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=186) 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±1.69SD and 5.39±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 Focus Group Interviews (n=36)
- How many days/week do you eat a least 2 different vegetables at home?
  - 4.78 ± 1.69SD days/week
- How many days/week do you eat at least 2 different fruits at home?
  - 5.39 ± 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

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