

# World Summit on OBESITY AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

December 15, 2021 | Webinar

## Children are key informants about establishing healthy eating habits; using Participatory Action Research with primary school children

Dr Suzie Waddingham<sup>1</sup>, Dr Pieter Van Dam<sup>1</sup>, Dr Silvana Bettiol<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Healthcare Redesign Program, Tasmanian School of Medicine, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, 7000, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Public Health Program, Tasmanian School of Medicine, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, 7000, Australia

### Abstract

**Background:** A key obesity risk factor is unhealthy eating. As eating habits established in young children persist into adulthood, it is crucial to understand ways to improve healthy eating. There is a gap in knowledge about how children make food decisions. The study aimed to understand how children make food choices in a Tasmanian primary school setting, described by children.

**Methods:** Participatory Action Research was used, completing five action cycles, with a convenience sample of children in a non-government primary school in Tasmania. The canteen, a familiar context, was used as a discussion point for children during data collection. Data was collected through observation, filming and documentation by researchers during; an open class discussion, one day in the canteen, a day when specified meal was offered in the canteen and two Discovery Days (children worked in groups to design a healthy menu). Qualitative data was analysed using a conventional content analysis to establish concepts that represented factors that children considered when making food choices.

**Findings:** Knowledge about healthy food did not appear to influence children's food choices, children used a range of concepts (pleasure, texture, social acceptability, versatility and eating context) collectively to make food choices. Using these concepts, a conceptual framework was developed to portray how consideration of children's criteria for making choices could be integrated with known evidence about making healthy options available in the school setting. This has the potential for making healthy food more desirable to children.

**Conclusion:** Children are key informants about concepts influencing their food choices. Designing programs which consider children's perceptions could shape what and how food is presented to children during school in the future. The framework developed shows how research outcomes can be simplified and used in the school setting to promote healthy eating.

### Biography

Suzie Waddingham currently works at the School of Health Science, University of Tasmania. Suzie does research in Public Health, Nutrition and Dietetics and Allied Health Science.

suzanne.waddingham@utas.edu.au