



HOMESTYLES

HEALTHY HOME HEALTHY FAMILY

Eating Healthy When Away from Home: Elementary School-age Children's Behaviors and Perceptions

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Abstract

Objective: To qualitatively explore elementary school-age children's behaviors and perceptions related to eating healthy when away from home.

Methods: Children (n=194; ages 6-11) in 3 states (FL, NJ, WV) completed a survey and 44 participated in focus group (FG) discussions moderated by trained researchers. Data were content analyzed by 2 trained researchers to identify common themes.

Results: Most children recognized the importance of eating healthy foods when not at home. However, those who infrequently ate meals away from home felt these were special occasions, so eating healthy was not important. Most meals children ate away from home were consumed at school with kids reporting they ate breakfast, lunch, and snacks at school. Lunch was the most common school meal, and frequently included pizza, hamburgers, and chicken nuggets served with milk. Almost all kids reported their parents considered it important for children to eat healthy foods when away from home to maintain good health. Children acknowledged receiving advice from parents to eat healthy (eat fruits and vegetables), but were allowed to decide for themselves what to eat when away from home. When eating out, kids choose water, soda, or juice drinks and, when eating out was a special occasion, they were more likely to drink sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs). A barrier to healthy eating when away from home was availability of unhealthy food, but kids indicated that they could overcome this and take responsibility by asking for healthy foods or packing healthy options to bring from home. Children suggested that parents help kids by checking what kids eat or pack to eat away from home, monitoring foods kids buy, and keeping healthy options available at home. To help children choose healthy foods when eating away from home, kids thought parents should provide incentives and pack healthy options. Kids also felt parents should talk to caregivers about having healthy options for the kids. Children acknowledged that people around them influenced their food choices, they mimicked their parents' choices, and that siblings copy what they eat or vice versa.

Conclusions: Children recognize the importance of choosing healthy foods when eating away from home, but without parental oversight or healthy options available, children typically choose less healthy options.

Methods

- Sample
 - 194 children aged 6-11 years
 - Average age 8.4 years
 - From Florida, New Jersey, and West Virginia
- Data Collection
 - Survey (n=194)
 - Focus groups (n=44)
 - Conducted by trained moderators using a scripted moderator's guide
 - Data constantly compared to identify data saturation point
 - Content analyzed by researchers trained in qualitative data analysis



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Results

Children's Eating Away from Home Behaviors

- Kids eat out a couple of times a week and during road trips/driving in the car
- They commonly eat at fast food, sit down restaurants, friends or relative's homes
- Eating out is a special occasion
- Beverages consumed away from home included milk, water, soda, or other juice drinks
- Kids are more likely to consume SSBs when they eat out
- Eating at School:
 - School breakfast: cereal, sometimes waffles and pancakes
 - School lunches: pizza, hamburgers, chicken nuggets and milk
 - Special occasions (classroom birthdays): cupcakes and other special treats



Importance of Healthy Foods When Away from Home

- Most children think it is important to eat healthy foods when away from home to protect their health and not get sick
- Kids who thought it was not important felt eating away from home was
 - Special treat
 - Infrequent occurrence
- Children think it's important to parents to eat healthy foods when away from home based on choices parents make (e.g., not going to fast food, having healthy foods at home)
 - Parents want kids to stay healthy and do well at sports

Barriers to Eating Healthy Away from Home

- Unhealthy food options available
- Influences from friends and family

Facilitators to Eating Healthy When Away from Home

- Having healthy options available (fruits and vegetables)
- Packing your own healthy foods
- Taking responsibility by asking for healthy foods
- Mixing healthy with unhealthy options (moderation/balance)

Kids' Advice to Parents

- Use incentives to get kids to eat healthy away from home
- Pack healthy options
- Talk to caregivers and friends' parents about offering healthy options
- Explain to kids why healthy choices are important.

Parents Effect on Kids' Food Choices When Eating Away from Home

- Decision is left to the child
- Kids mimic their parents' choices
- Parents check what kids ate what was eaten/packed/purchased
- How parents advise kids:
 - Teach kids about making healthy food choices
 - Promote fruits and vegetables
 - Encourage healthy eating behaviors, including the amounts kids eat
 - Provide guidance

Kids Effect On Family's Choices When Eating Away From Home

- Siblings copy each other

Here's what kids say about eating healthy foods when away from home...

"It's not important [to eat healthy away from home] because we don't get them [sugary beverages and candy] very often, so it's okay when we do."



"When my mom packs me lunch in my lunchbox, I don't usually have anything to drink because I don't need anything to drink, but when I have hot lunch, it comes with milk."



"I had a sleepover last night and we ate at my friend's house. We usually have snacks at a friend's house."



"I get to pick what I want to eat when I am away from home."



"It's really important [to eat healthy away from home] because parents want their children to feel good and stay healthy"



"My mom checks my lunch before I go to school to make sure it's healthy."

"I am tempted with unhealthy food; especially at friend's house or grandparents' house."

Strengths & Limitations

- Diverse sample of children
- 3 states (FL, NJ, WV)
- Varied recruitment sites (schools, after-care, churches, universities)
- Focus groups led by different moderators in each state; all moderators completed the same training and used a scripted discussion guide

Conclusions

- Children recognize the importance of choosing healthy foods when eating away from home, but without parental oversight or healthy options available, children typically choose less healthy options.
- Obesity prevention programs could help children learn to eat healthy when away from home which would help children grow and develop normally while also maintaining healthy weights.

