

A Look at Fathers' Perceived Roles and Practices of Feeding Their Children

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INTRODUCTION

Parents set the foundation for their child's food choices and eating habits, however much of the current literature focuses solely on mothers' impacts on feeding their children. Fathers are underrepresented in pediatric nutritional research, not only in interventions but also in non-interventional research.

Reasons for limited research on fathers' feeding practices could be due to many factors. Perhaps women participate more in pediatric nutritional research due to greater interest or availability. Fathers have been shown to be harder to reach for participation in research due to work schedules and disinterest in weekend programs. Also, some fathers have reported a preference for a more passive role in interventions. However, while some families might be traditional in that the mother is predominantly the one to feed the family, some research has shown that in other families the father has a more involved role.

Research does show that fathers feed their children and seek nutritional information. Therefore it is important for researchers to increase efforts to understand fathers' feeding practices and perceived roles in feeding their children.

METHODS

Fathers were recruited to participate in an online survey via social media. Researchers developed the 63-item survey utilizing topics found in the current literature. Topics included grocery shopping, meal planning and preparation, family mealtime routine and rules, and general feeding practices and beliefs. Fathers were eligible to participate if they were a father or father figure, had a child between 0-15 years old, and ate at least 5 meals per week with their child. If they had more than one child, they were asked to answer questions regarding their eldest child.

RESULTS

Demographics of the sample (n=105) showed that the fathers were predominately white, married, and of high socioeconomic status

- 91.4% were non-Hispanic White
- 68.6% had a bachelor's degree or higher
- 96.2% were married or in a domestic partnership
- 94.3% were employed full-time
- 60% earned a household income of \$75,000 or higher

RESULTS

Participation in Meal Tasks

	Number (n=105)	Percent (%)
Meals Eaten with Child		
Breakfast	51	48.6
Lunch	30	28.6
Dinner	103	98.1
Snacks	41	39.0
Grocery Shopping		
≥50% of the time	25	23.8
<50% of the time	80	76.2
Meal Planning		
≥50% of the time	23	21.9
<50% of the time	82	78.1
Preparing Meals		
≥50% of the time	28	26.6
<50% of the time	77	73.4
Preparing Child's Plate*		
≥50% of the time	14	13.3
<50% of the time/child serves plate	91	86.7
Enforce Rules at Mealtimes*		
≥50% of the time	45	43.0
<50% of the time/no rules	60	57.0

*18.1% report child serves their own plate

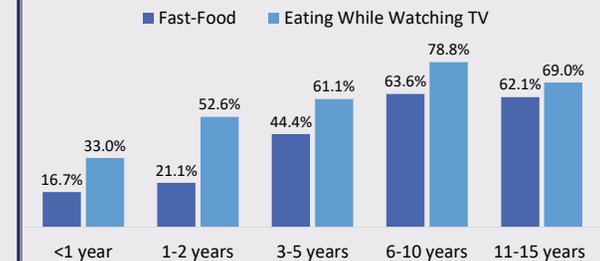
*13.3% report no rules

Feeding Practices & Beliefs

	Number (n=105)	Percent (%)
Have the ability to influence child's health	99	94.3
Eating healthy is important	95	90.5
Physical activity is important	90	85.7
Child must finish plate before leaving table*	55	52.4
No dessert until plate is finished	68	64.8
Encourage child to eat more if low intake	63	60.0
Encourage child to eat despite not hungry	44	41.9
Encourage child to try new foods	92	87.6
Feel knowledgeable about what foods to feed	81	77.1
Feel knowledgeable about amounts of foods to feed	75	71.4

*Plate, vegetables, main course, etc.

Feeding Practices & Child Age



*Table shows fathers who reported feeding fast-food ≥1 time/week

*Table shows fathers who reported their child eating and watching TV "always", "most of the time", and "sometimes"

Key Findings

- Majority of fathers report believing they have the ability to influence their child's health and that eating healthy and getting enough physical activity are important to them
- Around 75% of fathers participate in grocery shopping and meal planning and preparation less than half the time or never
- A higher number of fathers report enforcing the rules during mealtimes and encourage their child to eat more/finish their plate and try new foods
- As child age increases, fathers report feeding fast food more often and that the child eats while watching TV more often

CONCLUSIONS

This study adds to the existing literature regarding fathers' feeding practices and roles in feeding his children. Interventions for this specific population should focus on educating fathers regarding healthy eating habits for children and child food group intake recommendations. As most fathers reported feeling knowledgeable about what foods and amounts their child needs and participating in feeding tasks less than half of the time, a family-focused intervention might be better to impact parent-specific roles and practices. Interventions should also focus on healthy and easy-to-prepare meals for breakfast and dinner as these findings show fathers prepare those meals more often than lunch or snacks and value simplicity when preparing meals.

Future research should focus on roles of mothers and fathers in different families regarding feeding their children and how fathers' feeding practices differ accordingly.