

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Ensuring Children Eat a Healthy Diet: A Theory-Driven Focus Group Study to Inform Communication Aimed at Parents

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SUMMARY: Childhood obesity is common and parents play a crucial role in fighting against it. Parents discussed in semi-structural focus groups about the challenges of ensuring their children eat a healthy diet. Results revealed that the parents wanted their children to eat healthy, and the challenges they faced were mostly attributed to influences from other family members, social norms, and lack of resources.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Three main themes emerged from the focus groups: subjective norms related to healthy eating (i.e., nuclear and extended families, race/ethnicity, society), control beliefs about healthy eating (i.e., self-efficacy, money, time), and attitudes toward healthy eating (e.g., attitudes toward fast food).
- Parents experienced conflicts in their attempts to influence their children's eating habits, such as the conflict between their own health-conscious actions and pressures from extended families and sociocultural norms.
- Parents also expressed concerns about lack of time and money to cook healthy for their children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate military children about the benefits of avoiding fast food, and eating healthy
- Teach military parents to identify risk factors and early signs of childhood obesity

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Help military parents develop healthy weekly meal plans, and offer printable shopping lists
- Offer cooking workshops to military families to teach them simple and healthy ways of cooking

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend trainings for professionals who work with military families regarding ways of eating healthy
- Continue to promote programs that support healthy eating habits in military families

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METHODS

- The sample was recruited by posting flyers in community centers, and advertising in the city's weekly newspaper and Craigslist
- Seven groups were formed; each group had no more than eight participants, and consisted of people of the same race/ethnicity and gender.
- The groups were semi-structured; the discussions were about children's diet and nutrition.
- Each group discussion last approximately 90 minutes, and the contents of the discussions were categorized into themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 43 parents with an average age of 43 years (SD = 10.60), and their income was below state median.
- The race/ethnicity and gender breakdown of the participants were: Black (seven females, nine males), Latino (eight females, six males), and White (seven females, six males).
- The participants' children's ages ranged from five months to 36 years.

LIMITATIONS

- Although the participants were from various race/ethnicity backgrounds, their results were analyzed together, therefore it is unclear how race/ethnicity influences healthy eating.
- All the participants had below median income, therefore the results may not be applicable to people with higher income.
- It is unclear if the parents' attitudes and behaviors in healthy eating correlated with their children's BMI (body mass index).

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate intervention approaches that help parents identify conflicts and challenges in eating healthy, and develop effective coping skills
- Include both parents in the focus group to better understand their expectation of each other, and the family dynamics
- Examine the similarities and differences among race/ethnicity groups in eating habits, and learn about the specific barriers to healthy eating faced by each group

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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