

Best Portion Control Practices For Young Children: What Do Parents Think And Do?

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Abstract

Objectives: To determine parents' attitudes, beliefs, barriers, and facilitators related to controlling children's portion sizes.

Methods: Brief questionnaires were completed by 185 English- and Spanish-speaking parents of children 6- to 11-years-old from 3 states (FL, WV, NJ) and 36 participated in portion control-themed focus groups.

Results: Survey completers indicated that they let children decide how much to eat most the time, but not always. Content analysis of focus group data revealed an overarching attitude of parents feeling it was not important for them to exert control over amounts food children ate because kids were very physically active and kids' relied on internal hunger cues to regulate intake. However, if children had health or weight problems or a potential to be sick from overconsumption, parents sought professional advice and relied on past experience to determine amounts to serve children. Parents agreed that their own portion control behaviors affect amounts children eat, as did siblings and media. Changes from preschool to elementary-school that facilitated portion control included kids being more aware of how much and what they should eat and having more structured mealtime routines. However, busy schedules that interrupted routines and kids' exposure to and desire for unhealthy snacks hindered keeping serving sizes healthy. Other barriers to controlling kids' portion sizes named by English-speaking parents included children snacking often and not being hungry for meals, or lacking interest in eating when meals were served. A barrier among Spanish-speaking parents was lack of knowledge regarding age-appropriate portion sizes for children. Tactics parents used to overcome barriers were portioning food ahead of time, talking with kids about appropriate amounts of food, using resources (e.g., plates, utensils) to guide serving sizes, and restricting free access to snack foods. Strategies for serving healthy amounts to picky eaters were accepting that kids may not like certain foods and offering other food options.

Conclusion: Nutrition education efforts that enhance parent knowledge of and value placed on portion control and that provide strategies for effective, healthful portion control could help parents help prevent childhood obesity.

Methods

Sample

- Parents of school aged children (6 to 11 years old)
- Recruited in Florida, West Virginia, and New Jersey.
- English and Spanish-speaking parents

Data Collection

- Focus group discussions (45-60 minutes)
- Semi-structured discussions lead by trained moderators
- Brief survey

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Data

Focus Group Question: How do you decide how much your children should eat?

- Doctor or health professional supplied this information
- Past experience with certain food items/dishes
- Children eat when they are hungry or stop when they are full
- Parents try to know reference portions for foods

Focus Group Question: How important is it to you to serve healthy amounts of food?

- It's not important because children can regulate themselves
- It's not important because children are active
- It's important so kids don't overeat and get sick
- It's important for good health and to reduce the risk of obesity

Focus Group Question: What are some barriers to serving healthy amounts of food?

- Constrained budget and time
- Children snacking and not being hungry at mealtime
- Lack of knowledge about age-appropriate portions

Focus Group Question: What advice would you give to other parents to encourage them to control portion sizes and serve new foods?

- Talk to children about what healthy portions are and describe the new foods served
- Involve children in shopping or food preparation
- Monitor portions at snacks and meals
- Role model healthy eating
- Encourage children to try new foods



Results

- Participants (n=36) were 92% female, 57% white, and 76% had a bachelors degree or higher
- 24 participants were English-speaking and 12 were Spanish-speaking
- Parents tended to let children decide how much to eat (mean=3.53±1.0; range: 1=never and 5=always)

"I went to a nutrition class and they gave some tips about feeding children and adults. I try to let the information guide me in my choices for my family....The portions in my home are adequate for their age. If they say that I am full, I'll say OK. They eat good portions and my kids aren't grown yet."

"Kids are the best judge of how much they need to eat. As long as what we give them is healthy."

"It is very important [to control portions] because I think that if I do not control it now, because I already had experience with my first son, then it becomes difficult. So I prefer that his stomach gets used to a moderate portion now."

"My son eats like a man, so it is important for me to monitor what he eats because I want him to have good health and not be obese."

"There are different ways [to encourage healthy eating behaviors] and sometimes you can spoil them, but setting an example is extremely important."

"The older she got, the more she wanted to be involved [in food preparation]. She now has a kid's cookbook and loves it. I let her have time to make things over the weekend. My son is more willing to try new foods when his sister makes it."

Strengths and Limitations

- Discussions led by trained moderator using a semi-structured script
- Heterogeneous sample recruited from varying organizations (elementary schools, churches, day care settings, universities, community centers)
- Small sample size

Conclusion

- Parents felt that controlling children's food portions was not very important because kids can regulate how much they eat or are active enough to burn off calories.
- Parents were aware of the potential risk of large portions on health and obesity.
- Parents felt it was important to talk to their children about portion control, limit or monitor children's intake amounts, and get kids involved in meal preparation.
- Barriers to portion control included lack knowledge and children's food preferences.
- Future nutrition education programs should aim to increase parents knowledge of age-appropriate portion sizes.