

Transitioning to Elementary School:

Parents' Cognitions About Children's Eating Behaviors Away from Home

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HEALTHY HOME HEALTHY FAMILY

Abstract

Objectives: Children's transition to elementary school is associated with decreased parental control over child eating behaviors. This study explored parent cognitions about kids' eating away from home behaviors.

Methods: English- and Spanish-speaking parents of 6-to-11 year-olds (n=37) in 3 states (FL, NJ, WV) participated in focus groups conducted by trained moderators. Data were content analyzed by 2 trained researchers to identify common themes.

Results: Parents reported their kids typically ate lunch at school. Dinner was the meal families most commonly ate away from home, usually due to busy schedules. English-speaking families ate out more often, with Spanish-speaking parents tending to consider eating out a treat. Overall, parents felt that it was hard to control what kids ate away from home, especially if kids chose their own lunch/snacks at school or ate at a friend or relative's house. Providing healthy snacks to share at school events or afterschool activities was a special challenge due to inconvenience and cost of healthy options and kids' preferences for unhealthy snacks. Parents felt fruit was a well-accepted healthy snack option for kids and that a list of healthy, affordable snack options and implementation of school policies for healthy snacks could improve the quality of shared snacks. To better control what children ate away from home, parents packed kids' lunches/snacks or checked what children packed for themselves. Parents primarily relied on conversations with their kids to learn about what kids ate away from home, but emphasized that reprimanding children when they report eating a less healthy food will prevent kids from accurately reporting intake in the future. Parents also reviewed school menus and talked with caregivers to learn what kids ate away from home. Parents discussed healthy food choices with kids to teach them to make healthy decisions. Despite some concern over what kids ate away from home, parents tended to trust caretakers and school lunch policy to provide healthy options. They also felt that their kids ate healthfully most of the time, so they did not worry about occasional intake of less healthy foods away from home.

Conclusion: Future nutrition programs and resources should aim to build parent skills at teaching kids how to make healthy eating choices when away from home.

Methods

Sample

- Parents of children ages 6-11
- English- (n=24) and Spanish-speakers (n=13)
- 97% Female

Data Collection

- Focus groups
- Trained moderators
- Trained note-takers

Data Analysis

- Constant comparison
- Identification of point of data saturation
- Identification of common themes

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"Everyday they eat at school. For dinner, I make a nice meal, but once a week we will go out and have street food as a treat."

Results

Parent Cognitions about Eating Away from Home

- Most common meal kids eat away from home is lunch at school
- Dinner meal most likely eaten out by the family
- English-speakers ate out more frequently than Spanish-speakers
- Spanish-speaking parents considered eating out a treat
- Busy schedules precipitate eating out behaviors

Barriers to Controlling Kids' Intake Away from Home

- Kids choose their own lunch/snacks at school
- Kids eat at friends or relatives' homes

Methods for Monitoring Kids' Intake Away from Home

- Packing children's lunches or checking what they packed
- Talking with children about what they eat away from home
- Sending snacks with kids
- Reviewing school menus and talking with caregivers
- Teaching kids to make healthy food choices

Shared Foods at School Events and Afterschool Activities

- Challenges of serving healthy snacks to share are
 - Convenience
 - Cost
 - Child preferences
- Parents want a list of healthy affordable snack options
- Parents feel school policies for healthy snacks will improve snack quality
- Parents agreed that fruit was a well-accepted healthy snack option

Overall

- Parents were marginally concerned about what kids are eating away from home
- Parents trust caregivers and school lunch policy to ensure healthy eating
- Parents feel kids typically eat healthy, so occasional unhealthy food is not a concern

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

- Focus groups were lead by trained moderators using scripted a moderator's guide
- Geographic diversity (NJ, FL, WV)

Limitations

- Low representation of fathers

Conclusions

- Increased time spent away from home makes monitoring child intake difficult for parents. However, packing healthy options, conferring with caregivers, and discussing healthy choices with children are ways parents promote kids' healthy eating away from home.
- Future nutrition education programs should build parent skills for teaching children to make healthy food choices away from home and advocating for healthy options for children in away from home settings.

"My son always tells me—I'll ask what you spent your money on and he'll tell. I guess because I don't get upset when he gets chips or something, he doesn't feel like he has to keep it a secret."



"I will tell the babysitter what I want her to feed them or I will try to teach my children about how they should eat so that when I'm not there, they are eating how I feel they should."