

Editorial: Self-Regulation of Eating Behaviour among Adolescents

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The majority of European adolescents find themselves living in “obesogenic environments” characterised by a multitude of unhealthy and easily accessible food temptations, which have had a profound impact on their dietary habits (De Vet, De Ridder, & De Wit, 2011; Kirk, Penney, & McHugh, 2010). This tempting environment is held largely responsible for the dramatic increase in the number of overweight adolescents across Europe (Branca, Nikogosian, & Lobstein, 2007; Wang & Lobstein, 2006). The possibilities to restrict such weight-threatening temptations are limited and, as such, these temptations place a great demand on youths’ self-regulatory competence; that is, their ability to regulate their behaviour in the midst of competing options that challenge commitment to a personally relevant goal such as adopting healthy weight-related behaviours. Self-regulatory competence, which includes controlling one’s impulses for immediate gratification and planning for long-term goal pursuit, can greatly influence one’s ability to continue to strive for and achieve a healthy lifestyle in spite of the many temptations from the environment. The European TEMPEST research project—where TEMPEST stands for Temptations to Eat Moderated by Personal and Environmental Self-regulatory Tools—that ran in nine European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and the UK) and that was recently completed had the primary aim of investigating to what extent the improvement of self-regulatory competence would allow adolescents to deal with unhealthy foods in their environment. Specifically, the TEMPEST project’s objective was to gain insight into the interplay of characteristics of the obesogenic environment and the individual competencies of youth that may promote dealing with that environment (De Vet et al., 2014). Whereas the majority of research focuses on one of these aspects, either highlighting specific environmental features to encourage healthy choices or highlighting individual self-control strategies to withstand the temptation of unhealthy food, the central notion of the TEMPEST project posits that we should

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include both components in order to understand and overcome the epidemic of overweight amongst youth.

In this special section we present four articles that illustrate the relevance of self-regulation in adolescent eating behaviours, especially in an obesogenic environment. The point of departure is an investigation into the extent to which adolescents actually do possess and use self-regulation strategies to ensure their healthy eating. Capacities for self-regulation are still under development in adolescents and gradually improve with age, yet eating patterns tend to become unhealthy with increasing age. The first paper of this section by Tăut and co-workers (2015) illustrates that although adolescents develop self-regulation capacities when growing older, older adolescents are less inclined than younger adolescents to intentionally use them to benefit their diet. Yet, Tăut et al. (2015) also indicate that greater reported use of self-regulation strategies does benefit healthy eating, begging the question what kind of environment supports or hinders adolescent self-regulation and healthy eating. This is the central question of the following two articles. De Wit et al. (2015) indicate that family meal values and practices support healthy eating, essentially through the use of self-regulation strategies. This finding nicely illustrates how particular home environments may actually support eating self-regulation. The paper by Giese et al. (2015) takes a different perspective on the individual–environment interplay, by exploring how trait self-control may moderate the association between exposure to food advertising and eating. Whereas trait self-control was beneficial to healthy eating, trait self-control was not sufficient to alleviate the negative consequences of exposure to unhealthy food advertising. Simply relying on willpower may not be sufficient, and the use of eating-specific self-regulation strategies may be required to buffer against advertising unhealthy foods. The papers by De Wit et al. and by Giese et al. point out that self-regulation is shaped by the environment, but is also put to the test by the environment, rendering it crucial to build self-regulation skills in adolescents. In the fourth and final article of this section, De Boer et al. (2015) investigate a novel strategy to build self-regulation for eating among children. In two experimental studies, it was shown that controlled exposure to food temptations in a situation that supports self-regulation might eventually also enhance self-regulation in less supportive contexts.

To conclude, this collection of articles highlights the notion that self-regulatory competence plays a vital role in adolescents' eating behaviours. Self-regulation may be shaped by the environment, as well as used to navigate the obesogenic environment. Yet, self-regulatory competence may be enhanced if young people have the opportunity to learn to deal with their obesogenic food environments rather than banning food temptations from their environment which would prevent them from having experience with such temptations. These insights may contribute to the development of innovative prevention strategies that support self-regulatory competence in the midst of plenty.

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Further information about the project and the findings can be obtained from the project website: www.tempestproject.eu