



How Friendship Affects Children's Eating Habits

By Stephanie Mitchell



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Obesity is a major health problem for children in the United States: In the past two decades, the number of children who are obese has doubled, and the number of adolescents who are obese has tripled, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Although parents can influence their children's eating habits, studies show that friendship plays an important role in their eating behavior.

Researchers at the University of Buffalo in New York observed 23 overweight and 42 "nonoverweight" children who were given the opportunity to play and eat with a friend or with a peer they didn't know. The results of the study showed that the overweight children who ate with their overweight friends consumed more food than when they were with thinner children or children who weren't their friends. "People around you establish

a norm of what is appropriate to do," says Dr. Sarah-Jeanne Salvy, a researcher who worked on the study. In this case, the overweight children ate more because their friends influenced them to increase their food intake, she says. "So, if I'm overweight, I'm already eating more and the norm of how much is appropriate to me is pushed upward," she says.

Dr. Salvy says the study's results reflect a child's need to feel accepted by other children. "Kids start comparing themselves to others at a really early age," she says. "Although family has a huge impact on food and making foods available, kids are spending a lot of time with their friends, peers at school and on sports teams. The more they age, the more friends and peers have a bigger influence."

Should you let your overweight child interact with other overweight children?

So if overweight children have a negative affect on each others' food choices and eating habits, should their parents allow them to continue eating together? Yes, Dr. Salvy says. "Having a friend—and even more for overweight kids who might be at risk for stigmas or prejudices—is the most important thing that a child can have," she says. Friends are also important for children to play with, share activities with and confide in, Dr. Salvy says.

Although the research seems negative, it also highlights the benefits of friendship—friends can also help each other become healthier. "Instead of seeing [the research] as overweight kids should not eat with overweight kids, we need to influence a child's behavior," she says. "Chances are that he can influence his friends. It's not about forbidding kids to eat with overweight kids, but its changing friends' habits so they're actually reinforcing each other's habits."

Dr. Salvy works with Dr. Leonard Epstein on his Traffic Light Diet program, which helps children lose weight and keep it off. The program asks families to get involved in the process of changing the children's eating habits, but Dr. Salvy says it might evolve to include the children's friends as well. "One of the reasons why we involve the family in the weight loss program is that if we change the behavior of the child and put them back in the family with the same [bad] eating behaviors, chances are the old habits will come back," Dr. Salvy says. "What we're thinking is that if it is possible to involve friends in this program, they would keep each other accountable."

What you can do to improve your child's eating habits

Parents can set standards for the kinds of foods their children are eating and help them develop healthy eating behaviors. "If there's a take-home message from this, it's that parents should provide healthier food at home," Dr. Salvy says.

Start helping your child eat better with Dr. Salvy's advice on how to improve your child's eating habits.

- Provide healthier food at home. "Remove the bad foods from the house," Dr. Salvy says. "If you have them in the house, the kids will eat them. Expose them to a variety of healthier food options."
- Work with the parents of your child's friends to create better eating habits for your child and his friends. "If the [eating habit] change occurred in one of the friends or in both of the friends, it's more likely to be maintained because they're going to reinforce each other in those behaviors," she says.
- Get your child involved with other friends. "We know that they are more physically active when they are with other kids," Dr. Salvy says. "Children don't run on treadmills. They play with their friends; that's how they get their physical activities. Have them involved, but insist on healthy behavior like playing and being active and eating healthier options."

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