Young children take but often barely touch healthy school cafeteria food options

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You can offer young children healthier food choices in the elementary school cafeteria, but will they actually put it on their trays and eat it?

Probably not, suggests a new Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health study.

Researchers observed 274 children in kindergarten through second grade in 10 New York City public schools as they selected from the offerings during one lunch period when a chicken-and-vegetable entrée was on the menu. They watched to see whether each of the six-through-eight-year-olds chose a fruit, vegetable, whole grain, low-fat milk and/or a lean protein, taking before and after photos of the trays. They found that while 75 percent of the kids chose the lean protein (the entrée), only 58 percent chose a fruit and 59 percent chose a vegetable. And among those who put the various types of food on their trays, only 75 percent took even a single bite of the protein, while only 24 percent ate a bite of their vegetables.

"We have been thinking that if young children choose healthy food, they will eat it," says Susan M. Gross, PhD, MPH, a research associate in the Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "But our research shows that is not necessarily so."

Gross is scheduled to present the research at the American Public Health Association's Annual Meeting in New Orleans, La., on Nov. 17.

She says the environment in the cafeteria had a major impact on whether the children ate their lunches. Along with recording how much food the children selected and ate, the researchers also examined the noise level, supervision level, how full the cafeteria was, the length of the lunch period and the packaging of foods.

They found that children were much more likely to finish their food if a teacher ate in the cafeteria with them. They found that more children ate their vegetables and whole grains when it was quieter in the cafeteria, though noise had little effect on consumption in the other food groups. The children were more likely to eat when their food was cut up into smaller pieces and when lunch periods were longer.

The findings come as Congress prepares in 2015 to reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act, which funds the National School Lunch Program and National School Breakfast Program. Several years ago, new dietary guidelines were adopted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for school feeding programs requiring schools to provide healthier lunches including whole grains, lean protein and low-fat milk. There was pushback in many circles because mass production of those foods can be more difficult and more costly.

"As much as we are focused on menus in the school lunch program, we need to look more at our cafeteria environments, especially with our youngest children," Gross says. "We can give kids the healthiest food possible, but if they don't have time to eat it or they are distracted by how noisy the cafeteria is, they're not going to eat it. They're on their own and we need to do as much as possible to help them through that lunch period."

More information: "Does selection of foods in the school cafeteria by 6-8 year olds translate into consumption? Results of a cafeteria observation study" was written by Susan M. Gross, Allison Zucker, Erin Biehl, Sahnah Lim, Beth Marshall, Marycatherine Augustyn, David M. Paige and Kristin N. Mmari.

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