



Exploring Children's Understandings of Healthy Portion Sizes

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Abstract

Objective: To examine elementary school-age children's cognitions related to healthy portion sizes. **Methods:** Forty-four children (6 - 11 years old) residing in 3 states (FL, NJ, WV) participated in portion size-themed focus group discussions. Trained researchers content analyzed data to identify trends and themes. **Results:** Focus group discussions revealed that children believe eating age appropriate portion sizes is important for maintaining a healthy weight and staying healthy. However, children felt that the decision of how much they should eat is up to their parents, citing that parents fix children's plates and therefore determine the portion size. Children believe the portion sizes parents serve are based on parents' past experiences or teachings from their own parents. The amount children decide to consume is influenced by cues from parents, such as warnings to not eat too much or waiting to see if kids are full before offering seconds, in essence, relying on children's internal satiety signals. Children report that parents think it is important for kids to eat healthy amounts of food to be healthy and not hungry. Children reported that barriers to keeping portion sizes healthy depended on the food type: for foods they enjoyed, it was easy to eat too much; if they didn't like the food, even if it was healthy, children would not eat a full portion. Children reported incentives from parents would encourage them to eat full servings of healthy foods (e.g., dessert if kids ate all of their vegetables at dinner). Further barriers to eating healthy portions included eating too much if kids got too hungry and not eating enough if they were too tired. Children reported parent encouragement and asking the opinions of those they trust about the food was the best way to encourage them to try new, healthy foods. Some children did not believe that how much they ate affected family members, but reported that siblings copied their behavior, especially younger siblings. **Conclusions:** Children recognize the importance of eating age-appropriate portions and look to their parents to set those guidelines. Obesity prevention programs could help parents learn appropriate portion sizes to help children grow and develop normally while also maintaining healthy weights.

Methods

- **Sample:**
 - 44 children aged 6-11
 - Reside in Florida, New Jersey, and West Virginia
- **Data Collection:**
 - Focus groups
 - Conducted by trained moderators
 - Data constantly compared to identify data saturation point
 - Content analyzed by researchers trained in qualitative data analysis



Strengths and Limitations

- Combination of qualitative and quantitative data
- Diverse sample
- Focus groups conducted by multiple moderators- all moderators were trained and used a scripted discussion guide

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Results

How Kids Decide How Much To Eat

- Parents decide for kids
- Kids rely on internal hunger and satiety cues

"My tummy tells me how much to eat."

Importance of Eating Healthy Amounts

"Enough where I don't feel all stuffed up."

- Kids know it's important to eat healthy amounts of food for these reasons
 - To maintain a healthy weight
 - To stay healthy, not feel sick
 - To have energy for sports and exercise
- Kids think it's important to parents that kids eat healthy amounts of food for these reasons
 - To stay healthy, but not hungry
 - To stay active (parents with children who play sports encourage eating healthy portions)

Barriers to Eating Healthy Portion Sizes

- Kids won't eat enough healthy food if they don't like it and they eat too much if it's a really good food
- Kids will overeat if they get too hungry
- Kids will not eat enough if they are too tired

"I usually don't eat it if I don't like it. If I do like it, I usually say, 'it's delicious' and eat lots of it."

Facilitators to Eating Healthy Portion Sizes

- Parents telling kids how much to eat
 - Warning them to not eat too much
 - Instructing them to wait to see if they're full before having seconds
- Parents give incentives (TV or dessert) if kids eat healthy portions

Affecting How Much the Family Eats

- Some kids do not believe how much they eat affects their family
- Others report younger siblings copy their behavior

"When they see me eat healthy they want to try."

Kids' Suggestions for Parents to Get Kids to Eat Full Portions of Healthy Foods:

- Encouraging kids to try it
- Having kids ask other people they trust if it's good
- Hiding healthy foods foods they like
- Incentivizing intake with dessert

Conclusions

- Children recognize the importance of eating healthy portions and look to their parents to set those guidelines.
- Obesity prevention programs could help parents learn appropriate portion sizes and give children the direction children expect from parents.

