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Evaluating friends' diets can improve children's eating habits

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Getting children to evaluate their peers' dietary choices could help them improve their own diet, new research has found.



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Childhood obesity has become a problem in many countries, with more than 340 million children and adolescents classified as overweight or obese in 2016, according to the World Health Organisation.

It is associated with a wide range of severe health complications and an increased risk of premature onset of illnesses, including diabetes and heart disease - and without an intervention, these risks persist into adulthood.

However, a new study conducted in the United Arab Emirates has shown that encouraging kids' diet - making them think about others' food choices and what they eat.

In the study, these were fictitious students of the same age identified as coming from another school whose healthy or unhealthy food choices were shared with participants.



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The children were presented with four different food trays each with five different food items of similar nutritional value evaluated by a nutritionist at the Burjeel Hospital in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Each was asked to select four food items from the trays.

Before making their own food choices, they were told about the four food items chose by an unknown remote peer attending a different school who was also said to be participating in the experiment.

They were also asked to evaluate the healthiness of a peer's choices as "very unhealthy", "unhealthy", "healthy", or "very healthy", and researchers found that those asked to evaluate the choices of a peer chose significantly healthier food themselves, whether or not the peer's food choice was healthy or unhealthy.

"Growth in reliance on deliberative decision making with age during early adolescence would mean that being asked to evaluate the food choices of a remote peer could have a higher impact on the healthiness of food choices of the older students compared to the younger ones," Ernesto Reuben, lead researcher and professor at the Center for Behavioral Institutional Design at New York University Abu Dhabi said.

"These findings show that making individuals think more deliberately affects their decision-making-- moreover, the stage of their cognitive development matters," Francisco Lagos, professor of economics at Zayed University and the University of Granada added.

The research was published in the journal, Child Development.

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