

How to get kids to make healthy food choices



LETTERS

Monday, 20 Feb 2023 7:00 AM MYT

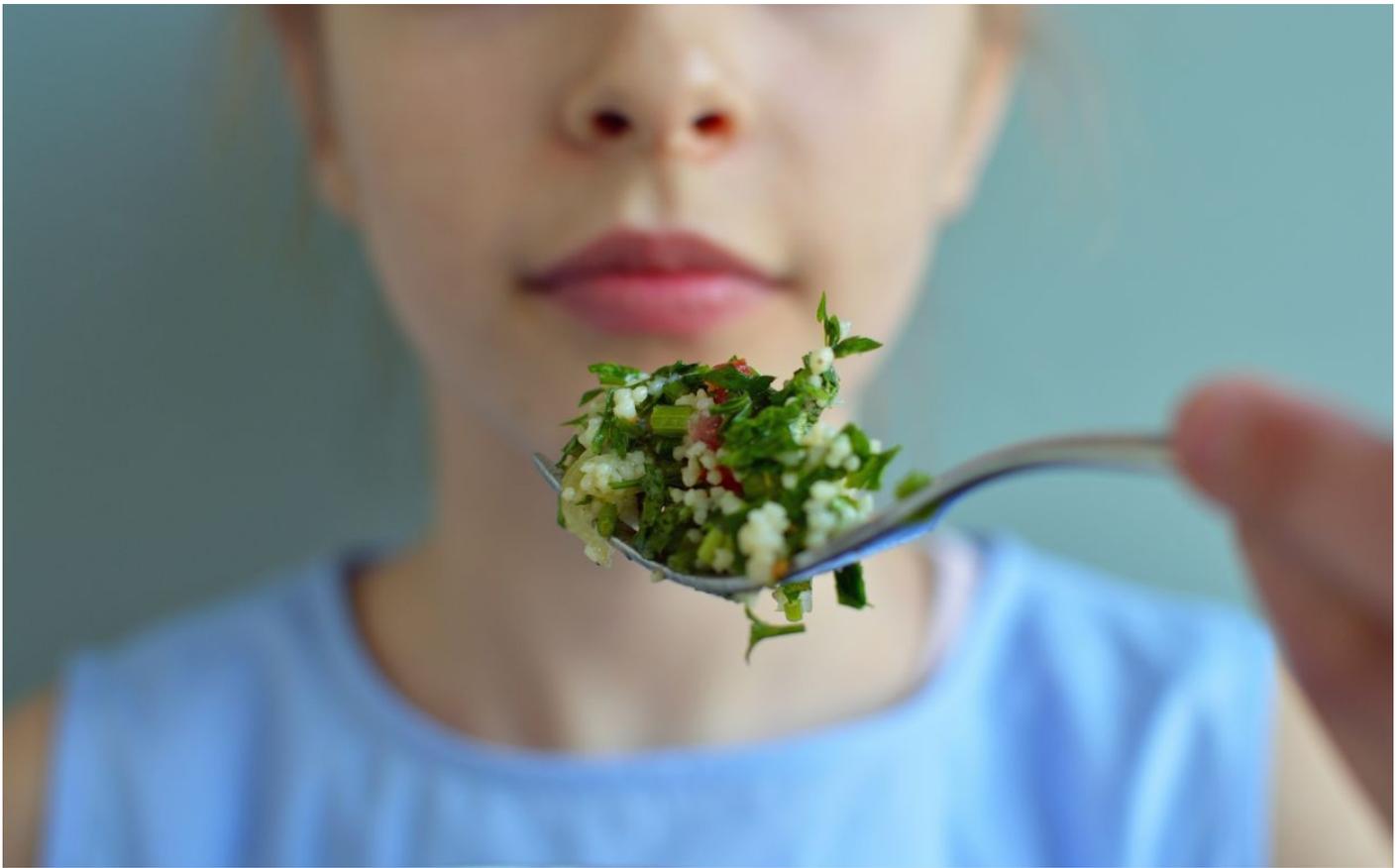


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FINDINGS from the National Health Morbidity Survey showed that the prevalence of childhood and adolescent obesity in Malaysia has increased exponentially over the last decade, from 5.4% in 2006 to 14.8% in 2019. The growing prevalence of obesity is significantly influenced by unhealthy eating behaviour, which may impact chronic noncommunicable diseases.

Behavioural scientists have identified various psychological biases that can explain anomalous behaviour regarding food choice. It can be the price, the taste, the portion, or how it appears

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Given the current overweight and obesity trend, especially among children, schools provide an ideal setting to promote healthy eating behaviour in children. Evidence indicates that it is critically important to develop healthy food preferences and eating habits in children because these can persist into adolescence and adulthood.

The development of nudge-based interventions in schools has been influenced by a behavioural insights approach to understanding behaviour and decision-making. Studies suggest a few nudges to promote healthy eating behaviour, including changes to the physical environment or layout in the canteen or school cooperative store.

The canteen layout can be designed to promote a healthy "choice architecture" by placing the fruits and vegetables where children must walk past them. Another strategy is to change the serving order so that vegetables are served first and/or dessert is served as a separate course.

Apart from that, increasing the variety of fruits and vegetables available and displaying attractive posters advertising fruits and vegetables might be feasible to nudge school children.

Another example is to make the "default choice" healthy – for instance, making low-fat milk the default rather than offering several types of milk. The default option can also come from the parents by providing food packs of protein, vegetables, fruit and milk to their children.



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Studies also show that lowering the price of fruits and vegetables positively affects children's purchasing at school.

Combining these pricing strategies with nudges in a school setting seems to stimulate healthy food purchases by children.

In addition, the Education Ministry's Supplementary Food Programme can be utilised to nudge school children to eat healthily by providing nutritious food. The long-term impact of adjusting the healthier food can improve the children's nutritional status and health needs.

Parents also play a significant role in determining the content of the food pack. In fact, it is becoming more common for parents nowadays to make bento boxes, which are excellent for encouraging a range of nutritious foods, portion management, and keeping foods separate.

Lastly, having a school garden might also be a way to nudge healthy eating behaviour. The aim is to involve children in gardening, nutrition lessons, and cooking classes which may offer a way for the children to eat their vegetables and help in changing eating behaviours over the long-term.

Encouraging healthy eating in schools should be simple and inexpensive. However, it takes time and

Additionally, decision-makers and choice architects must involve and strengthen local stakeholders. Similarly, district-level initiatives must form alliances with stakeholders from various schools to enable successful implementation and monitoring.

As the school session for the academic calendar 2023/2024 will start this coming March, it will be a perfect time to help our children focus on forming healthy eating behaviour. Let's embrace this new session with this new resolution: Healthy food, happy kids, bright futures!

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