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"Food's Yum":  
Primary School Children's Constructions of  
Food and Healthy Food Messages

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### Abstract

In the current climate of increasing child obesity levels, and the accompanying media constructions of child obesity, improving children's eating behaviours is the focus of much attention. Traditional methods of promoting healthy eating have had limited success in improving eating behaviours, in part because they do not adequately address the social and environmental complexities associated with food and eating. This study adopts a discursive approach to examine the ways in which children construct food and make meaning of food in their everyday lives. A discursive analysis of conversations from small groups of 9-11 year old children about food, with an emphasis on healthy food, resulted in the identification and reporting of the use of four of the interpretative repertoires drawn on by the children: sensory, nutrition, natural and healthism. I describe the ways in which the children draw upon these repertoires to construct food as an object and to use food as a social marker and personal identifier. By drawing on multiple discourses in their constructions of food, the children demonstrate the socially negotiated nature of food. Unlike previous studies examining children's food preferences and eating habits, these children indicate that they are interested in healthy eating, however this position is negotiated rather than static. The strong presence of the healthism discourse in the conversations indicates that children are receiving healthy food messages, but emphasises that these messages form one part of a complex social negotiation of food practices and are used for the children's own social purposes. The children's focus on the responsibility of individuals to maintain health indicates that some of the concern that health promotion messages create a morality around health behaviours is justified.

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