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## Agriculture & Natural Resources

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### NEWS RELEASE

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August 2003

### **LETTING YOUNG CHILDREN SERVE THEMSELVES**

For many years, the Head Start Program has practiced letting preschool children serve themselves at mealtime. They call it family-style food service—now it can be called the best and healthy thing to do.

Let your kids dish out their own food. In this world of super-sized portions, it may help them eat more healthfully. That's the take-home message from a series of studies of preschoolers led by scientists from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

In response to the increasing problem of children becoming overweight, experts are looking for better ways to prevent excess weight gain early on. In this study preschool children were fed different amounts of macaroni and cheese—an appropriate amount for children this age, twice as much, and at a third setting the children were allowed to serve themselves.

The study found that children who were served larger portions ate 25% more food. The children's overall calorie intake was 15 percent higher when served the larger portion.

What surprised the researchers was *how* the children consumed more food. When the children were served the double portion, they “increased the size of their bites, but not the number of bites,” said Jennifer Fisher, assistant professor of pediatrics at Baylor and lead author of the study. They didn't compensate by eating less of the other foods offered. “They just ate more macaroni and cheese,” Fisher said. However, when allowed to serve themselves, the children ate about 25 percent less than when the larger portion was placed on their plates.

This is important information in this era of super-sized portions. Over the past 30 years portion sizes of all categories of food have jumped—both at home and at restaurants.

“Kids are not often left to their own devices when foods are served,” Fisher said. “We tell them how much we want them to eat. We give them prompts about how much to eat. We make deals.”

Allowing children to serve themselves -- the healthier items, that is, rather than junk food, ice cream and sugar-soaked sodas -- “may lessen the exposure to large portions,” she said. Which in turn, may prevent excess weight gain in children.

*Source: CNRC Consumer News, Heaping helps encourage kids to overeat*  
<http://public.bcm.tmc.edu/cnrc/consumer/archives/heaping.htm>