The Family Meal Project: Assessing the Relationship between Family Priorities and Routines with their Child’s Eating Preferences

Jeune SC\textsuperscript{1}, Hamil C\textsuperscript{1}, Frazier S\textsuperscript{2}, Coccia C\textsuperscript{1}

\textsuperscript{1}Department of Dietetics and Nutrition, Florida International University, Miami, FL
\textsuperscript{2}Department of Psychology, Florida International University, Miami, FL

\textbf{INTRODUCTION}

Parent-child interactions pose significant influences on the child’s dietary behaviors as children often obtain their nutrition habits and behaviors early in life. Adverse child dietary preferences may lead to obesity and other chronic disease, later in adulthood. Familial preferences including their priorities and routines can foster significant influences on the child. Positive family priorities and routines may increase the child’s healthy eating preferences. However, there are few studies that analyze how the family experience can be associated with child dietary preferences. Purpose: The objective of this study is to examine parents’ report of family priorities and routines in relation to their child’s dietary preferences.

\textbf{STUDY DESIGN}

\textbf{Study Design}: Seven families, including 12 parents and their children (n=14), aged 2-11, participated in a 6-week family-focused intervention that incorporated parent-child interaction activities and healthy mealtime coaching. Participants were assessed at baseline and at post-intervention with validated questionnaires. Families were predominantly Hispanic/Latino (82%), with married parents (80%) and had two or more children (82%).

\textbf{Measurable Outcome/Analysis}:

\textbf{Family Priorities}. Parental program activities were used to assess family priorities and routines. Priorities were ranked from 1-16, ranging from most to least important.

\textbf{Family Routines}. Family routines were assessed to indicate whether routine meal planning decisions were healthy/unhealthy.

\textbf{Child Dietary Preferences}. Children completed the Catch Kids Club: After-school Student questionnaire by selecting pictures of healthy/unhealthy foods to assess dietary preferences.

\textbf{Statistical Analysis}. Descriptive statistics, paired sample t-tests, and correlations tests were analyzed using SPSS V26.0. Results were considered significant at p<0.05.

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\textbf{Family Priorities} & \textbf{Family Routines} \\
\hline
Healthy Breakfast & Grace before meals vs. No Grace  \\
9.50 (3.13) & 0.82 (0.40) \\
\hline
Healthy Lunch & Eating how much you want vs. Cleaning your plate  \\
10.00 (2.81) & 0.46 (0.52) \\
\hline
Healthy Dinner & Eating together vs. Eating alone  \\
11.36 (2.27) & 0.91 (0.30) \\
\hline
Healthy Snacks & Electronics during meals vs. No electronics during meals  \\
11.29 (2.43) & 0.09 (0.30) \\
\hline
Eating Meals Together & Parents deciding portions vs. Children deciding portions  \\
5.86 (3.08) & 1.00 (0.0) \\
\hline
Academic Performance & Save leftovers vs. Throwing out leftovers  \\
7.50 (4.18) & 0.55 (0.52) \\
\hline
Maintaining Family Harmony & Children cleaning up after meals vs. Parents cleaning up after meals  \\
1.86 (1.81) & 0.27 (0.47) \\
\hline
Receiving Proper Nutrition & Stop eating when full vs. Stop eating when the plate is empty  \\
5.14 (3.35) & 0.46 (0.52) \\
\hline
Having Family Food Interactions &  \\
6.54 (3.33) &  \\
Exercise &  \\
5.50 (3.55) &  \\
Completing Homework &  \\
2.12 (4.08) &  \\
Getting To School On Time &  \\
10.29 (4.83) &  \\
Participating in Extracurricular Activities &  \\
9.93 (3.89) &  \\
Proper Sleep Health &  \\
6.14 (2.07) &  \\
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\textbf{RESULTS}

At baseline, approximately 42% of parents scored 75% or higher for practicing “healthy” family routines during meal planning. Healthy child dietary preferences had significant negative correlations with parents who reported high priorities of “Completing HW” (r=-0.66, p-value=0.026) and “Getting to school on time” (r=-0.85, p-value=0.001). Healthy family routines such as “Having meals together”, “Stop eating when full”, and “Saving leftovers” had significant positive correlations to high-ranked, nutrition-related family priorities such as “Healthy dinner” (r=0.67, p-value=0.009), “Eating meals together” (r=0.58, p-value=0.028), and “Positive family food-interactions” (r=0.72, p-value=0.006).

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

Overall, most parents emphasized nutrition-related priorities for their families, however, less than 50% of parents currently practiced “healthy” family routines. Nutrition-related priorities and routines were correlated with healthier choices for the child. Positive parent-child interactions, including the practice of healthy, nutrition-related priorities and routines may significantly impact the child’s dietary preferences. Further research is needed with larger sample sizes to confirm these findings.

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