



HOMESTYLES  
HEALTHY HOME HEALTHY FAMILY

# Focus Groups Identify Parents' Attitudes and Beliefs About Children's Fruit and Vegetable Intake

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** To explore parental beliefs, influences, and practices related to their elementary school-age children's fruit and vegetable (F/V) intake.

**Methods:** Parents of 6-11 years old in FL, WV, and NJ completed a brief questionnaire (N=185) and 36 participated in focus groups targeting F/V cognitions and behaviors.

**Results:** Questionnaire completers reported eating 2 different vegetables and 2 different fruits at home  $4.78 \pm 1.69SD$  and  $5.39 \pm 1.73SD$  days/week, respectively. Overall, focus group parents believed that F/Vs were important for health, growth, and development, and that their children usually preferred fruits over vegetables. F/Vs commonly liked were limited to strawberries, bananas, carrots, and green beans. Spanish-speaking parents felt school lunches served adequate F/Vs, so they tended to let children eat at school often. In contrast, English-speaking parents thought school lunches served poor quality F/Vs, thus they tended to pack lunches for their children to ensure inclusion of F/Vs likely to be eaten. Now that their children are school age, parents report that F/V intake has become easier because children's taste preferences are more diverse, and some children are influenced by others who encourage F/V intake. Barriers to getting children to eat more F/V included adverse peer modeling, kids' lack of desire for F/Vs served at school, and limited F/V availability in grocery stores. Strategies for overcoming these barriers included letting children choose F/Vs, involving kids in meal preparation, allowing children to help pack F/Vs in their lunches, setting goals for F/V intake at each meal, talking with children about the nutritional value of F/V, and mixing F/V in dishes or smoothies. Other advice was to make children try different F/Vs by providing limited options at meals, which parents thought would help kids develop a preference for them. Lastly, parents agreed that children imitated eating behaviors and advised others to set a good example or be firm about not allowing unhealthy foods in the home that would interfere with intake of F/Vs.

**Conclusion:** Creation of self-directed materials that provide parents with information about healthfulness of school lunches and providing recommended child feeding tips to diversify children's F/V profile could help increase F/V intake among children.

## Methods

### Sample

- Parents of school-aged children (6-11 years old)
- English and Spanish speaking
- From Florida, West Virginia, and New Jersey

### Data collection

- Brief self-report survey
- Focus groups with 2 to 5 participants
- Semi-structured discussion
- Trained moderators using scripted guide

## Strengths and Limitations

### Strengths

- Geographically diverse sample
- Focus groups lead by multiple trained moderators, but all used a semi-structured script to ensure uniformity and completeness

### Limitations

- Limited representation of fathers



## Results

### Parent Demographics

Variable	N	%
<b>Language</b>		
English	24	67
Spanish	12	33
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	3	8
Female	33	92
<b>Education</b>		
High school degree or less	9	27
Some college	6	18
Bachelor's degree or higher	18	55
<b>Race</b>		
White	14	40
Hispanic	20	57
Other	1	3

### Parent Focus Group Interviews (n=36)

- **How many days/week do you eat at least 2 different vegetables at home?**
  - $4.78 \pm 1.69SD$  days/week
- **How many days/week do you eat at least 2 different fruits at home?**
  - $5.39 \pm 1.73SD$  days/week
- **Parent Beliefs About Why F/Vs Are Important for Children**
  - Supplies fiber and nutrients
  - Promotes good health
  - Fuel for normal growth and development
  - Enhances school performance
- **Barriers to Serving F/Vs**
  - Kids are picky eaters
  - Lack of time for preparing and eating F/V
  - Limited availability in stores or at home
  - Fresh spoils quickly
- **Tips to serving F/Vs**
  - Give kids options
  - Plan meals ahead of time
  - Purchase pre-cut F/Vs
  - Set F/V Intake goals for dinner
  - Encourage kids to try new F/Vs
  - Serve F/V in mixed dishes

"Plan ahead and have [fruits and vegetables] clean and ready to eat." "Try to get picky eaters involved in picking out or preparing foods." "She [my daughter] likes watching cooking shows and sometimes she helps cook."

"I don't make a big deal about it because they will fight you. Make it fun, get their opinions, have a limited menu—that's how we control chaos in our house."

"Anything parents do serves as a model. So they can't expect [children] to do something different. We [parents] try to be good examples in eating and packing lunches. It does help seeing us make those choices."

"It starts with the parent, so I would recommend setting an example. Also, we have mixed it (F/V) into other foods, got children involved with meal purchasing, going to the farmers market as a family, and being around new foods in general."

"I was intimidated by cooking, I went to Whole Foods and spent about \$100 on new ingredients and just started experimenting. I had my i-Pad downstairs with me in the kitchen and I would watch how to do things I never had done [on videos]. I think a lot of parents are intimidated about cooking."

"I try to have good balance. I don't want them to get to college and start to eat unhealthy. We have junk food, but in moderation."

## Conclusions

- Parents agreed that it is important for children to eat F/Vs for health, normal growth and development.
- Barriers to serving more F/Vs include picky eaters, constrained time, and F/V availability.
- Parents overcome barriers by providing options for kids, prepping-ahead, and setting goals for serving and eating F/Vs.
- Self-directed materials that teach parents about the importance of F/V and recommended strategies for increasing children's F/V intake could improve children's intake, and ultimately contribute to better health and weight-status.

## Funding Source

United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Grant Number 2017-680001- 26351