

Hispanic Mothers' Barriers to Making Healthy Eating Changes within the Family

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Introduction

Hispanic adults and children have the highest rates of obesity of any ethnic or racial group (Warren, Beck, & Delgado, 2019; Skinner, Ravanbakht, Skelton, Perrin, Armstong, 2018). The family environment plays a critical role in shaping children's eating habits and practices. Parental behaviors such as modeling, provision of food, communication around food, and nutrition knowledge are all important factors that influence child eating (Patrick & Nicklas, 2005; Salvy, Elmo, Nitecki, Kluczynski, & Roemmich, 2011).

Hispanic mothers play a particularly important role as they are usually the persons most responsible for shopping and preparing foods (Ayala et al., 2001; Dave, Evans, Pfeiffer, Watkins, & Saunders, 2010; Villegas, Coba-Rodriguez, & Wiley, 2018). Families may encounter many barriers when trying to create and sustain healthy eating behaviors and it is important to understand if mothers feel empowered to make changes within their families. The goal of this exploratory study was to understand Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers' perspectives on creating healthy eating changes within the family at home.

Methods

Focus group interviews were conducted with Hispanic mothers. See **Table 1** for interview questions. To be eligible to participate, families had to be of Mexican or Puerto Rican descent and to have a child between the ages of 6-18. Parents were recruited from grocery stores, churches, community centers, and universities through the use of flyers. Mothers completed demographic interviews before the start of the focus group interview. See **Table 2** for sample characteristics.

Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. They were then back-translated to Spanish. Two researchers coded the data using thematic analysis.

Results

Forty-six Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers from three sites participated in one of 11 focus groups (with an average of 5 mothers per group). Focus groups averaged 1 hour. All focus groups took place in Spanish.

Several themes were identified that described challenges to increasing healthy eating within the family. Themes included: Child and spouse resistance, trying to please all members of the family, balancing work life, the specific creative strategies mothers would use to make changes, and the need for educational programming. Several examples of representative quotes are provided below.

Family Member Refusal: "My son is the one who is most grumpy. He says "Oh mom, well you eat that because it's what there. I am not going to eat a sandwich. "No, you are going to eat that.""

Pleasing Everyone: "I have a daughter of 7 and a son of 16, so the food that she likes he does not like. So, for me this also costs me more work."

Creating a balance: "Because there is no time to cook or to go shopping for things that you need for a meal."

Role modeling: "And he sees me, and my daughter sees me, and they see me drinking from a water bottle and well now they too drink from a bottle [of water]."

What does a "family meal" look like in your house?
Sometimes we want to make changes to be even healthier in the way we live. What might stop you from trying to make healthy changes (in food, meals, physical activity)?
Are there traditions/ideas that might make change hard?
How would your family react to these changes you might make?
Would you try any particular strategies for successfully making changes?
What might help you make healthy changes (in food and/or meals)?

Married	
N (%)	25 (54)
Average # of children	
M (SD)	3.33 (2.10)
Number of years in the U.S. M (SD)	
	17.94 (8.18)
Language spoken	
Only Spanish N (%)	20 (44)
Speak Spanish better than English N (%)	18 (39)
Education	
Average # of years formal education U.S. M (SD)	4.21 (5.27)
Average # of years formal education in home country M (SD)	7.78 (3.60)

Conclusion

Mothers anticipate encountering significant pushback from family members when making healthy changes within the family. Most mothers felt that the changes would be met with negativity and resistance.

Getting the entire family involved, especially fathers, in making healthy eating changes, should be a focus of nutrition education programs working with Hispanic families.



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