



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



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

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 JEAN YEUNG, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research.

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.

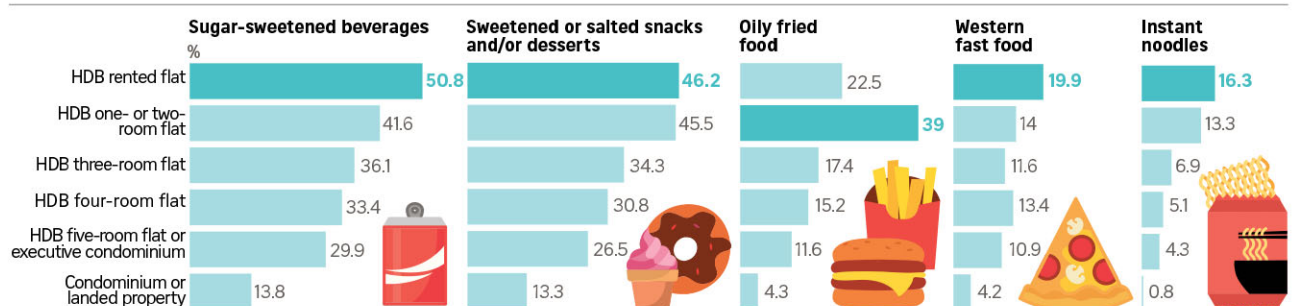
For example, 51 per cent of the children surveyed who were living in rented Housing Board flats consumed SSBs at least three times a week, compared with 14 per cent of children living in private condominiums or landed property.

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 behavioural problems while punitive parenting is linked to more behavioural problems in children," she said.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg