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## **“Picky Eating” among Hong Kong Children**

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### **ABSTRACT**

“Picky eating” is a common behaviour among Hong Kong children. It may be caused by the unhealthy eating habits developed during childhood, the children’s impressions on food and bad parental education. Children who are “picky eaters” may have different kinds of health problems such as obesity, malnutrition and poor immunity. It may also result in poor growth development among these children. Therefore, the behaviour of “picky eating” should be avoided and the children can then improve the behaviour of “picky eating” step by step. In Japan, the government has implemented the School Lunch Programme, which aims at promoting food and nutrition education among students. Europe has a Food and Nutrition Policy for Schools. The policy aims at changing the eating environment of the children in order to promote healthy eating. The Hong Kong Government can consider and adopt the practices in Japan and Europe. Besides, schools, parents and media should be responsible for promoting healthy eating among children. Education, healthy public policy, changes to the lunchboxes and promotion of healthy eating are useful in stopping the behaviour of “picky eating” among children.

**KEYWORDS:** Picky eating, Healthy eating, Hong Kong children, Balanced diet

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Hong Kong is a gourmet paradise. There are different kinds of delicious food for people to choose from. To enjoy food, we may consider both the taste and the nutrition of food. Healthy eating is essential for the health of adults and normal development among children. However, children are likely to pick and choose their favourite food without knowing the nutritional value. They may simply refuse to eat the food that they dislike. The children who have this behaviour are considered “picky eaters”. “Picky eating” means consuming inadequate variety of food (Ong, Phuah, Salazar, & How, 2014). “Picky eating” is not a good eating habit for children and will potentially affect their growth. Therefore, “picky eating” among children is an important health issue.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 “Picky Eating” among Hong Kong Children**

Most Hong Kong children have unhealthy meals every day. Most of them prefer to eat food with high salt, sugar or fat contents, such as burgers and ice-cream. Few of them take fruits each day (Department of Health, n.d.). Volger et al (2017) have found that some Chinese and Hong Kong children consumed fatty food, sweets, beverages and snacks for daily energy intake.

According to the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) (2011), most children aged between 2 and 6 years always consume unbalanced diets. They eat few fruits and vegetables while eating too much junk food. A survey conducted by CHP has found that nearly 50% of interviewees consume less than 1 serving of fruits each day and less than 1 serving of vegetables each meal. Nearly 70 % interviewees have fast food at least once each week (Centre for Health Protection, 2011). Another study, which selected samples from local kindergartens, has found that few pre-schoolers consume normal amount of fruits, vegetables and dairy products (Lo et al, 2015).

Apart from the type of food, children who skip breakfast will likely develop “picky eating”. Currently, many more primary and secondary school students become breakfast skippers (So, et al., 2011). The behaviour of “picky eating” among children is common in Hong Kong.

### **2.2 Causes of “Picky Eating”**

#### **2.2.1 Eating Habits during Childhood**

When children are young, their diets are prepared by parents, and they are fed by parents. Therefore, behaviour of “picky eating” may have been “nurtured” by parents. For children aged 3 to 6 years old, behaviour of “picky eating” appears as a consequence of improper parental feeding practices. Parents always determine the types and control the amount of food that their children should eat. Being “forced” to eat, restriction of certain food for health reasons, and not providing balanced and varied food by parents, and their own beliefs may lead children to “picky eating” (Leung, Leung, & Luk, 2012). Besides, many children watch television during meal times. This behaviour may cause “picky eating” easily (Chung & Fong, 2015). It may prolong the eating time. Then, longer eating time may affect the taste of food since the temperature and the texture of the food will change. Finally, children may have less interest in the particular food. Therefore, the behaviour of “picky eating” is often a consequence of unhealthy eating habits during childhood.

#### **2.2.2 Children’s Impressions on Food**

Children’s impressions about food may affect their decisions on eating a certain food or not. Firstly, most children are not willing to try unfamiliar food because they have not seen it

before. They are afraid of trying something new. Generally, children take note of the appearance of the food before they eat it. The worse the appearance of the food is, the worse the first children's impression is, and they will refuse to eat that food. On the other hand, children are sensitive to the taste and texture of food (Chung, Fong, & Chung, 2016). Taste has stronger influences on whether children will eat a particular food again or not. If children do not like the taste, they will not try the food again and will refuse it immediately the next time. Very much like adults, children would refuse to eat smelly food. The shapes and sizes of the food may also affect their appetite. Infants aged 1 to 3 years start to select food according to the taste, colour, shape, temperature and smell (Lam, & Chen, n.d.). Therefore, children's impressions on food are important in shaping their eating habits.

### **2.2.3 Parental Education**

Parental education has strong influences on children's eating habits. Most children learn from their parents' behaviours. Children whose parents are "picky eaters" are almost certainly picky eaters too. Parents do not cook unfavoured food. Therefore, their children do not have the chance to try that food. On the other hand, most parents spoil their children. "Helicopter parents" are common in modern society. They always respond to and fulfil children's wants. Therefore, they will not encourage their children to try different kinds of food, but these parents always let their children eat unhealthy snacks such as crisps, chips and candies. Subsequently, these children are not willing to eat the normal diet because they have too many snacks already.

In the local community, there are many children who are cared by the maids or their grandparents because parents need to work. However, the maids or even the grandparents may not have enough knowledge and skills in exercising healthy eating on the children. Therefore, they may not be well aware of whether the children are having a balanced diet or not. To make the situation worse, grandparents often spoil their grandchildren while the maids may not pay enough attention to children's diet. Moreover, they may not make firm decision on food purchase and do not control the children's eating habits (Chung & Fong, 2015). Then, children are very autonomous and free to choose the food. These practices in the families and community have caused the behaviour of "picky eating" in the children.

## **2.3 Consequences of "Picky Eating" among Children**

"Picky eating" is definitely neither a healthy nor desirable behaviour at all for anyone. Apart from eating fewer varieties of food, "picky eating" may affect the growth and health of children. More seriously, "picky eating" may lead to different kinds of personal conditions and diseases in children because they cannot absorb all kinds of nutrients or are exposed to large amounts of selected food and nutrients only. Since "picky eaters" have a lower dietary intake of energy and nutrients, their height, weight and intelligence are affected negatively (Xue, et al, 2015).

### **2.3.1 Obesity**

Obesity is defined as excessive fat accumulated in the body and is considered unhealthy (World Health Organization, 2017). A major cause of obesity is the imbalance between the input and output of energy (Centre for Health Protection, 2017). Energy is obtained from consuming food and drinks. The energy is expended in the basic metabolic functions of the body and is used in performing physical activities.

Obesity is becoming an increasingly common, but alarming, phenomenon among Hong Kong children, mainly from the habit of eating high calorie, low-nutrient food and beverages (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). They always eat fatty food but fewer fibre-rich fruits or vegetables, resulting in excessive energy intake. According to the Department of Health (n.d.), prevalence of obesity in year 1997/98 was 15.7% and this was

significantly increased to 20.4% in 2008/09. The prevalence of obesity in boys is higher than that in girls. The increasing prevalence of obesity has caused much concern and has drawn the attention of the government, schools and parents. One in five students are considered overweight or obese (Department of Health, 2017).

### **2.3.2 Malnutrition and Poor Immunity**

“Picky eating” will result in malnutrition. All nutrients from food contain specific ingredients with the functions of keeping our body healthy. Children and adolescents, in particular, need the appropriate nutrients and in sufficient amount, in order to develop and grow normally. However, “picky eaters” take in only a few “selected” types of food. This eating habit potentially causes malnutrition and abnormal physical development of the body. Likewise, eating junk food will also lead to malnutrition because there is inadequate amount and variety of nutrients in such unhealthy food. Poor food intake over a long period can present clinically with growth hormone deficiency in children and in the worse scenario, anorexia, particularly among girls.

Children who do not receive enough nutrition in their diet will very likely not grow normally or healthily, and some of them may suffer from growth retardation (De Onis & Blössner, 2003). Furthermore, malnutrition causes poor immunity in children because the normal functions of the immune system are being disrupted by the lack of a balanced supply of ingredients from food. Each of the essential ingredients has specific functions in the immune system. For example, deficiency of vitamins and minerals will decrease the body resistance to infections because of poor or depressed response to new antigens and the abnormal function of immune cells (Rath, & Niedzwiecki, 2005).

## **3 PRACTICES IN JAPAN AND EUROPE**

### **3.1 Japan – School Lunch Programme**

In Japan, the preservation of the Japanese food culture is of pressing importance and priority to the Japanese government. They regard lunchtime as an important integral part of education. “The School Lunch Act” has been implemented in Japan since 1954 to monitor the School Lunch Programme, with the aim to promote healthy development among school children. In 2005, the “Basic Law on Shokuiku” was enacted after growing concerns over the country’s rising obesity rates and an increase in embraced unhealthy Western dietary habits (Tanaka, & Miyoshi, 2012). Shokuiku means food and nutrition education, and the law was the first law that regulates one's diets and eating habits. Registered dietitians play an important role in promoting the programme. Shokuiku supports the recognition that Japanese food culture is sustained and characterized by a nutritionally balanced rice-staple diet, containing adequate fish, meat, vegetables and fruits.

In order to make the Shokuiku programme effective, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology established the Diet and Nutrition Teacher System in 2007, in which teachers with qualifications and nutritional expertise are the supervisors of the school lunch programme. Homeroom teachers, families, school doctors or dentists and other nutrition experts also assist in the operation of this programme. It aims to improve dietary practices by ensuring adequate food intake for energy and nutrients, thus helping to reduce obesity and the chance of developing lifestyle-related diseases (Miyoshi, Tsuboyama-Kasaoka, & Nishi, 2012).

Through the school lunch and “nutrition education” programme, with information on appropriate diets, school children not only learn about the food culture, nutrition, the production of the food, culinary culture, and food environment and hygiene, but also the importance of good manners, sharing food fairly with their classmates, making sound

judgment about diet and being grateful for food (Durkin, Callahan, Kaneda, & Yamamoto, 2015). Moreover, school children are responsible for serving lunch and cleaning the dishes. Leftover food is not allowed in Japan. So school children need to finish their lunch completely, or they cannot leave the classroom. Therefore, children in Japan have learned more about food and nutrition in childhood. Their healthy eating habits are nurtured when they are young, avoiding the behaviour of “picky eating” later in their life. The Japanese approaches can be considered by the Hong Kong Government in planning nutrition education in schools, with the objectives of improving the health and nutritional status, and to nurture the sustainable food culture and healthy eating habits in our children (Miyoshi, Tsuboyama-Kasaoka, & Nishi, 2012).

### **3.2 Europe – Food and Nutrition Policy for Schools**

The term “health promoting schools” was developed by European Commission (EC), the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe and the Council of Europe (CE) in 1990 (Burgher, Rasmussen & Rivett, 1999). It aims at recognizing the roles of educational institutions to strengthen its setting to be healthy for living, learning and working. The concept of health has initiated the formation of school food and nutritional policy within the European region. School food and nutritional policy focuses on four elements, which are school curriculum, school environment, school nutrition and health services and school community, aiming at promoting health throughout the whole school (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2006).

There are guidelines about “picky eaters” in the policy. These guidelines are applicable to both the home and school environment. Firstly, children need to concentrate on eating their meals and therefore, televisions are to be turned off. Secondly, parents can encourage children to prepare the meals together. Thirdly, avoidance of giving too much food to children. Fourthly, forcing children to eat is not considered suitable. Fifthly, praising children when the food is eaten can encourage them to do the same the next time. Sixthly, letting children eat with other well-eating children (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2006). These guidelines mainly focus on creating the appropriate environment of having meals in order to reduce the prevalence of “picky eating” among children.

## **4 WHAT SHOULD THE STAKEHOLDERS DO?**

### **4.1 Parents**

Parents are the prime responsible persons for shaping the eating habits of children. They should seriously and actively consider making a positive change in the preparation of meals to avoid “picky eating” among the children, such as changing the cooking methods, trimming the sizes, and adding colours to the food. These measures can facilitate children to eat a balanced diet while at the same time to avoid “picky eating” behaviour. Parents can give encouragements such as “You are a good boy or a good girl!”, and give prizes to children when they eat more vegetables and fruits. On the other hand, the most important thing for parents is to be good role models, because children normally worship their parents as idols. Children will follow and replicate their parents’ behaviours, “example is better than percept”. Parents themselves need to eat healthily. Moreover, children are more likely to listen to parents than other people because they rely on and trust their parents. Therefore, parental education is extremely important to promote healthy eating among children. Parents should educate children about the knowledge of food and nutrition when children are still young. Since children’s eating behaviours may be affected by the food’s texture, taste and odour, parents should educate children about the importance of balanced diet when children are not willing to eat healthily. Parents must not spoil children with the “picky eating” behaviours.

## 4.2 Schools

Schools play an important role in shaping the healthy eating behaviour of students as observed from the findings of the School Lunch Programme in Japan and the Food and nutrition policy for schools in Europe. In Hong Kong, nearly all primary schools are full-day schools. Students have their lunch provided in the form of lunch boxes in schools. According to the World Health Organization (2018), children should consume more fruits and vegetables, limit the energy intake from total fats, and shift fat consumption away from saturated fats to unsaturated fats and limit the intake of sugar. Likewise, the Centre for Health Protection in Hong Kong has prescribed the standards for preparing school lunch in order to promote healthy eating, including achieving energy balance and a healthy body weight, increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables, and limiting the intake of total fat, sugar and salt (Center for Health Protection, 2017).

Students may only take their favourite food and do not finish eating their lunch. To improve the situation, some changes are necessary in order to promote healthy eating more effectively. The design, styles and packing of the lunch boxes must be attractive. More directly, the caterers should make the ingredients more appealing to the students through some modified methods of cooking. For example, frying vegetables with less oil and packing the lunch boxes with “colourful” vegetables not only ingratiate students, but also encourage them to eat more. Moreover, the sizes of the food are made as small as possible so that students can chew easily.

The schools should optimise the duration of lunchtime. Since many children eat slowly, longer lunchtime can allow enough time for them to finish their lunch boxes, and hopefully, they will not waste any food. Practically, the duration of lunchtime should be of at least one hour. With a better arrangement, students can enjoy their lunch every day when they are at school. This is certainly good for their health and wellness.

There are also non-eating measures for the schools to organise for the students to promote healthy eating, such as planting schemes. Hydroponics is one of the popular planting methods these days. It does not need any soil for planting. Thus, hydroponics does not require much space and there are no complicated procedures. Under the teachers’ supervision, students can do hydroponics in their own classrooms to experience planting. They can plant different fruits and vegetables such as tomatoes, lettuce and potatoes, which can be used for lunchbox ingredients. Through the process and experience of hydroponics planting, students can learn about the production of food and its nutrients, while teachers can make full use of the scheme to educate the students about the importance of healthy eating. More importantly, students are willing to eat the food they have grown themselves because they have paid great efforts in the process.

School education is one of the very effective ways to solve the problem of “picky eating” in children. In addition to the activities mentioned above, schools can also organise talks, competitions and booth games, by employing interesting and interactive methods, to further educate children in healthy eating and the choice of food.

## 4.3 The Government

The Department of Health launched EatSmart@school.hk Campaign in 2006 in order to promote healthy eating among Hong Kong schools, contained in the “school policy on healthy eating” established in the EatSmart@school.hk Campaign. The policy aimed at ensuring enough resources for promoting healthy eating in schools both sustainably and comprehensively, by creating a supportive school environment and atmosphere to promote healthy eating and to enhance the awareness of balanced nutrition among students, parents and staff. Under the EatSmart@school.hk Campaign, lunch and snacks are being monitored, and EatSmart Recipes and printed materials such as posters and pamphlets are printed.

Moreover, there is an activity of “Joyful Fruit Month” to hold some colouring and drawing competitions and to provide nutrition information. The EatSmart@school.hk Campaign is found to be effective and successful since the number of obese primary students decreased gradually (Wan, Chan & Fong, 2017).

The Hong Kong Government can refer to the healthy eating policies and programmes in Japan and Europe, and to consider adopting their practices in Hong Kong. A programme can be set up in schools to monitor the conditions and ways of eating lunch by school children. Consultations can be provided to children who have leftover food and who are “picky eaters”. It is essential to nurture healthy eating habits among students when they are still young. Moreover, the Government can promulgate healthy public policies to regulate and strengthen food and nutrition education in schools. At present there are no formal food and nutrition lessons in schools, apart from some talks. Therefore, inclusion of food and nutrition courses in the curriculum can help to increase the awareness, knowledge, attitude and practice of healthy eating among children. The Government can add home economics lessons in primary school curriculum, with the objective of educating students about healthy eating through the process of cooking uncomplicated dishes.

#### **4.4 Media**

The media is one of the powerful channels to influence the public. There are two kinds of media, mass media and print media, and they can assist in promoting healthy diet to children, hopefully reducing the undesirable behaviour of “picky eating”. In the mass media, electronic devices are widely used in the Hong Kong society, and many young children have their own smartphones. They are keen on surfing Internet and social network. Therefore, promotional advertisements and announcements about healthy eating can be posted on the Internet. Children will be more aware of the messages at their fingertip. It is a direct way to educate children about healthy eating.

On the other hand, the Government can design colourful leaflets with information on healthy eating, “picky eating” and balanced diet. The leaflets can be put in healthcare centres and clinics for distribution to the public. Schools can also help to distribute the leaflets to students and parents. It is an effective way to pass the correct messages to students like “direct marketing”. Apart from leaflets, simple, clear, colourful, “funny” and prominent posters can be placed noticeably in the schools, healthcare centres and clinics.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

According to Siu, Chan, & Lee (2013), both internal and external factors may affect the eating habits of secondary school students. They have difficulties to eat healthily because the strong taste food such as potato chips are too attractive. They are easily influenced by their peers, and may be “forced” by their classmates to eat unhealthily in schools. Although they may understand the importance of healthy eating, they still cannot change the unhealthy eating habits because of family influence, peers influence and personal eating habits.

Thus the behaviour of “picky eating” needs to be stopped as soon as possible. Otherwise, there are far-reaching impacts on children. It is difficult to change the bad habits after the children have grown up. The cooperation among the Government, schools and parents, as well as the media, is important. Children do not understand many things in life and they are like blank papers. Therefore, moulding the children’s minds during childhood is more effective than changing the external factors. Furthermore, education, healthy lunch policy, changing the lunchboxes and promotion of healthy eating are also useful in avoiding the behaviour of “picky eating” among children.

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