5 Nudges to Get Kids to Eat Better at School

Kids won't do what you tell them. But you can subtly convince them to make healthier choices without them knowing.

Nobody likes being told what to do, least of all kids. So, as we try to do something about childhood obesity—a problem that affects about 20% of all kids—it makes sense to do it in a non-aggressive, non-preachy sort of way. If you try and enforce diets and exercise regimes, you're likely to get a negative reaction that could be counter-productive, experts say.

Hence, there's a growing movement to use behavioral techniques in school lunchrooms—that is, to "nudge" them in a certain direction by altering the environment in which they make choices. A survey by Cornell University's Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (B.E.N.) earlier this year showed that 19,000 public schools—or almost a quarter of all schools—had employed one of the nudges the center advocates.

"As soon as you say 'you have to do something,' you will experience [resistance]," says Kathryn Hoy, B.E.N.'s manager. "The schools are offering good food. It's not that it's not available. It's that students are not choosing to select it and consume it."

Below are a few ideas B.E.N. suggests, based on its research.

Highlight fruit

Research shows that putting fruit in a nice bowl can double the likelihood that students will choose it. "The easiest [nudge] for most schools is to highlight whole fruit by putting it in an attractive bowl in a highly attractive area, next to a register for example, or an area where every student has to pass through, maybe at the very beginning of the line," Hoy says.

Better lighting can also help. When Cornell researcher Brian Wansink bought a cheap T.J. Maxx desk lamp and shone it on a wire bowl, the fruit sales went up 54%.

Rename vegetables

Another easy strategy is to rename fruit and vegetables to make them sound more exciting. So, instead of "carrots" you call them "X-ray Vision Carrots." Or instead of plain old "spinach" you call it "Super Strength Spinach." Again, B.E.N.'s research shows that this can almost double consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, Hoy says.

Reposition the chocolate milk

Rather than outlawing chocolate, which would be cruel, B.E.N. instead recommends pushing it to the back of the cold cabinet. In one school it worked with, the nudge increased the number of kids purchasing white milk by 46%. "The kids who want the

chocolate milk are still going to get the chocolate milk, but the kids who really don't care are more likely to fall into what's convenient," Hoy says.

Bundle healthy options

Schools can think about up-selling healthy options. So, when a student decides on pizza, it can say "you know you can get a salad to go with that?" or "you know the full meal comes with a salad?" Similarly, schools can encourage healthy eating by offering full meals at all places where food is sold, so kids don't just snack on junk outside the cafeteria.

Offer trays

Research from a college cafeteria shows that offering a tray makes students more likely to choose healthy options. Hoy: "Going tray-less reduces the amount of fresh fruit and vegetable that people take because of the juggling factor. When we removed the tray, we found people were more likely to grab those convenient foods that are prepackaged."