

Overweight kids learning about willpower

By Bonnie Rochman, Wall Street Journal

A recent research program is testing an intriguing hypothesis: Can overweight children be taught to eat less by putting their favorite dishes right in front of them?

Kerri Boutelle, a professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at UC San Diego's School of Medicine, calls her willpower-enhancing technique "cue exposure." The aim is to train the brain of overweight and obese children to reduce the desire to eat when they're not actually hungry. And since many impulses to eat come from triggers in our environment, such as getting an urge to snack while watching TV, interrupting such automatic responses can help children cut down on mindless eating.

Boutelle, working with children between the ages of 8 and 12, recently completed a four-month study with 40 obese kids and conducted an earlier eight-week study involving 36 overweight children. The results: Children seem capable of learning to subdue their food cravings, but it isn't clear how long the willpower lasts after the experiments are over.

In the studies, the participants are given a favorite food, such as a brownie, and told to rate their craving on a scale of 1 to 5—1 means "I can resist this," and 5 is "I'm dying for it," Boutelle says. The children are instructed to put the brownie down, wait 30 seconds and rate their cravings again. Another rating is recorded after the participants sniff the brownie, then again after taking a small bite and later after staring at it for five minutes. Finally, Boutelle directs the children to throw the brownie away.

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