professor Murray Drummond.

"We found a cohort of teenagers, regardless of their family's food practices, looking to set their own healthy agenda—possibly for life," he says.

The Flinders study also found participants were also interested in increasing their food literacy and the impact of dietary behaviors on animal welfare and environmental sustainability.

"They shared considerable agreement with the dominant discourse of what constitutes healthy and ethical eating beliefs," the research concludes.

"Food literacy and nutrition educators should focus on the moral and symbolic meanings that adolescents attach to food and towards health and food sustainability to change dietary behavior."

Previous studies found adolescents in westernized countries consume large amounts of high kilojoule, nutrient-poor foods and beverages, often with high saturated fat and sugar content, and that teens use food discussions to articulate themselves as healthy or unhealthy eaters while also using foods to draw class distinctions or to define and establish moral boundaries with their peers, friends and family members.

More information: Christopher Bailey et al, Australian adolescents' beliefs and perceptions towards healthy eating from a symbolic and moral perspective: A qualitative study, *Appetite* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2022.105913](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2022.105913)

Provided by Flinders University

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