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Opinion Paper

School food culture may promote an "*unhealthy* = *fun*" intuition

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Highlights/Key Messages

- School celebrations may reinforce an *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition.
- These associations may influence food choices beyond childhood.
- Food-related expectations may contribute to emotional eating.
- Healthier or non-food celebrations may weaken these associations.
- Research should text how this intuition develops and affect eating.

Introduction

American schools face a myriad of challenges related to food practices. Most importantly, schools play a vital role for many children struggling with poverty-related hunger. According to a recent report from Food Research & Action Center, nearly 30 million children received a school lunch on an average school day (Hayes & FitzSimons, 2025). Despite ongoing budgetary constraints, the nutritional quality of U.S. school lunches improved substantially following implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (Kinderknecht et al., 2020). Yet, more than one-third of U.S. children and adolescents have either overweight or obesity (Noiman et al., 2026). In addition, schools may influence eating behavior through more than the nutritional quality of foods served; they may also shape the beliefs, expectations, and emotional associations children develop about food. Here I propose that school food culture may inadvertently cultivate an "*unhealthy* = *fun*" intuition, namely, a learned expectation that energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods are more closely associated with celebration, reward, and enjoyment than healthier alternatives. Although this lay belief may originate from multiple sources, including the home environment, organized social settings, food marketing, and broader cultural practices, schools may represent an underappreciated setting in which it is repeatedly reinforced during childhood.

Emotional expectancies and the "*unhealthy* = *fun*" intuition

In a recent commentary, Cummings and Gearhardt (2026) argued that greater effort should be devoted to understanding food-related emotional expectancies and their role in food intake and physical and mental health. According to these authors, expectancy theory can help explain why people may overeat foods that are high in fat, sugar, and/or salt. As with alcohol use, anticipated positive emotions from consuming these foods may motivate intake. Food advertising may further strengthen associations between particular foods and positive emotions, thereby influencing consumption (Cummings & Gearhardt, 2026). Similar to the "*unhealthy* = *tasty*" intuition (i.e., the lay belief that unhealthy foods normally taste better; Raghunathan et al., 2006), marketing that links foods with positive experiences may also reinforce an "*unhealthy* = *fun*" intuition among consumers, especially among children. This intuition may represent a specific form of food-related emotional expectancy, whereby unhealthy foods become linked with pleasant emotional outcomes such as celebration, reward, and social connection. Although this intuition has not been directly studied, it may represent one pathway through which food-related emotional expectancies influence eating behavior.

Keywords: **school food environment, emotional eating, nutrition education.**

The "*unhealthy = fun*" intuition in the classroom

The *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition highlights a tension in school food practices. Whereas school meals are regulated through federal nutrition standards, food practices around celebrations, rewards, and other school activities are often shaped by local policies. Often, decisions about the use of food in these settings are made by the school district, individual school, or even the teacher. To plan classroom celebrations, schools and teachers may also need to consider food-allergy policies, food-safety requirements, and local restrictions on food brought from home. These constraints may make commercially packaged foods a convenient option.

Importantly, the *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition is unlikely to be intentionally taught or reinforced by teachers. Rather, it may emerge incidentally through repeated exposure to school or classroom celebrations where unhealthy foods become part of the experience. It is also important to acknowledge that schools are not the only context in which children develop associations involving food, including the *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition discussed here. Such associations may also arise at home (e.g., when parents celebrate special occasions or accomplishments with fast food), in other organized social settings (e.g., religious organizations, scouting groups, sports teams, and clubs), through food marketing (e.g., television commercials, social media advertising, and influencer marketing), and through broader cultural traditions (e.g., celebrations such as Valentine's Day, Easter, and Halloween). The relative contribution of these contexts is currently unknown. Future research should examine how school, home, organized social settings, marketing, and cultural influences contribute to the development and persistence of food-related intuitions.

Health impact

The consequences of the *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition might not be constrained to the classroom. If future research supports the hypothesis that the *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition influences eating behavior via food-related emotional expectancies, associations between unhealthy foods and positive emotions acquired during childhood may persist well into adulthood, further shaping food choices during holiday celebrations and gatherings (e.g., Fourth of July and Super Bowl), in which people seek to enhance their enjoyment of the occasion.

Of potentially greater consequence, the *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition may play a role in emotional eating, that is, increased food intake in response to negative emotions such as stress, depression, or anxiety, often involving energy-dense, palatable foods (Konttinen, 2020). In other words, the *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition might become a coping mechanism for people experiencing emotional distress. If this link were confirmed, its potential health implications would be notable, given that higher consumption of ultra-processed foods has been associated with a range of adverse physical-health outcomes (e.g., obesity, type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, some cancers, frailty, and mortality; Lane et al., 2024), as well as mental-health outcomes (e.g., anxiety and depression; Lane et al., 2022; Lane et al., 2024). Moreover, some highly processed foods have been proposed to meet established scientific criteria for addictive substances (Gearhardt & DiFeliceantonio, 2023), underscoring the potential importance of understanding the factors that promote their consumption.

A call for research and change

Given the possible role of school celebrations in reinforcing food-related beliefs such as the *"unhealthy = fun"* intuition, research is needed to determine whether it can be measured reliably, how strongly it is expressed, and whether it is associated with students' attitudes, food choices, dietary intake, and longer-term health. Initial work could develop and validate measures of the proposed intuition, combine these with observation or school-policy audits of celebration practices, and examine associations with dietary behavior over time. Such research should also identify effective ways to reduce potentially harmful food-related expectancies. Schools may also consider practical changes to classroom celebrations. Where food is included, healthier packaged snacks may be an option; alternatively, celebrations can focus on non-food activities.

Although the idea of non-food celebrations may seem novel, such celebrations are already encouraged in some school settings. For example, Saint Paul Public Schools (Saint Paul, Minnesota) encourages classroom celebrations that "focus on fun, not food" (Saint Paul Public Schools, n.d.). Consistent with these recommendations, schools with policies discouraging sugary foods and beverages at classroom parties were less likely to serve these items during classroom celebrations (Turner et al., 2013). By adopting this simple yet radically different approach to classroom celebrations, schools might simultaneously promote healthier eating and healthier food-related emotional expectancies and beliefs that could last a lifetime.

Author Contributions

OP: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. The author read and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in Scientific Writing

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to improve readability. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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