



SINGAPORE

Children's dietary habits linked to behaviour: Study

Poor eating and nutrition habits in young children were found to be significantly linked to behavioural problems such as acting out or anxiety, data collected by researchers from the National University of Singapore has shown. The longitudinal study aims to study factors that affect child development. **B2**

Kids' dietary habits and behaviour linked, study shows



TOO MUCH SUGAR

High sugar-sweetened beverage and high fat contents are bad for child development, and they are hurting young children in low-income families the most.



PROFESSOR JEANYEUNG, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research.

Research has shown that children who develop healthy eating habits are less likely to be obese, as well as more likely to have a healthier diet throughout their lives and perform better academically. ST FILE PHOTO

Poor nutrition practices are connected with issues like acting out and anxiety

Goh Yan Han

Poor eating and nutrition habits in young children were found to be significantly linked to behavioural problems such as acting out or anxiety, data collected by researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) has shown.

The data also showed that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds had unhealthier diets.

A longitudinal study led by Professor Jean Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at NUS, looked at about 5,000 children, from newborn babies to six-year-olds, between November 2018 and September 2019.

The Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study, funded by the Ministry of Education, aims to study factors that affect child development, including the food that children eat.

The team is currently collecting its second tranche of data from respondents.

From the first tranche, the researchers found that children aged two to six from low socio-economic backgrounds did not eat as much nutritious food and ate more unhealthy food than their peers from more well-to-do backgrounds.

The data showed that the children from low socio-economic backgrounds also consumed more sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) and more processed and fast food such as snacks, Western fast food and instant noodles.

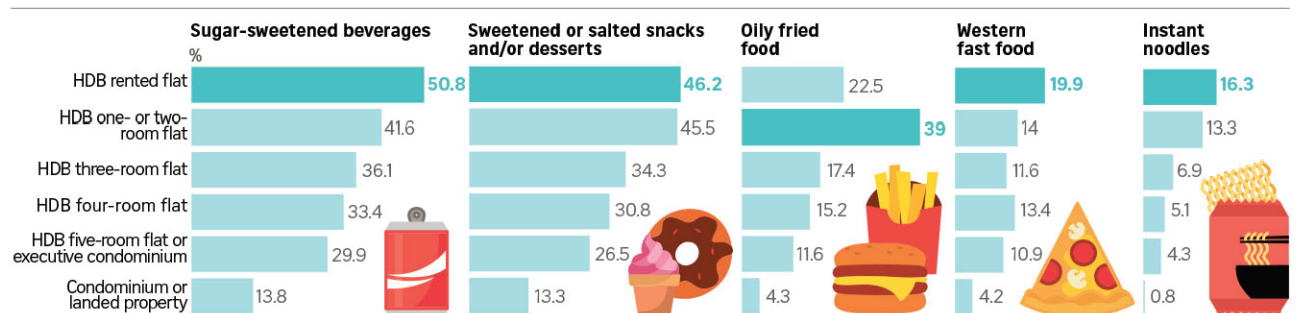
For example, 51 per cent of the children surveyed who were living in rented Housing Board flats consumed SSBs at least three times a week, compared with 14 per cent of children living in private condominiums or landed property.

Children living in rental units or in owned one- or two-room flats were least likely to eat fruits or vegetables every day, with about 40 per cent of them doing so.

In comparison, about half of the children living in owned five-room or executive HDB flats and 57 per cent of those living in private

Eating habits of young children in Singapore

Children aged two to six who consume the following three times or more each week, by housing type



Source: SINGAPORE LONGITUDINAL EARLY DEVELOPMENT STUDY STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

condos or landed property did so every day.

"High SSB and high fat contents are bad for child development, and they are hurting young children in low-income families the most," said Prof Yeung, who shared the team's findings with *The Straits Times*.

"This is part of the achievement gap story in Singapore that does not get sufficient attention, and for the first time, we have the national

data to show the relationship," she said.

She noted that research has shown that children who develop healthy eating habits are less likely to be obese, as well as more likely to have a healthier diet throughout their lives and perform better academically.

Prof Yeung, in a separate paper with Dr Xuejiao Chen, a post-doctoral researcher, looked at identifying a causal relationship between

food insecurity and behavioural problems using the data they had collected from children aged three years old and above.

They found that food insecurity had a statistically significant effect on children's externalising and internalising behavioural problems, such as aggression, delinquency, anxiety and depression.

The data also shed light on how food hardship affects children's behaviour, said Prof Yeung.

"We found that food deprivation contributed to primary caregivers' higher depressive affect, which is associated with less parental warmth and more harsh discipline.

"Warm parenting is significantly correlated with fewer behaviour problems while punitive parenting is linked to more behaviour problems in children," she said.

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Efforts taken to address nutritional gaps among children

The Government recognises the importance of nutrition for children in their early years, which are the foundation for their healthy growth and development, said Minister of State for Education and Social and Family Development Sun Xueling.

She was commenting on a National University of Singapore (NUS) study which found that poor eating and nutrition habits in young children were significantly linked to behavioural problems, and that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds had unhealthier diets.

Ms Sun highlighted the KidStart programme, led by the Early Childhood Development Agency, which

provides families with the knowledge and skills to nurture their children's early development.

"Our KidStart practitioners visit homes and work directly with parents and young children, including guiding them on their children's nutritional needs," said Ms Sun. KidStart also works closely with community and corporate partners to ensure families who are in need will also receive food sponsorship support or social assistance.

Ms Sun added that childcare centres and schools also pay attention to the nutritional needs of young children. For instance, all childcare centres provide breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack to children and, in keeping with

Health Promotion Board guidelines, the meals must be nutritious, balanced and varied.

"Primary and secondary students on financial assistance in Ministry of Education schools also receive substantial subsidies for healthy meals in schools," she said.

Professor Jean Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at NUS who led the study, said it was important to address food insecurity in young children, as early behaviour problems may have long-lasting implications for children's learning when they enter school.

Food insecurity affects both adults and children in the family, and it should be acknowledged

that food filled psychological and emotional needs, she said.

Prof Yeung cited several reasons that families of low socio-economic status find it difficult to adopt healthy eating guidelines. These included not having enough family financial resources as well as a lack of knowledge about the harmful long-term effects of processed food, fast food and sugar sweetened beverages.

The study said that 37 per cent of those living in rented or owned one- or two-room flats reported that the food they bought was not enough and they could not afford to buy more.

It said 20 per cent reported that they could not afford to eat bal-

anced meals, and 14 per cent acknowledged that their children were not eating enough because they "just couldn't afford enough food".

"For programmes and policies to effectively address food insecurity in children from low socio-economic status families, it is important that a participatory approach be used so that the needs of the whole child are addressed," said Prof Yeung.

This means that communities affected should be involved in the formative stage of designing an intervention so that underlying causes of food insecurity can be addressed, she added.

Goh Yan Han