

Getting Kids to Eat Their Veggies: A New Approach to an Age-Old Problem

July 01, 2013

Every parent has a different strategy for trying to get his or her kid to eat more vegetables, from growing vegetables together as a family to banning treats until the dinner plate is clean. New research suggests that teaching young children an overarching, conceptual framework for nutrition may do the trick.

The new findings, published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), show that a conceptual framework encourages children to understand why eating a variety of foods is ideal and also causes them to eat more vegetables by choice.

Psychological scientists Sarah Gripshover and Ellen Markman of Stanford University hypothesized that preschoolers would be capable of understanding a more conceptual approach to nutrition, despite their young age.

“Children have natural curiosity — they want to understand why and how things work,” the researchers explain. “Of course we need to simplify materials for young children, but oversimplification robs children of the opportunity to learn and advance their thinking.”

Gripshover and Markman developed five storybooks aimed at revising and elaborating on what children already know about different nutrition-related themes, including dietary variety, digestion, food categories, microscopic nutrients, and nutrients as fuel for biological functions.

The researchers assigned some preschool classrooms to read nutrition books during snack time for about 3 months, while other classrooms were assigned to conduct snack time as usual. Later, the preschoolers were asked questions about nutrition.

The children who had been read the nutrition books were more likely to understand that food had nutrients, and that different kinds of nutrients were important for various bodily functions (even functions that weren't mentioned in the books). They were also more knowledgeable about digestive processes, understanding, for example, that the stomach breaks down food and blood carries nutrients.

These children also more than doubled their voluntary intake of vegetables during snack time after the three-month intervention, whereas the amount that the control group ate stayed about the same.

When the conceptual program was pitted against a more conventional teaching strategy focused on the enjoyment of healthy eating and trying new foods, the results showed that both interventions led to increased vegetable consumption. Yet, the children in the conceptual program showed more knowledge about nutrition and a greater overall increase in vegetable consumption.

Further research is needed to determine whether the conceptual intervention encourages healthy eating

habits outside of snack time and whether it's effective over the long-term, but Gripshover and Markman believe that the intervention shows promise.

“In the future, our conceptually-based educational materials could be combined with behaviorally-focused nutrition interventions with the hope of boosting healthy eating more than either technique alone,” they conclude.