

Leann Birch, scientist who came to the aid of picky eaters and their parents, dies at 72

By [Emily Langer](#)

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In the universe of everyday worries for parents of young children, mealtime ranks near the top of the list: Are they eating too much or too little? Why do they load up at snack time, then sit and play with their food during dinner? And how to persuade them to eat their peas and carrots?

Leann L. Birch, a developmental psychologist who died of cancer May 26 at age 72, devoted more than four decades to the study of how children eat, revolutionizing a field that was once largely limited to questions of nutrition. Healthy eating, she showed, is far more complex than the intake of calories and vitamins — and need not be the daily battle many parents fight.

“Every parent wants their child to grow well and thrive, and I think when it comes to nutrition, a lot of parents fundamentally understand what healthy diets look like,” Jennifer Orlet Fisher, a former student of Dr. Birch’s and the associate director of the Center for Obesity Research and Education at Temple University, said in an interview.

“But how to get kids there, how to get kids to like to eat healthy foods is another challenge altogether,” she added. She said Dr. Birch’s research provided the first “scientific basis for understanding how children develop food likes and dislikes and how parents can really support the experiences that help kids develop healthy palates.”

Through carefully designed studies, Dr. Birch revealed the flaws of mealtime strategies that beleaguered parents commonly employ. These include admonishing children to “clean their plate” or to eat “five more bites,” offering dessert as a reward and limiting children’s diets to buttered pasta, chicken fingers and other bland mainstays of the so-called kids’ menu of the restaurant establishment.

Babies, she pointed out, are born knowing how to regulate their consumption of food. They eat when they are hungry and stop when they feel full. Their palates, moreover, are a tabula rasa. Only as children grow up, absorbing the influence of their parents and other people around them, do they learn to like some foods, such as candy, and dislike others, such as lima beans.

Dr. Birch and the pediatricians she influenced used those central insights to relieve parents of the common instinct to shovel ever more food into their children’s mouths.

“There should be a division of responsibility about who is in charge of children’s diets, even as preschoolers,” she said. “It is the parents’ responsibility to provide a healthy array and lots of opportunities to sample new foods. But it’s the child’s job to decide how much to eat.”

Such an arrangement, she conceded, “makes a lot of parents nervous.”

Children, she showed, instinctively know how many calories they need, and allowing them to self-regulate produces healthier eaters in the long run. In one experiment, children were fed either a low-calorie or a high-calorie yogurt before being offered the lunch of their choice. Independently, the two groups of children selected meal options that resulted in an approximately equal consumption of calories.

To the parents of picky eaters, Dr. Birch offered the adage those mothers and fathers might recite to their children in another context: If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

Children, she said, are predisposed to resist new flavors. But with repeated exposure — sometimes eight to 15 tries are necessary, she demonstrated — they will venture far beyond animal crackers. The young participants of her studies learned to enjoy such exotic items as lychee nuts, jackfruit and papaya.

Dr. Birch counseled parents not to cheer too much when their children finished a serving of vegetables, lest they suggest that eating healthy foods is a chore. For the same reason, she advised against extending desserts as a bribe. Nor were bans on sugary or fatty foods effective, she said; they simply turned the desired treat into a forbidden fruit.

Taken together, Dr. Birch's work offered an encouraging message for parents.

"With no pressure to actually consume it," she told NPR, children "typically will learn to eat a lot of new things."

Leann Elsie Traub was born in Owosso, Mich., on June 25, 1946. Her father was an engineer, and her mother was a homemaker.

She grew up primarily in Southern California and received a bachelor's degree in psychology from California State University at Long Beach in 1971. She completed her graduate studies at the University of Michigan, where she received a master's degree in 1973 and a doctorate in 1975, both in psychology.

Dr. Birch taught at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before joining Pennsylvania State University, where she was director of the Center for Childhood Obesity Research, in 1992. She had taught since 2014 at the University of Georgia, where she ran the Obesity Initiative.

Dr. Birch promoted interventions to help parents instill healthy eating habits from infancy — when many mothers and fathers fall back on food as an all-purpose soothing tool — through adolescence, when eating disorders may set in. She was credited with playing a leading role in combating the growing scourge of childhood obesity.

"Her work that was groundbreaking in the laboratory setting is now arguably the most successful approach to date for early life obesity prevention," Ian Paul, a pediatrician and professor at Penn State College of Medicine, wrote in an email.

Dr. Birch's middle initial stood for Lipps, the surname of her first husband, from whom she was divorced. Her second marriage, to David Birch, also ended in divorce.

Survivors include her husband of 35 years, Karl M. Newell of Ocean Isle Beach, N.C.; and their two children, Charlotte K. Newell of New York City and Spencer H. Newell of Washington. Her daughter said Dr. Birch died at a

hospice center in Durham, N.C., and the cause was cancer.

Dr. Birch's colleagues noted that any parent who has ever gone to the pediatrician for a well-child visit and received a tip sheet suggesting that they persist in offering new vegetables to the children is the beneficiary of her work.

"It is hard to think that there was ever any other way of thinking about child feeding," Alison Ventura, a former student of Dr. Birch's and a professor at California Polytechnic State University, wrote in an email.

"As I have become a mother of my own two children, I am additionally thankful that I learned from her all that I did about feeding children," she continued. "My boys are incredibly healthy, great eaters, and really love vegetables! I can honestly say that my time in her lab, learning from her and her research, helped mold me into the mother I am today."

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