

# Friday night is pizza night. How weekend choices undermine our kids' healthy eating habits.

by Galadriel Watson June 15 at 9:00 AM

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Weekdays can be exhausting for parents. You get your kids out of bed, take them where they need to go and help with homework. You make sure they have the proper food to fuel their brains and bodies. By the time the weekend comes, everyone is exhausted and ready for fun. Out comes the frozen pizza for dinner, the soda and popcorn with a movie and the Jujubes for dessert, because it feels like it's time to unwind and indulge.

If this is your habit — to generally enforce dietary rules on weekdays and get a little lax on weekends — you're not alone.

Sibylle Kranz, a registered dietitian nutritionist and nutrition expert at the University of Virginia, says that for both kids and adults, “weekend dietary intake is very different from weekday. On

weekend days, we seem to have more of what we call celebration food. It's birthday parties, or going to the pool and getting something from the vendors there, or families getting together and having big meals."

A recent [survey](#) of 192 moms of kids ages 7 to 11, who were recruited by Amazon's Mechanical Turk, backs this assertion up. "On weekends, kids are eating less healthy foods and beverages more often, and having larger portions of them," says Debra Hoffmann, a clinical health psychologist at Ohio's Bowling Green State University and the lead author of the study based on that survey.

The study looked at the eating habits of children, including their consumption of healthy foods, specifically fruit, vegetables, whole grains and water; and unhealthy foods, specifically chips, fast food, fried food, pizza, sweet snacks, desserts and soda. The kids in the study ate bigger portions of unhealthy foods and beverages, more often — while their consumption of healthy foods dipped.

"I think it's possible that parents view weekends as a time to let loose and relax," says Hoffmann. "Children may be eating out more often. And the concern there is that foods at restaurants are generally high in calories and low in nutrients, and often have large portion sizes."

Hollie Raynor, a professor of public health nutrition at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, and a registered dietitian and clinical psychologist, co-authored a 2011 [study](#) on weekday/weekend differences in overweight and obese children. She too believes the difference is caused by the lack of structure on weekends compared with weekdays. "Rather than the day being more planned out, it sort of happens as it goes," she says. "And then potentially thoughtful decisions are not happening about foods and beverages being consumed."

But does a little thoughtlessness matter? According to nutrition experts, yes, these weekend slides can be problematic for kids.

Hoffmann points out the big concern — "What's this going to mean for children's weight?" She notes that, in the United States, nearly one in three elementary-school-age children is [overweight or obese](#). "Even if a child's not necessarily gaining weight, we still want to make sure they're developing healthy habits and won't run into problems in the future."

Raynor's study also found that children watched twice as much TV on weekends, while other studies (such as [here](#) and [here](#)) have shown children get less exercise on weekends. So if weekends mean more calories and less movement, many of the health benefits kids get on weekdays could be offset by poor weekend choices. Plus, food habits gained in childhood can persist into adulthood and become harder to break.

Kranz add that a healthy diet is "especially critical because growing children have very high nutrient needs." The body is actively making tissue, and micronutrients such as vitamins and minerals are important for proper development, including in the brain.

That's not to say parents are doing a horrible job. "It is indeed very promising that during weekdays, mothers may be telling their children, 'You need to have your vegetables and eat these healthier [foods],' " Hoffmann says. However, "Even a couple hundred extra calories a day on the weekend can still significantly add up over the course of a year. So, for example, an extra 300 calories on the weekend would result in about 16,000 calories over the course of a year, which alone could significantly affect the child's health and weight if they aren't properly compensating for it. And, unfortunately, most children do not." For reference, two servings of chips equal about 300 calories.

And it's not just moms who affect children's food choices. While Hoffmann's study only looked at mothers — for consistency and because, she says, "research does suggest that mothers still are predominantly the primary caregiver when it comes to feeding their child" — studies such as Raynor's, and others from Europe, involving both parents have shown similar results. Raynor suggests that all adult caregivers need to be aware of how weekday/weekend differences "can create challenges for kids, especially if they're working toward healthier eating goals or being more active."

Parents should also watch out for summer vacation, which poses similar challenges to weekends, in terms of structure and activity level. "There are data that show that children gain weight during the summertime as compared to during the academic year," Raynor says.

Kranz points out that at places like summer camp, children may be offered more processed food, because it can better withstand the heat and humidity.

As a parent, then, how can you keep your child healthy all week, and all year? Hoffmann suggests implementing small changes, rather than drastic edicts such as banning all sugar. "The concern about placing children on strict diets is that, similar to adults, they may be more likely to break down and binge, and gain weight," Hoffmann says. "Prevention really is the key, especially when they're young and they're still developing food habits."

To help kids establish healthy long-term practices while watching calories and nutrition in the short term, promote sparkling water instead of soda, or aim for fresh fruit instead of cake. In restaurants, keep in mind that children need much smaller portions than adults, so try cutting your child's portion in half.

"I'm not saying that parents need to say, 'Nope, we can't have our fun weekend routine,'" Hoffmann says. "I think it's okay if weekends are a time to let loose a bit. It's about finding a balance, because the key really is moderation."

Raynor also says it's about finding a balance between implementing healthy habits and keeping the child from feeling impossibly confined. Parents should be "more engaged in terms of thinking about the weekend day and how eating is going to occur, similar to the way they do during weekdays."

And Kranz says, “Overall the diet should have more healthier foods than not-so-healthy foods. If you want your children to eat healthy, you always need to offer them healthy food — no matter if it’s Saturday, Sunday or holiday time.”

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