

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Sugar and Hyperactivity in Children is a Myth”

The prevailing notion is that when children indulge in sugary foods, they turn feral and nearly uncontrollably bounce off the walls. Most parents really believe that sugar causes hyperactivity in their children. But scientific investigations do not support this assertion. Reportedly, scarfing down bowls of candy does not launch offspring into sugar-induced bedlam. In 1995, *JAMA* published a meta-analysis that combed through the findings of 23 experiments across 16 scientific papers. Surprisingly, the authors concluded: “This meta-analysis of the reported studies to date found that sugar (mainly sucrose) does not affect the behavior or cognitive performance of children.” But the authors noted that they cannot eliminate the possibility of a “small effect.” However, overall, the scientists demonstrated that there certainly is not an effect as large as many parents’ report. Still, some parents believe that their child is particularly sensitive to sugar. Investigators tested this notion and concluded, “For the children described as sugar-sensitive, there were no significant differences among the three diets in any of 39 behavioral and cognitive variables. For the preschool children, only 4 of the 31 measures differed significantly among the three diets, and there was no consistent pattern in the differences that were observed.” In 2017, a related study appeared in the *International Journal of Food Sciences and Nutrition*. The researchers investigated the impact of sugar consumption on the sleep and behavior of 287 children aged 8–12. A surprising 81% of the children consumed more than the recommended daily sugar intake. Still, the researchers concluded that, “Total sugar consumption was not related to behavioral or sleep problems, nor affected the relationship between these variables.” Experts concluded that taking the findings together, it seems clear that if sugar does impact hyperactivity, the effect is not huge and does not extend to the majority of children. At this point we may be asking, “If there is no scientific evidence that sugar induces hyperactivity in children, why does it induce hyperactivity in *my* children?” Some of the blame, it is sad to say, may fall on parental expectations. A study that underlines this point appeared in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* in 1994. It concluded, “Mothers in the sugar expectancy condition rated their children as significantly more hyperactive.” And the media plays a part in perpetuating the myth. In the 1970s, there were the two prominent theories that underpinned the belief that children’s behavior is negatively impacted by consuming sugar: It is either an allergic reaction or a response to hypoglycemia. However, neither theory is now backed by the data.

In the America that I love, we should, in general, limit our children’s sugar intake and have them eat more fruit, vegetables and nuts. It’s overall healthier.

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