

Pre-schoolers eat more sweets when watching TV with limited supervision

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(Medical Xpress) -- It's no surprise that TV viewing has an effect on our eating habits, but a new study shows that even pre-schoolers planted in front of the set are more prone to eating sweets and salty foods instead of fruits and vegetables.

University of Michigan and University of Illinois researchers conducted a three-year study using data from 423 [parents](#) and 354 children - ages two to four - in the Midwest. Parents completed a questionnaire about their children's viewing habits, along with Internet and video game usage, throughout the day and their physical measurements.

Studies like this, the researchers noted, paint a compelling picture of how children become overweight as an outcome of early TV exposure.

"This study captured a moment in children's lives when [TV viewing](#) may be urging them toward (poor eating) habits, before those habits culminate in accelerated BMI growth," said Kristen Harrison, a professor of communication studies and director of the U-M Media, Youth, and Health Lab. She collaborated with Janet Liechty, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Illinois.

The findings appear in the current issue of *Journal of Children and Media*.

Parents and caregivers should be mindful of their pre-schoolers' TV viewing and dietary habits before the child becomes overweight, Harrison said. Childhood obesity in the United States has become a national priority, especially among 2- and 5-year-olds.

The researchers looked at three parenting styles: restrictive, which sets limits on programming content and viewing time; instructive, which involves communication about the TV content between the parent and child; and social co-viewing, which is a non-critical method and indicates parents endorse the content. The parents who were most strict about TV viewing time and content were the most successful in changing the [eating habits](#) of the pre-schoolers, the research showed. The other two types of parenting styles had little effect on changing unhealthy eating patterns.

The findings indicated that TV was the most popular medium for children, over Internet and video games, with more than 10 hours watched weekly. But when combined with other media, the average weekly exposure was 18.8 hours per week. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children limit the weekly exposure to 14 hours per week.

Provided by University of Michigan

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