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Children's and adults' health beliefs



As adults, most of us know that what we eat influences our growth patterns in childhood and adulthood. But when do children begin to recognize the impact of nutrition on height and weight? Do children and adults think that what we eat influences our mood states? These are the types of research questions that Lakshmi Raman has been studying for several years.

Raman's research interests focus on children's and adults' causal understanding of biological processes such as the contraction of illnesses and how biological factors such as nutrition contribute to growth (height and weight) and mood states. In the area of illness, she has found several erroneous modes of thinking in children and in adults. In one of her studies, her research findings indicated that adults (but not children) entertain moral causal reasons (such as illness being a form of payback for bad behavior) for the onset of serious deadly illness. Children, however, strictly rejected moral causes and attributed serious illnesses to scientific elements such as germs.

In another study, Raman found that young children attribute psychosocial factors for the origins of common contagious illnesses. They reasoned that they were more likely to contract a cold from someone they did not know rather than someone they liked, disliked, or were related to. This again illustrates the common misconceptions that children have when reasoning about how they might get sick.

In the area of nutrition, Raman has found that it is only at fourth grade that children recognize that healthy nutrition results in growing taller and unhealthy nutrition results in growing fatter. Younger children reason that any kind of caloric intake results in growth. She also found that when reasoning about the impact of nutrition on mood states, preschoolers judge that short-term healthy eaters are more likely to be in a positive mood whereas healthy/unhealthy nutrition on a long-term basis does not have an effect on mood states. By second grade, she found, children reason that both short and long-term healthy eaters will more likely be in a positive mood whereas unhealthy eaters will be in a negative mood. This clearly illustrates that even young children think biological factors can influence psychological processes.



The results of these studies are informative to educationists and health professionals.

"Beliefs usually translate into behaviors, so knowing people's belief systems about health issues is essential to correct any existing misconceptions and to tailor successful intervention programs to promote healthy lifestyles and behaviors," Raman said.

Raman recently received an R15 Academic Enhancement Award from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development for a grant titled "Beliefs about the role of nutrition on mind-body interactions." She has published several articles in peer reviewed journals and serves as a reviewer for several journals in her field. Her future goals are to continue her work in the area of children's and adults' health beliefs with a specific emphasis on uncovering the common misconceptions children and adults hold about common biological processes.

Representative Recent Publications

1. Raman L. (in press). Can we get sick if we want to? Children's and adults' recognition of intentionality in the origins of illness and injuries. *British Journal of Psychology*.
2. Raman L, Gelman SA. 2008. Do children endorse psychosocial factors in the origins of illness and disgust? *Developmental Psychology* 44:801-813.
3. Raman L, Gelman SA. 2007. Children's recognition of time in the causes and cures of physical and emotional reactions to illnesses and injuries. *British Journal of Psychology* 98:389-410.
4. Raman L, Gelman SA. 2005. Children's understanding of the transmission of genetic disorders and contagious illnesses. *Developmental Psychology* 41:171-182.