

# Food insecurity linked with low self-esteem in children: Study

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Children in households with uncertain access to nutritious food are twice as likely to have low self-esteem and less likely to believe they can make healthy choices, new research shows.

Uncertain access to enough [food](#) can starve a child's self-esteem and confidence in making healthy life choices, new research shows.

Children living in households with food insecurity have double the risk of low self-esteem compared with their peers living in homes that always have good access to nutritious food, according to joint research by the University of Alberta and Edith Cowan University in Australia.

"Food insecurity is a real concern, a big public health concern," said community nutrition researcher and registered dietitian Rosanne Blanchet. "We're seeing that food insecurity is affecting [children](#)'s mental health and that can have long-term consequences. It affects their life chances."

One in six Canadian children lives in a household without sufficient access to [nutritious food](#), with consequences ranging from worrying about running out of food or having to buy cheap, poor-quality food, to experiencing outright hunger.

Blanchet noted that research has already shown food insecurity can have a [negative impact](#) on children's social and physical development, associated with poor nutrition, school absenteeism and [lower grades](#).

In the study, the researchers surveyed 5,281 Canadian children aged 10 and 11, and found those living in food-insecure homes had a 44 to 54 per cent higher risk of low self-esteem than children with unrestricted access to healthy meals.

The study looked at factors like gender, body weight and rural and urban residence. As well, when levels of parental education and household income were taken into account, girls had a 67 per cent higher risk of having low self-esteem.

Lower levels of self-efficacy—a child's ability to believe they can achieve their goals—were also noted, when it came to making healthy lifestyle choices about food and exercise.

The link between food insecurity and low self-esteem may be related to family dynamics, Blanchet said.

"There's overall family stress when parents are worrying about running out of food; they may not have the energy to spend on parental skills. It could also be linked to not being able to afford high-quality food and having to use food banks or scavenge for food. Children may feel ashamed, and this could be internalized as low self-esteem."

The study also showed low [household income](#) was the underlying culprit of the association between food insecurity, [low self-esteem](#) and low ability to

make healthy lifestyle choices.

"This is likely because higher-income families have enough money to buy food."

The solution to the problem ultimately targets poverty, to prevent [food insecurity](#) in the first place, she added.

"Our research suggests the need to provide a basic guaranteed income or an increased social security rate, to make sure everyone, no matter their status, working or not, gets enough money to meet their [basic needs](#), including adequate food."

School programs that build children's self-esteem and confidence would also be helpful, the study suggested.

"This could lead to improvements in school achievement and mental health," Blanchet said.

**More information:** Stephanie Godrich et al. Canadian Children from Food Insecure Households Experience Low Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy for Healthy Lifestyle Choices, *Nutrients* (2019). [DOI: 10.3390/nu11030675](#)

Provided by University of Alberta

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