Understanding Healthy Food Access Among Childcare Workers: A Qualitative Analysis of Food Shopping Experiences

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Background: Early childhood education settings are a major focus of childhood obesity efforts. Front-line childcare providers – predominantly low-wage earning females – are expected to implement healthy eating guidelines. Yet, workers’ own food access and experiences that shape their contexts and behaviors have not been well-addressed.

Objective: We explored perceptions of local food environments and access to healthy foods among childcare workers in New Jersey.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: Semi-structured interview guides were developed using a socioecological framework. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with childcare workers (n = 25) about their food shopping practices, foods available at their regular stores, and affective and interpersonal experiences while shopping.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Open coding for all focus groups was conducted in NVivo by the same researcher to identify themes from the interviews/focus groups.

Results: Major themes affecting food needs and access were: household composition, life stage, convenience, budget constraints, satisfying multiple children, and coping with overweight/obesity. Experiences of discrimination (“they’re like, do you have money for that?”) and perceived unsafe environments (“I won’t go to [supermarket] because I’m uncomfortable driving down there”) were reported as disincentives to shopping at particular stores. Themes of judgment were prevalent (“they don’t want people to see them using their [EBT] card” and “they look at you like you don’t belong there”). Some participants avoided stores due to such experiences and perceptions, while others pushed through barriers to satisfy family food priorities.

Conclusion: Childcare workers have complex, heterogeneous histories, practices, and perceptions regarding food access embedded in their relationships with food. Understanding and supporting their healthy food access could reduce nutrition disparities and strengthen their effectiveness in implementing childcare center policies. Future research should focus on a greater understanding of the perceptions of the grocery shopping experience of low-wage workers.

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Validation of a Stage of Change Algorithm for Plant-Based Protein in College Students

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Background: A validated Stage of Change (SOC) algorithm is needed for Transtheoretical Model-informed interventions designed to increase consumption of plant-based protein.

Objective: To use dietary intake as a validation of a newly developed plant-based protein SOC algorithm in college students. The algorithm included the target behavior “Do you try to incorporate plant-based proteins as your main source of dietary protein?” with the 5 standard SOC temporal response categories.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: Consenting students (n=119) ages 18-24 from introductory Nutrition classes in a Northeastern college. The NCI Diet History Questionnaire III (assessment timeframe previous year) and SOC algorithm were the primary study instruments.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: t-tests or X2 for demographic and MANOVA for dietary variables comparing stages (Pre-Maintenance [PM] and Maintenance [M]) M was used instead of the standard post-action stages (Action and Maintenance) due to the Questionnaire time frame. Mean±SD are reported for continuous variables.

Results: The distribution of the sample was 79.8% PM, 20.2% M. There were no differences in demographic variables: age 18.8±1.3 years, race/ethnicity (84% White), sex (80.5% female). There was a multivariate effect for dietary variables (Wilks Lambda) F(6,111)=6.2, p<0.001. There were univariate effects for %animal protein PM 66.2±10.0, M 51.2±17.7, F(6,116)=30.1, p<0.001; %vegetable protein PM 33.8±10.0, M 48.8±17.7, F(6,116)=30.1, p<0.001; dietary fiber (g) PM 19.7±12.05, M 31.0±20.5, F(6,116)=11.7, p<0.001; total fruit (c) PM 1.2±1.1, M 1.9±1.3, F(6,116)=6.9, p=0.01; total vegetables (c) PM 1.7±1.2, M 3.5±3.8, F(6,116)=15.8, p<0.001 but no effect (p>0.05) for % kcal protein PM 15.0±4.2, M 15.3±4.2.

Conclusion: Participants who perceived that they were in Maintenance for plant-based proteins consumed less animal protein and more plant-based protein as well as more fruits, vegetables, and dietary fiber than students who perceived they were not. There were no differences in overall protein intake. These results provide empirical validation for the use of this algorithm in college populations. Additional research is needed to determine if the plant-based SOC algorithm is valid in diverse populations.

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Who Are Nutrition Educators? Insight From the Online Masters of Science in Nutrition Education at American University

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Objective: Explore characteristics of those interested in advancing a nutrition education career and identify preparedness upon graduation.

Use of Theory or Research: Both employment and career readiness are indicators of success for degree-granting programs. Variation in learning modalities and attention to peer-to-peer, peer-to-instructor, and peer-to-material learning opportunities provide for a desirable