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New research: Children's vegetable intake linked to Popeye cartoons

Popeye cartoons, tasting parties and junior cooking classes can help increase vegetable intake in kindergarten children, according to new research published in the journal *Nutrition & Dietetics*.

Researchers at Mahidol University in Bangkok found the type and amount of vegetables children ate improved after they took part in a program using multimedia and role models to promote healthy food.

Twenty six kindergarten children aged four to five participated in the eight week study. The researchers recorded the kinds and amounts of fruit and vegetables eaten by the children before and after the program.

Lead researcher Professor Chutima Sirikulchayanonta said: "We got the children planting vegetable seeds, taking part in fruit and vegetable tasting parties, cooking vegetable soup, and watching Popeye cartoons. We also sent letters to parents with tips on encouraging their kids to eat fruit and vegetables, and teachers sat with children at lunch to role model healthy eating.'

Professor Sirikulchayanonta and her colleagues found vegetable intake doubled and the types of vegetables the children consumed increased from two to four. Parents also reported their children talked about vegetables more often and were proud they had eaten them in their school lunch.

She said there was no significant change in the kinds of fruit eaten by the children, but this was probably because they were already eating more fruit than vegetables at the start of the study.

According to Australia's last children's nutrition survey, Australian children are eating too much saturated fat, sugar and salt, and not enough fruit and vegetables. Only 61 per cent of the four to eight years olds surveyed ate the recommended amounts of fruit, and less than one in four ate enough vegetables.

Studies have shown the food habits and eating patterns picked up in early childhood 'track' into later childhood and adulthood. Professor Sirikulchayanonta said focusing on healthy food choices at an early age can have a major impact on the future health of adults.

The research also highlights that:

- Sitting next to children and eating the same foods as them makes children feel special
- 'Tasting' parties are an enjoyable way for children to compare tastes of fruit and vegetables

- Involving children in food preparation activities, like measuring, pouring and stirring helps them learn the names and colours of foods, and develops their hand-eye coordination.

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This study is published in the journal *Nutrition and Dietetics*. Media wishing to receive a PDF of this article may contact healthnews@wiley.com

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