ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine perceptions of mindful eating and to identify factors associated with mindful eating among Hispanic and non-Hispanic white parents of elementary school children.

Study Design, Setting and Participants: Four focus groups were conducted with 20 Hispanic and 15 white parents. Nineteen of Hispanic participants were born in Mexico. Two focus groups were conducted in participants’ respective native languages.

Outcome Measures and Analysis: Perceptions of mindful eating and factors affecting mindful food parenting were examined. Focus groups were transcribed and translated into English. Data were independently coded twice using grounded theory. A codetable was developed and pre-identified and newly identified themes were compared and synthesized across the focus groups by all authors.

Results: Four themes were identified in the study: 1) parents’ childhood and current mealtime traditions; 2) divergent views on mindful eating; 3) mindful food parenting; and 4) mindful eating and food culture. Compared to non-Hispanic white parents, Hispanic parents reported more pleasure mealtime traditions and want to keep their cultural traditions. While white parents perceived hunger cues and portion control as important elements of mindful eating, Hispanic parents believed that mindful eating was a fundamental part of mindful eating. All parents valued importance of involving children in cooking as part of mindful food parenting. Hispanic parents reported that traditional foods may facilitate mindful eating practices with children.

Conclusions and implications: Identifying and promoting cultural assets for mindful eating and parenting may be important for future studies.

METHODS

Participants

Recruitment began with flyers that were sent to the recruited school. Parents of 2nd through 4th grade students then signed up to be contacted to participate in the focus groups. The project was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Board at California State University. There were four pre-intervention focus groups consisting of 20 Hispanic parents and 15 non-Hispanic white parents. Nineteen of the Hispanic participants were born in Mexico. Two focus groups were conducted in the participants’ respective native languages, Spanish or English, for each ethnicity (Hispanic or non-Hispanic white). These two groups represented different cultural traditions. The non-Hispanic white focus groups represent the mainstream culture in the United States. The Hispanic focus groups represent the Mexican culture.

There were a total of 35 participants. The 32 participants were female, with only 3 male participants. Around half of the participants were born in the U.S. while the other half were born in Mexico. The majority of the participants had three or four children living at home. About 58 % of the participant’s level of education was high school degree or less, followed by 25% of participants having some college or vocational school.

Procedures

Four main questions were developed for the focus groups. Each of the main questions contained probing questions in order to facilitate the discussions during the focus groups. The questions were piloted with a small group of parents, based on the input from the pilot test, questions were revised to improve clarity and understanding. Table 1 displays the focus group main and probing questions developed. Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

RESULTS

Four main themes were found:

Food traditions during mealtime. The majority of participants from the Spanish and English focus groups stated that dinner was usually set at a scheduled time. Mealtimes were also more structured in comparison to how they currently practice it with their family.

I think that in Mexico people like to be around each other more around dinner time, one likes to be with one another, it is like the time to talk about what happened during the day.-Hispanic father

Perceptions of mindful eating. The majority of participants had not previously heard about mindful eating. However when introduced to the topic, many participants saw the benefits it could provide for their families. When the participants were asked about mindful eating, the Spanish speakers found that tradition is an important factor when talking about mindful eating. In both of the Spanish speaking focus group sessions the participants mentioned the importance of allowing time for food to settle.

If you pay attention to what you’re eating you enjoy it more and maybe you feel fuller sooner or you become more satisfied because well I know that the brain will get the signal and to a few minutes after you’ve finished eating.-Hispanic mother

Mindful food parenting. After introducing mindful eating, there was an interest in understanding the participants’ parenting in conjunction with mindful eating. All of the focus groups highlighted that having open conversations with their children in regards to their hunger cues was a pretty normal routine. There was also a consensus among participants on the importance of having good food experiences. There was a divergent theme seen however, the English focus groups appear to mention more about portion control in regards to mindful food parenting while it was not mentioned in the Spanish focus groups.

My girls are learning the same, they already know, when they go somewhere and eat they say, Mommy don’t you think that the rice needed garlic or did you see that the rice, I mean they already know that, because I already got them used to it- Hispanic Mother

I do the opposite, I try to do portion control… so if we are going to have a snack or like if we sit down as a family to watch a movie and we pop popcorn everybody has their and not just you know about if it tastes good but it has to be good for you.- non-Hispanic white mother

Promotion of mindful eating through the preparation of traditional foods. Spanish speaking participants in particular showed pride in passing traditional Mexican foods. To them that is their identity. They view some traditional foods as more important than eating fast food. The Spanish-speaking participants not only talked about cooking but about prep work being an important part of making traditional Mexican food. I noticed that if we are all sitting as a family around the table they enjoy it more, they are sitting and when I let them go watch TV, something is missing and they eat it to finish it quickly or they’ll get up and leave or for example pizza, a pizza makes it easy to grab and be out playing on the other hand if I make soup they will not be able to go because they know that if they throw it away there will be problems with the mom.-Hispanic mother

REFERENCES


BACKGROUND

With the growing obesity epidemic in the United States, one strategy that could help combat this trend is parental feeding practices. Studies have shown that parental feeding practices can influence children’s food intake. For example, having pleasant, distraction-free family meals have been seen to increase familiarity of food (Tylka, Eneli, Kroon Van Diest, & Lumeng, 2013).

In addition there is growing interest in research as regards to the importance of mindful eating as a method to aid in the obesity epidemic. One study in particular found that mindfulness in general is associated with less impulsive eating, reduced calorie consumption, and healthier snack choices (Jordan, Wang, Donatoni, & Meier, 2014).

A fairly new concept called mindful food parenting incorporates both parental feeding practices as well as mindful eating. Just like mindful eating, parental feeding practices show to be promising methods in improving obesity, mindful food parenting may be utilized with children to develop a positive relationship with food. The aim of mindful food parenting is to give parents the tools to feed their children healthy food options when hungry (Mears, 2010). Further, some studies have taken into consideration the importance of food culture as a means to improving health status. Roche et al. (2015) state that there is a strong relationship among food culture preservation, cultural bonding and cultural identity with one’s ethnic group. While maintaining food culture appears to promote healthy eating habits (Zhao, Goto, Wolff, Bianco-Simeral, & Song, 2013) the Hispanic population, unlike their non-Hispanic white counterparts, face challenges in preserving their food culture due to acculturation.

The primary goal of this study was to understand the perceptions of mindful eating among Hispanic and non-Hispanic white parents of 2nd through 4th grade students, in a northern California elementary school. The current study also aimed to examine the relationship between mindful food parenting practices and food culture.