



## Are children more paternalistic than their mothers when choosing snacks?



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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on an experiment in which mothers and their child separately chose between relatively healthy foods (flasks of stewed apples) and relatively unhealthy foods (candy bars). Each participant first filled up a first bag for her/himself, and then, a second one for the other person of the dyad. A simple nutritional message on vitamins and sugar contents of foods was then provided, and subsequently each participant filled up a third bag for her/himself and a fourth one for the other person of the dyad. The results show that before revealing the nutritional message, mothers are, on average, “indulgent”, which means that they choose a lower number of relatively healthy foods for their child than the one they choose for themselves. Children tend to be rather “paternalistic”, which means that they choose a higher number of relatively healthy foods for their mothers than they choose for themselves. The nutritional message leads many mothers and children to significantly increase the number of relatively healthy foods selected for themselves and for the other person. The mothers’ indulgence versus the children’s paternalism, along with the children’s reactivity to the message, suggest that mothers underestimate the children’s acceptance of healthy food.

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## 1. Introduction

There are rising concerns about the low acceptance of healthy foods by children and their preferences for high-sugar and/or high-fat foods (for instance, see [Cooke & Wardle, 2005](#)). As a response, parents may sway their children’s habits both implicitly and explicitly. Parents’ diet can implicitly influence their children through modelling ([Tibbs et al., 2001](#)) or through covert control, such as not buying sweets ([Ogden, Reynolds, & Smith, 2006](#)). They can also explicitly impact their children’s

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behaviour through parenting practices such as praising, negotiating, pressuring to eat healthy foods, or by overtly restricting access to less healthy foods (Vaughn, Tabak, Bryant, & Ward, 2013).

Parents' decisions for their children can be driven either by their views about nutrition, including the long-term effects of eating habits, or by their desire to immediately satisfy their children's preferences. Nutrition education via public policy is another explicit tool for modifying eating habits. Understanding food choices during childhood is important because these choices are persistent, and could have long-term impact on weight, health status, and well-being (Nicklaus & Remy, 2013).

This paper aims at focusing on a decision-making environment in the presence of family members, by examining parents' and children's preferences regarding healthy and unhealthy snacks, and allowing the identification of factors affecting these choices.

This paper analyses the choices of snacks using data from an experiment with family dyads, including one mother and her child, recruited in the Dijon area (France). The experiment was designed to determine preferences for relatively healthy versus relatively unhealthy (but tasty) foods, which is obviously important for nutrition. This trade-off between a current benefit (pleasure) and a future benefit (health) is crucial in research involving time-inconsistent preferences, as emphasised by O'Donoghue and Rabin (1999) and List and Samek (2015).

During our experiment, each mother and each child separately chose between relatively healthy foods (flasks of stewed apples) and relatively unhealthy foods (candy bars) and filled up take-home bags. For each bag, each participant selected five products among healthy and unhealthy foods. First, each participant filled up a bag for her/himself; second, a bag for the other person of the dyad. A simple nutritional message on both types of food was then given to participants, and subsequently each of them filled up a third bag for her/himself and a fourth one for the other person of the dyad. At the end of the experiment, each participant received one bag randomly determined among the different bags filled by each member of the dyad (mother or child), which corresponds to an incentive-based mechanism.

With this experimental design, participants' choices can be characterised as paternalistic or indulgent, although limits related to this dual classification are indicated later in this paper. When a participant chooses a higher number of relatively healthy foods for the other person of his/her family, compared with his/her own choice, the behaviour is characterised as paternalistic because the participant is prescribing healthier options for others than (s)he personally prefers. By contrast, if an individual chooses a lower number of relatively healthy foods for the other person compared with his/her own choice, the behaviour is characterised as indulgent.

Results show, first, that before revealing the nutritional message, mothers are on average indulgent, choosing a lower number of relatively healthy foods for their child than for themselves. Second, children tend to be more paternalistic, choosing a higher number of relatively healthy foods for their mother than for themselves. Third, individual choices for themselves made by mothers and children are significantly associated with liking of the foods and with individuals' expectations about the other member of the dyad's choices for this individual, underlining an indirect influence of the other member of the dyad. Fourth, a simple nutritional message leads many participants to significantly increase the number of relatively healthy foods for themselves and for the other person of the dyad. Children react more to the message when choosing snacks for themselves than for their mother, and become more indulgent after the message, even if they are still less indulgent than their mothers. The mothers' indulgence does not significantly change with information. The mothers' indulgence versus the children's paternalism, along with the children's reactivity to the message, suggest that mothers underestimate their children's acceptance of healthy food. Moreover, the econometric estimations show that the paternalism elicited before the message is a significant predictor of the participants' reactions towards more healthy products for themselves, after receiving the nutritional message.

Our paper contributes to the behavioural literature focusing on food choices by children.<sup>1</sup> In particular, some recent field experiments by Belot and James (2011), List and Samek (2015) and Maimaran and Fishbach (2014) studied some regulatory interventions in schools or in daycares. In particular, Maimaran and Fishbach (2014) underscored a negative impact of several specific persuasive health messages on carrot consumption by pre-schoolers. Moreover, List and Samek (2015) showed that the introduction of small incentives significantly increased the selection of healthy snacks, while educational messaging alone had little influence on food choices.

These field experiments organised in real contexts focus only on children's behaviours, and abstract from parents' behaviours. Our paper is therefore a novel contribution, as it examines mothers' and children's choices for two specific products in the lab, allowing a precise control of both dyads' strategies and revealed information. Despite classical limitations stemming from the artificial environment and the limited number of products (see Levitt & List, 2007), a lab experiment allows a precise observation of participants' choices. Our lab experiment offers a new design and precisely isolates participants' choices for themselves and for the other member of their family, which is particularly difficult to study in a natural field experiment.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Our paper is also related to the few experimental studies involving children and parents together, even if these papers do not focus on food choices. For instance, Cipriani, Giuliano, and Jeanne (2013) focuses on the transmission of public values between parents and children. Our experiment focuses on real choices, which also differs from studies where parents were asked about their motivations for choosing foods for their children (as for instance Rigal, Chabanet, Issanchou, & Monnery-Patris, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> To the best of our knowledge, only Gram (2015) examined dyad food choices in the field with ethnographic perspective, based on the observation of food negotiation between parents and children. This paper does not use a field protocol with both control and treatment groups, and it does not use an econometric analysis.

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