

Choosing is Losing: Children's Food Choice Independence Triggers the Development of the Unhealthy = Tasty Intuition

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Cite as:

D'hondt Jonathan, Briers Barbara (2024), Choosing is Losing: Children's Food Choice Independence Triggers the Development of the Unhealthy = Tasty Intuition. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 53rd, (119615)

Paper from the 53rd Annual EMAC Conference, Bucharest, Romania, May 28-31, 2024



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Abstract

In the 21st century, childhood obesity is a critical public health concern, with alarming rates and severe health risks. In the context of food choices, consumers often face a conflict between two goals, a long-term health goal and a short-term indulgent goal. When children have to make such food choices independently, they are confronted with conflicting attributes and goals and the trade-off between taste and health in food. We therefore propose that repeated exposure to conflicting attributes during childhood may trigger the belief that taste and healthiness in food are inversely related, often referred to as the "unhealthy = tasty" intuition, with an increased risk of higher body weight later in life. Study 1, analyzing data from 1063 children, reveals that greater food choice independence in childhood leads to unhealthier food intake and higher BMI. Study 2, involving 397 adults, shows that early food choice independence predicts UTI beliefs in adulthood. These findings underscore the importance of parental guidance and early interventions in promoting healthier food beliefs and preventing childhood obesity.

Subject Areas: *Consumer Behaviour*

Track: Consumer Behaviour