Treat or Trap?
the perceptions and role of treats in relation to what, where and why children eat

Introduction
Despite growing evidence and public recognition of the importance of healthy eating, "treats" are often regarded as a legitimate exception, with the term often used synonymously with and to justify non-healthy choices. Moreover, types of food and drink that were traditionally "treats" are now regularly available and packaged for convenience in children's daily environment. The Treat or Trap study was developed in conjunction with the WA Canteen association and undertaken in 2007 with Healthway funding to explore factors that hinder or enable healthy food availability and consumption within primary school environments.

Methodology
The study was funded by a Healthway starter grant and was undertaken in the 2007 school year. Four government primary schools from low to mid SES areas were randomly selected to participate in the study. The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods:
- Semi structured interviews with canteen managers
- Written survey sent to random sample of canteen managers
- Focus groups with students (years 4-7)
- Parent interview/focus groups
- Principal/staff interviews

Some key findings
- Although the importance of healthy eating was generally well recognised, the notion of unhealthy food and drink as a "treat" seems to be embedded within the culture of family and student beliefs, and to some extent still within the school environment.
- There is a discrepancy between student and parent's definitions of a treat as something 'occasional', and the high frequency of unhealthy 'treats', both in food consumed while at school and in the home environment. Factors such as convenience, lack of time and children's fussiness often over-ride 'good intentions'.
- Canteen managers suggested that it is possible to encourage children to purchase healthy treats that are innovative and interesting (e.g. fruit cups, frozen pineapple sticks, popcorn bags).
- The traffic light guidelines for healthier eating introduced into public schools in 2007 provided an impetus for both canteen managers and students to 'try new things' and reframe notions of 'treats' within the school environment.
- Parental influences oriented towards unhealthy eating can however undermine or serve as a barrier to the impact of strategies being employed through the school.
- There is untapped potential for Children to be powerful change agents within their home environment in relation to healthier eating, in the same way that children have become advocates against smoking and for the environment. Just as the notion of a treat needs to change, so too should we aspire to turn "pestle power" around to be about healthier food choices.
- More broadly, the project identified many of the factors that can both facilitate and impede healthy eating initiatives within a school setting, and in the wider home and community environment.

Factors Influencing Children’s Food Behaviour emerging from the study

School Environment
- Cultural: School culture, values & practices related to food
- Canteen managed: Healthy & unhealthy foods
- Healthy food and drink policies for schools
- Food and beverage restrictions
- External influences: External advertising
- Internal influences: Availability & promotion of unhealthy food options

Home Environment
- Socioeconomic factors: Parent beliefs & practices
- Parent power: Perceived cost of healthy food
- Parent control of healthy food: Perceived cost of healthy food
- Parent influence of food choices: Level of autonomy & responsibility allowed to children
- Internal influences: Influence of a treat
- External influences: Food and drink advertising

Individual Factors
- Autonomy and responsibility
- Food practices

Government Policies
- Healthy school food and drink policies
- Food and beverage restrictions
- External influences: Food advertising
- Internal influences: Availability & promotion of unhealthy food options

School Canteen
- School food consumption
- Home food consumption

Dr. Lisa Wood
Ms. Karen Martin
Dr. Michael Rosenberg

School Lunch

The University of Western Australia
Achieving International Excellence

Centre for the Built Environment and Health