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Healthy eating incentives up pupils' appetite for fruit and greens

Introducing a competitive edge to school meal times could increase the number of children eating fruit and vegetables by a third, new trials suggest.

The proportion of those trying fruit and vegetables increased by around a third among pupils who were not eating fruit and vegetables every day before the six-week test.

Researchers conducted the trial in 31 schools in England involving more than 600 pupils in years two and five. Two incentive schemes were compared to a control group, where no incentives were provided.

The first incentive scheme gave pupils a sticker if they chose a portion of fruit or vegetables at lunch time, or brought it in their packed lunch.

Pupils were given an additional reward, such as a highlighter pen, on each Friday if they had collected four or more stickers over the week.

In the second incentive scheme, an element of competition was introduced. Pupils were randomly assigned into groups of four and the pupil with the most stickers in each group at the end of the week was given an additional reward.

Boys responded to both schemes, while girls mainly responded to the competitive one. The intervention had more pronounced effects among children who received free school meals.

Researchers from the University of Edinburgh collaborated with the University of Bath's Institute for Policy Research and the University of Essex on the study. The paper was funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, which aims to improve the quality of life for people and communities throughout the UK.

Professor Michele Belot, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Economics, said: "Using incentives, particularly with children, is often controversial. Yet many parents use incentives to encourage positive behaviour from their children. Our research shows that certain incentives do work, and in particular work for groups of children that typically respond little - or not at all - to other health-promoting interventions, such as boys and children from poorer backgrounds."

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Dr Patrick Nolen, of the University of Essex, said: “Interestingly, unlike in other work on competition, we find girls – rather than boys – respond more favourably to the competitive incentive. This means that girls, who generally eat more healthily than boys, increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables even more under our new incentive.”

Dr Jonathan James, of the University of Bath, said: “Through our research, we found that introducing an element of competition at lunchtime could have larger effects on children’s eating habits than using an incentive scheme that was based only on their own choices.”

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