

Sugar Rush Allegations: The Truth

Anonymous

Department of English, Anoka-Ramsey Community College

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Prof. Chris McCarthy

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For decades, parents and teachers believed that sugar causes hyperactivity in children. This idea that consuming sugary snacks leads to bursts of excessive energy and wicked behavior has been accepted by many in society. It has been heavily misunderstood that due to children consuming sugar it gives them an overabundance amount of energy. The media often portrays children as becoming hyperactive after having sweets treats. Children getting the zoomies are frequently being showed in TV shows, commercials, and movies which reinforces the allegation of these “sugar rushes.” However, scientific evidence has repeatedly debunked this notion, demonstrating that sugar does not cause hyperactivity in children. The belief of this myth stems from cognitive biases, social expectations, and misinterpretations of how children normally act. Including other factors like a child’s physical activity throughout the day and environmental stimulation. A healthy child is normally full of energy.

The idea that sugar causes hyperactivity in children is a belief strongly believed by many, but scientific research continues to show that this claim is more of a myth than a reality. I watched a video of an experiment being done on children. In this experiment the children were divided into two groups. There were the children whose parents believed sugar affected their behavior and the children whose parents believed sugar had no effect on them. Over the next nine weeks these children were given three identical diets. The parents, however, were unaware of what diet their child would receive for the particular week. Within these diets they were testing two types of sugar. One being sucrose and the other being aspartame, which is a sugar substitute. The parents were asked to take notes on their children’s behavior and cognition. Nine weeks later the results were clear that neither sucrose nor aspartame cause uncontrollable behavior in children. In this video Dr Ezgi states “Essentially this study showed that because parents expected their children to be hyperactive when they had a food that was high in sugar contents. They then perceived their behavior as

hyperactive, irritable and restless" (2022). Proving that there is no consistent link between sugar consumption and increased hyperactivity in children. Instead, much of this belief in this connection seems to be guided through parental expectations and not evidence.

Sugar is not only found in candy and desserts. Sugar is a natural ingredient in many healthy foods we encourage children to eat on a daily basis. In the podcast by *Maintenance Phase* "The Trouble with Sugar" (2023), one of the speakers says, "Fructose is a sugar that's found in fruits and vegetables. Lactose is the sugar that's found in dairy. Maltose is a sugar that is found in sprouting grains." These are all natural sugars and also highly essential elements necessary to our bodies. We don't discourage children from eating apples, drinking milk, or enjoying whole grains. We actually promote these foods and incorporate them in children's daily diets because of their nutritional benefits. The body needs glucose which is a simple sugar to fuel the brain and muscles. Without enough of it, energy levels and cognitive function can actually deteriorate. While it is important to not let children go overboard with sweet treats because it can cause health problems, it's important to know that not all sugar is harmful, and in the right forms and amounts, sugar is actually necessary for healthy growth and development. When Sugar is eaten in reasonable amounts as a part of a balanced diet, sugar isn't harmful and doesn't drastically alter a child's behavior.



Making Sense of Sugar (2024)

Another important factor to consider is the age and developmental stage of a child.

Many people believe sugar causes hyperactivity in children because they overlook that younger children are extremely energetic and have shorter attention spans than older kids. In the article *Medline plus* “Hyperactivity and sugar” by Charles I. Schwartz, David C. Dugdale, and Brenda Conaway (2023), they state, “Activity levels in children vary with their age. A 2-year-old is most often more active, and has a shorter attention span, than a 10-year-old.” This is a perfect example because a 2-year-old is often more energized, easily distracted and always on the move not because of their age but because of where they are developmentally. In contrast a 10-year-old might have better self-control, and a longer attention span due to their maturity.

Additionally, *Loma Linda University Health* “Is sugar making my child hyper?”, by Lindsey Crumley (2022) uncovers the myth that sugar causes hyperactivity in children. A medical doctor stated “a large part of this myth comes from the power of our own minds. If we go into a situation expecting a certain outcome, we will likely see that outcome. It’s a placebo effect.” This statement perfectly shows the psychological phenomenon known as a confirmation bias. When parents anticipate that their children will become hyper after eating

sugar, they are more likely to notice and interpret normal energetic behavior as excessive. When parents believe their children have consumed sugar, they rate them as more hyperactive. Even though their children hadn't consumed any as seen in the YouTube video I had previously discussed about. This shows that the perception of the effects of sugar can often be stronger than the actual physiological impact.

Beyond scientific study real life experiences have also challenged this myth. One parent commented on a Reddit post, "I couldn't get my daughter to fall asleep before 11pm so I stopped giving her screen time and sugar, and I still couldn't get her to fall asleep. Case closed" (2024). This anecdote proves how other factors like a child's internal well-being, bedtime routines, activity throughout the days, etc. Can affect behavior and sleep patterns far more than sugar. Especially when they've removed sugar out of the picture and realize it is still difficult to get their child to fall asleep. Another parent stated "Yep, anecdotally I gave my son a ton of sugar the other evening, like 6:30 PM, but I didn't make a big deal out of it, and he went to bed at his normal bedtime and behave normally." These parents unintentionally conducted a small experiment that supports what researchers have found that sugar is not the root cause of hyperactivity.

It is important to know that allowing your child to excessively consume sugar can have negative impacts. These negative impacts can happen in various forms, for example weight gain, dental cavities, heart disease or nutritional developments. Too much sugar can also negatively impact a child's mood and weaken their immunity. The list goes on, but these outcomes are usually long-term effects of overconsumption, not immediate. It is important to note these negative impacts of an extremely high sugar diet over time vs the myth that a single sugary snack is to blame for your child's erratic behavior. Sugar is just like any other food component, it should be consumed in moderation, but it does not deserve the blame for every

burst of energy a child portrays. What often gets overlooked by parents is factors like their children's physical activity, sleep patterns, stress levels and even boredom. These factors play a huge role when it comes to putting a child to bed or tiring them out.

I have seen this firsthand with my eight-year-old sister. This girl is naturally very energetic and there are days when I have assumed she is too hyper because of something she has ate. However, I've noticed that her behavior really depends on how much physical activity she has gotten throughout the day. For example, the days she has dance class or after school activities, she comes home extremely exhausted, tired, and calm. She is usually ready for bed right away on these days without making a fuss. On other days we have her play outside and jump on the trampoline, and after this she comes inside tired and less hyper. But on rainy or cold days when we are stuck inside and she hasn't had much chance to run around, she becomes very jumpy and harder to settle down. It, however, isn't because of her sugar intake; it is because she hasn't had the exercise her body needs. This goes to show that physical activity and a child's environmental stimulation throughout the day plays a much bigger role than what they have had for a snack.

The myth that sugar causes hyperactivity in children has kept influencing many people, despite overwhelming scientific evidence that says the opposite. Studies have consistently shown that sugar does not influence children's behavior in a significant way. Instead, cognitive bias, parental expectations, and societies misinterpretations contribute to this illusion of sugar causing hyperactivity in children. Taking into consideration real factors that affect a child's behavior like their age, environment, physical activity and even emotional needs can help this misunderstanding of sugar being the root cause for too much energy. Understanding this myth can help parents make their little one's dietary choices without unnecessary restrictions. Allowing kids to have a sugary treat once in a while is okay because

moderation helps teach balance rather than restriction. Completely banning sweets from a curious child can make it more tempting and lead children into sneaking as many treats as they can into their bodies. Occasional treats can be a part of a good healthy diet and allowing children to consume sweat treats occasionally encourages a positive relationship with food rather than guilt or obsession.

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