

Mind the doughnut: emotional eating is a habit that can start in childhood

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Emotional eating? Shutterstock

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Food can be an extremely effective tool for calming young children. If they are bored on a long car journey, or fed up with being in the pushchair, many parents use snack foods to distract them for a little longer. Or if children are upset because they have hurt themselves or want something they cannot have, the offer of something sweet is often used to “make them feel better”.

But what are the effects of using food as a tool to deal with emotions like boredom or sadness? Does it turn children into adults who cannot cope with being bored or upset without a sweet snack? Probably not. There certainly isn't any evidence to suggest that occasionally resorting to the biscuit tin will affect children in this way. But what if we do it on a regular basis? What happens when sweets and biscuits become the tool for rewarding children for good behaviour and doing well? Or if food is consistently withheld as a punishment?

There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that using food as a tool or as a reward regularly with children may be associated with a greater risk of emotional eating. In a recent study we explored whether children as young as three preferred to play with toys or eat snack foods if they were feeling

stressed.

All the children had just eaten lunch so were not hungry, and were then observed to see what they did in a four minute period - eat or play with toys - whilst waiting for someone to look for a missing final piece of a jigsaw. Children aged three to five did not tend to eat much more in comparison to a control group. However, in a similar experiment when the children were two years older, we found many of the children would eat foods when they were not hungry (emotional overeating), rather than play.

It appears that somewhere between the ages of four and six, the tendency to emotionally overeat may increase in many children. And parents who told us they frequently used food as a reward (or its withdrawal as a punishment) when their children were younger, were more likely to have children who emotionally overate when they were aged five to seven. This suggests that frequent use of food as a reward or punishment in that younger period may predict a greater chance of children using food as an emotional tool later in life.



Calming effect. Shutterstock

Of course you may be thinking that your own exposure to “reward” foods hasn’t had any lasting impact on your current eating behaviour. But it is worth considering how society has changed in the last few decades to market and promote high calorie foods to children. Many people believe we live in an “obesogenic society”, where our environment has evolved to promote obesity rather than support healthy eating. The fact that around a third of English school children are overweight or obese is testament to this. With grab-bag sized bags of chocolates being promoted to children, supersized portions in fast-food outlets and even clothes shops selling sweets at children’s eye level in queues, it is clear our children need to adapt to cope with constantly being marketed large portions of high calorie foods.

So how can we navigate this complex environment, juggling the balance of making food enjoyable and sociable, whilst helping children to achieve a healthy and balanced diet? Sweet foods are a fun part of life and not necessarily something we want to remove. Even if we eliminated all links between food, emotion and reward in the home, the reality is that society is full of situations where children will experience being given calorie dense foods as a reward or as part of celebrations. It would be a pity to take away the joy that children find in party bags, birthday cakes, Easter eggs and other celebration foods. Perhaps thinking about not just what foods we give children, but also how and why we give certain foods to children at particular times is a good way to start.



An obesogenic society? PA

Teaching children how to manage their appetites, to eat if they are hungry and to stop if they are full, is an important lesson which is often overlooked.

Eating patterns can usually be tracked across life, so children who learn to use food as a tool to deal with emotional distress early on are much more likely to follow a similar pattern of eating later in adult life. Around three quarters of children who are obese will continue to be obese as adults.

Emotional overeating is one factor that has been linked not only with overeating and obesity, but also with the development of eating disorders. To combat this, the way we feed children, and the lessons we provide about how to use food, may be just as important as what we feed them.

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