INTRODUCTION

Eating in response to emotional arousal (i.e., emotional eating) is related to:

- Increased food consumption (e.g., Elbaz, Thiel, & Rammstedt, 2008).
- Higher weight status (e.g., Brussels, 2008).

Research has mainly used parents’ report and children’s report of negative emotional eating (e.g., Briet & van Strien, 1997).

Only one study has been conducted to observe children’s eating behaviors in response to negative emotions, yet this research lacked a control group (Gibson, Hyslop, & Farrow, 2010).

In addition, little is known about whether children eat in response to positive emotion.

**Research Question:**
Do children in the happy and sad condition eat more than in the neutral condition?

METHODS

**Preliminary Analyses**
Age, gender, and BMI percentiles did not differ across conditions, all ρ’s > .05.

Compared to children in the neutral condition,

a) children in the happy condition were happier (M = .34, SD = 1.1), F(1, 75) = 2.85, p = .048,

b) children in the sad condition were more sad (M = -.81, SD = 1.1), F(1, 75) = 4.88, p = .015.

**Primary Analyses**
A 3 (Condition) × 4 (Food Type) ANOVA was conducted (Figure 1).
Condition was not significant (F(2, 75) = .72, p = .46, η² = .02).
Food Type was significant, F(3, 225) = 17.25, p < .001, η² = .17.
Condition × Food Type was significant, F(6,225) = 2.14, p = .05, η² = .05.

Children consumed more chocolate in the happy and sad than neutral conditions.
Children consumed less goldfish in the happy and sad than neutral conditions.

Teddy graham and animal cracker consumption did not differ across conditions.

RESULTS

**Figure 1: Amount of Food Consumed by Condition and Food Type**

**Snack Foods**
- Children (N = 79; 42 boys, 37 girls)
  - Happy (M age = 6.9 years, SD = 1.2) (Range: 4.5-9.0)
  - Neutral (M age = 6.9 years, SD = 1.2) (Range: 4.5-9.0)
  - Sad (M age = 6.9 years, SD = 1.2) (Range: 4.5-9.0)

**Amount of Food Consumed (in pieces)**

- Chocolate
- Teddy Grahams
- Animal Crackers
- Goldfish Crackers

**Condition**
- Happy
- Neutral
- Sad

**Amount of Food Consumed**
- Happy (4 pieces)
- Neutral (3 pieces)
- Sad (5 pieces)

**Snack Foods provided; 5 minutes**

**Height and Weight Measures**

**Sticker & Certificates**

**Snack Foods**
- Chocolate: 82 pieces of chocolates
- Teddy graham: 36 pieces of teddy graham
- Animal crackers: 12 pieces of animal cookies

DISCUSSION

Children engaged in emotional eating.

- Children consumed more chocolates in the happy and sad than neutral conditions.
- Past research suggests that consuming chocolates can alleviate negative moods (March & Muirhead, 2007).
- It may also be that children prefer chocolates than other snacks foods, although these foods are common snacks for young children.
- Future research should determine whether it is the chemical properties or children’s preferences that led children to choose chocolates.
- Unexpectedly, children consumed less goldfish in the sad and happy than neutral conditions.
- It is unknown why this is the case; it may be sweet foods can alleviate negative moods, but not savory foods (van Strien et al., 2008).
- Similarly, it may also be that children prefer goldfish less than chocolates.
- Future research should examine this.
- Although both happy and sad conditions induced eating, it is unknown if mood intensity is the underlying mechanism.
- It may be that happy and sad emotions induced the same intensity, thus lead to over- or under-eating, instead of the valence.
- Future research should examine the role between valence and intensity of children’s emotional eating behaviors.

REFERENCES


