

Nudges Greased palms and dried fruit

 economist.com/free-exchange/2014/06/16/greased-palms-and-dried-fruit

Can children be nudged to eat fruits?



Jun 16th 2014
by S.H. | LONDON

OBESITY, according to a government-sponsored [report](#), could make the current generation of Americans the first in history to live shorter lives than the previous one. A major change in food habits is needed to reverse the trend of widening waistlines (a development which we recently illustrated on our blog [Graphic detail](#)). Recognising that people's dietary preferences develop at an early age, John List of the University of Chicago and Anya Savikhin Samek of the University of Wisconsin-Madison examined in a recent [study](#) whether children can be "nudged" (or incentivised) to eat more fruits and less sweets. Their results suggest that the answer is yes.

In a field experiment carried out in Chicago over several weeks, Mr List and Ms Savikhin Samek tested the impact of giving kids an incentive to choose food they normally would not. During after-school programmes dubbed "Kids' Cafes" in 24 different locations across the city, children aged 6-18 were offered a free snack and could select either a cup with dried fruit (dried banana with acai or dried mango) or a cookie (such as snickerdoodle or chocolate chip). A group of the Kids' Cafes was randomly selected to offer the children at their

particular site an incentive to pick the cup; each time an individual chose the dried fruit over the cookie and ate it in the cafeteria, he or she would receive a small prize worth 50 cents or less (for example a wristband, pen or keychain).

Latest stories

The researchers observed that children attending the group of Kids' Cafes that did not offer an incentive to pick the fruit only turned down the cookie with a probability of 17%. At locations where participants were nudged to select the cup, however, nearly 80% wanted the dried fruit. Enticing children with wristbands and the like thus led to more than a four-fold increase in the share of children who chose the dried fruit. In addition, the randomised evaluation provided evidence of a lasting effect; a significant number of children who presumably had selected the banana or mango to get the prize continued to opt for the cup even after the researcher stopped rewarding their behaviour.

That may be the most encouraging aspect of the experiment: that bribing children to try good foods is more a tactic to get children to start to eat well than the most expedient way to get kids to do something they do not actually want to do. Such small nudges might therefore have satisfyingly large effects.