

# The Formation and Malleability of Dietary Habits: A Field Experiment with Low Income Families

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We conduct a field experiment to evaluate the extent to which dietary habits are malleable early on in childhood and later in life. 285 low income families with young children were recruited and assigned either to a control group or one of two treatments, each of them lasting for twelve consecutive weeks. In one treatment, families received food groceries at home for free for twelve weeks and were asked to prepare five specific healthy meals per week. In the other treatment, families were simply asked to reduce snacking and eat at regular times. We evaluate the impact of the interventions on diet using a range of self-reported and objective measures collected over three consecutive years. We find evidence that children's BMI distribution shifted significantly relative to the control group, i.e. they became relatively "thinner" and this effect is sustained 2 years after the intervention. We also find some evidence that their preferences and sugar intakes have been affected by both treatments. On the other hand, we find little evidence of effects on parents. We conclude that exposure to a healthy diet and regularity of food intake possibly play a role in shaping dietary habits, but influencing dietary choices later on in life remains a major challenge.