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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Friendship helps control obesity rise in kids

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ANI, 12 January 2010, 12:36pm IST

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Having a nice group of friends may help stem rise in obesity among children, say researchers.

It is well known that friends have a significant impact on children's behaviour like how they dress, how they wear their hair, whether they drink or smoke.

A new study has shown that friends also may influence how much adolescents eat. "Consider a person who usually comes home alone after school and eats out of boredom," said Dr Sarah-Jeanne Salvy, assistant professor of pediatrics in the University at Buffalo's Division of Behavioural Medicine and first author on the study.

"But on this day, she has a play date with a friend and socializes instead of eating. In this case, socializing is acting as a substitute for eating. Identifying substitutes provides a potential way to reduce behaviour.

"Our findings underscore the importance of considering the child's social network in studying youth's motivation to eat.

"Previous attempts to find substitutes for food and eating have not been very successful. To our knowledge, no research has studied whether social interactions can be a substitute for food in children," she added.

Salvy said that youth's social network might be uniquely relevant and influential to eating behaviour and choice of activities.

"Peer rejection and ostracism are obvious costs imposed on social interactions. Even the unavailability of one's peers or friends can limit youth's access to social settings and situations," she said.

"As a result, children may choose to engage in eating and sedentary activities when social alternatives are unavailable," she added.

The study is published in *Annals of Behavioural Medicine*.

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