If It’S Useful and You Know It, Do You Eat? Preschoolers Refrain From Instrumental Food

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Five studies, using real consumption and taste rating as dependent measures, show that preschoolers (3-5.5 years old) infer that food that is instrumental to achieving health or intellectual goals is less tasty, and therefore they consume less of it, compared to presenting the food with a neutral or taste frame.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

If you told a 3-year old that she should try a certain food because it will make her smart, would she conclude that it must not taste very good? If you told her that a certain dish will make her strong, would she conclude that it is less tasty? In this research, we ask what children, as young as three years old, learn from persuasive messages about food, and how these messages affect their consumption and food enjoyment. We propose young children infer from such messages that if food is good for one goal, it cannot be a good means to achieve another goal. We argue that when food is presented as making children strong or as instrumental to a non-health goal such as knowing how to read or count, children conclude the food is not as tasty, and therefore consume less of it, compared to when the food is presented with no accompanying message or as tasty.

We test our predictions among children 3.5-5.5 years old who are at the beginning of learning about food-related persuasion (Desrochers and Holt 2007). As such, it is important to understand how such messages affect their consumption behavior. We use different food items (crackers and carrots) and different messages (health- and academic-related, such as associating eating carrots with knowing how to count). By testing young children and using academic, non-health goal-messages, we are able to go beyond the learned-associations account that would suggest that children learn through experience that healthy-framed food is less tasty, and as a result consume less of it. By showing that no prior experience or learning is necessary for children to infer that if food serves an external goal it is less tasty and therefore they eat less, we rule out the learned-associations account and rule-in the online-inference account.

Specifically, by using these novel food-goal associations we extend past research that showed that children like less healthy-framed food (Miller et al 2011; Robinson et al 2007) and food that is presented as a contingency to receive rewards (e.g., saying “finish your vegetables and get dessert” decreases liking of the vegetables; Birch et al 1982; see Lepper et al. 1973 for the general principle of overjustification). These past findings can be explained by learned associations: children learn that healthy food is usually less tasty and that they are rewarded for eating this type of food. We extend also past research on causal-discounting (Kelly 1972) and outcome-discounting or means-goal dilution (Zhang et al. 2007), as we measure actual consumption, which allows us to go beyond perceived instrumentality that was measured in past research.

We conducted five studies at a daycare. An experimenter read preschoolers a story in individual sessions. The story featured a girl who had a snack (crackers or carrots). Depending on the experimental condition, the story either did or did not state the benefits of the snack. Our key dependent variable was preschoolers’ actual consumption of that snack after listening to the story.

Study 1 (N=66, 4.5-5.5 years old) presented crackers as making one strong (a health goal), as yummy, or with no message. Consistent with our predictions, children in the “health” condition ate fewer crackers compared to those in the “yummy” and “control” conditions that did not differ from each other. Those in the “healthy” condition were also less likely to choose these crackers to take home for future consumption. Study 2 replicates this effect using younger children (N=49, 3-4 years old) and additionally finds that children in the “healthy” condition rated the crackers as less tasty compared to children in the “control” condition (we did not include here the “yummy” condition, since there was no difference between the control and yummy conditions in Study 1).

Our first two studies established that children judge food that is presented as instrumental to a health goal as less tasty and consume less of it compared to yummy and neutral frames. We argue that this is due to an online-inference process, such that children conclude that if the food is presented as instrumental to achieving one goal it cannot be instrumental to achieving another goal (i.e., good taste). As reviewed above, an alternative account would be that children already consider healthy food less tasty, because they learned this through experience and often are convinced to consume it. To rule out this account, in studies 3-5 we used goals that children do not spontaneously associate with the food—knowing how to read or count. If making food instrumental to achieving these new goals also reduces consumption, it will support our online-inference account: Since children do not have preexisting associations between the food and the new goals, the learned-associations account could not explain such a result.

Study 3 (N=57, 4-5 years old) presented carrots as helping knowing how to read, as yummy, or with no instrumental message. We find that children indicated they would eat fewer carrots in the “read” condition compared to the “yummy” and “control” conditions that did not differ from each other, thus replicating study 1’s results using a novel, non-health, goal and another food item (carrots). Study 4 (N=46, 3.5-4.5 years old) generalizes this effect to another non-health goal, knowing to count, and finds that children ate less carrots when these were presented as instrumental to knowing how to count compared to a control condition. Finally, study 5 replicates this effect by showing that the activity the girl in the story engaged in after eating the snack (going to play in studies 1-4 and going to school/bed in study 5) does not interact with the effect of the instrumental message (carrots help you count).

Using a highly important context—food consumption by preschoolers—with practical, medical, and policy implications, we shed light on information processing among young children. Ultimately, we find that serving food without any message about the goal the food serves—making them strong, helping them read or count—increases actual consumption of neutral (crackers) and healthy (carrots) food items.

REFERENCES


