

# Preschool kids know what they like: Salt, sugar and fat

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A child's taste preferences begin at home and most often involve salt, sugar and fat. And, researchers say, young kids learn quickly what brands deliver the goods.

In a study of preschoolers ages 3 to 5, involving two separate experiments, researchers found that salt, sugar and fat are what kids most prefer -- and that these children already could equate their taste preferences to brand-name [fast-food](#) and soda products.

In a world where salt, sugar and fat have been repeatedly linked to [obesity](#), waiting for children to begin school to learn how to make wise food choices is a poor decision, says T. Bettina Cornwell, a professor of marketing in the University of Oregon Lundquist College of Business. Children even are turning to condiments to add these flavors -- and with them calories -- to be sure that the foods they eat match their taste preferences.

"Our findings present a public policy message," Cornwell said. "If we want to pursue intervention, we probably need to start earlier." Parents, she said, need to seriously consider the types of foods they expose their young children to at home and in restaurants. "Repeated exposure builds taste preferences."

Cornwell and co-author Anna R. McAlister, a consumer science researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, involved both developmental psychology and marketing for the two-part study. It

appeared online in January ahead of regular publication in the journal *Appetite*.

In the first experiment, 67 children (31 boys, 36 girls) and their mothers were recruited from pre-school classes in a large city. The mothers completed a 21-item survey to report on their taste preferences of their children. The children responded to their perceived tastiness of 11 natural and 11 flavor-added foods. The photos of the foods were presented without labeling or packaging. Researchers found strong agreement in that both parental and children's perceptions matched: Parents noted the desire for foods high in sugar, fat and salt, while their children showed preference for flavor-added foods, which contained these ingredients.

Foods well within the preschoolers' experience were presented in the experiment. Natural foods included apples, bananas, plain milk, fruit salad, water, green beans and tomatoes (strawberries and watermelon were the top picks; flavor-added foods included such things as cheese puffs, corn chips, watermelon hard candy, jellybeans, banana soft candy, ketchup, colas and chocolate milk (strawberry ice cream and jellybeans scored the highest).

In the second experiment, researchers explored the association of preschoolers' palate preferences to their emerging awareness of brands of fast foods and sugar-sweetened beverages. Participating were 108 children (54 boys, 54 girls) from five urban pre-schools. Each child was shown 36 randomly sorted cards -- 12 related to each of two popular fast-food chains, six to each of the two leading cola companies and six depicting irrelevant products. All children were able to correctly place some of the product cards with the correct companies, indicating their differing levels of brand recognition.

The results, the researcher wrote, "suggest that fast food and soda brand

knowledge is linked to the development of a preference for sugar, fat and salt in [food](#)." The relationships, they added, appeared to reflect the children's emotional experiences in a way that says the brand-named products deliver their developed taste preferences.

It may well be, Cornwall said, that when parents repeatedly serve certain foods, their children acquire a taste for them and soon recognized what brands deliver that taste. Earlier research has shown that children given red peppers on 10 different occasions will acquire a taste for red peppers and that logic extends to other foods. Children served French fries will, in turn, develop a preference for French fries.

Fighting childhood obesity, Cornwell says, should begin at home. First, families should focus on reducing the consumption of low-nutrient "junk" foods and replacing them with increased servings of healthy foods. Such an approach, the researchers noted in their conclusion, moves away from issues of weight and dieting -- instead targeting the development of tastes preferences.

In a previous paper in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Cornwell and McAlister found that children begin to understand persuasion as early as age three and most develop this sense by age six. They argued that advertising targeting children should be monitored and regulated.

Provided by University of Oregon

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