



Maternal Attitudes and Behaviors Regarding Feeding Practices in Elementary School–Aged Latino Children: A Pilot Qualitative Study on the Impact of the Cultural Role of Mothers in the US–Mexican Border Region of San Diego, California



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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article history:

Accepted 26 September 2013
Available online 4 December 2013

Keywords:

Latino children
Maternal role
Feeding behaviors
Obesity interventions
Border region

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2015.02.028>

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the attitudes and behaviors of Latino mothers around feeding their children. Using qualitative methods, we conducted four focus groups in Spanish with 41 Latino mothers of elementary school-age children in San Diego County, CA. Latino mothers' mean age was 41 years; 90% were foreign-born; and 74% had a high school education or less. We explored cultural viewpoints around feeding and cooking and feeding strategies used. Focus groups were analyzed based on a priori and emergent themes. The following themes around feeding emerged: feeding attitudes central to the maternal responsibility of having well-fed children and feeding behaviors that centered on cooking methods, supportive behaviors, and reinforcement strategies for “eating well.” These findings increase our understanding of the Latino maternal role to feed children and can help to inform more culturally appropriate research to effectively address nutritional issues and obesity prevention in Latino children. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2015;115:S34–S41.

This article is reprinted from the February 2014 issue of the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (2014;114(2):230–237).

LATINOS ARE THE LARGEST AND FASTEST GROWING minority group in the United States (16.3% of the population)¹ and are expected to triple in number by 2050.² They comprise one quarter of US newborns³ and by age 5 years, 33% are overweight/obese (hereafter referred to as overweight) compared with 25% of non-Latino white 5-year-olds.⁴ Overweight children are more likely to be overweight throughout the life course,⁵ contributing to the rapid increase in metabolic disturbances and type 2 diabetes

in adolescents^{6–9} and adults.^{5,10–12} With the disproportionate impact of obesity and type 2 diabetes among Latinos, the National Institutes of Health's Health Disparities Strategic Plan¹³ has urged research in childhood obesity to create effective interventions for minority groups. Because parents play a critical role in the development of child eating behaviors,^{14–17} understanding how Latino parents approach feeding their children is a primary step in this process. Identifying Latino mothers' attitudes and behaviors around feeding their children is necessary to determine whether there are specific practices to address in this population.

To date, there have been limited data on Latino feeding behaviors. Most studies have focused on parental behaviors known to influence childhood obesity and have, therefore, focused on understanding methods for decreasing fat intake and increasing F/V consumption.^{18–20} In some reports, Latino mothers promote the consumption of hearty, high-calorie meals so that children can become “big and strong.”^{19,21} Consequently, Latino mothers do not often limit their children from eating foods, be it healthy or unhealthy, and might use more coercive parenting practices, such as bribes, threats, and punishment to get their children to eat.²² Such parent-centered directives promote control over children's eating

Statement of Potential Conflict of Interest: The authors have no potential conflict of interest to disclose.

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through external means and are less focused on the child.²³ In contrast, others have found that Latino mothers are more likely to be indulgent in their feeding practice and permissive in parenting.²³⁻²⁶ This type of feeding style, characterized by few rules and demands on children, has been associated with higher child weight status.²³ However, another group recently found that among Mexican mothers, positive involvement in eating, which is characterized by more authoritative parenting styles and includes such behaviors as monitoring the child's intake and limiting consumption of high-calorie foods, was associated with lower child weight status.²⁷

Given these variances in the literature to date, research is needed to understand the underlying attitudes and behaviors Latino mothers demonstrate around feeding their children. Previous studies have included Latinos living in Boston, MA; northern California; and Houston, TX, representing a diverse Latino culture.^{23,25,26} The diversity of US Latinos can present different attitudes or behaviors among them, resulting in different study findings. Research focusing on Latino mothers in the US–Mexican border region could provide unique information about Mexican-American feeding behaviors and attitudes, as the border region is a unique cross-cultural context, with the existence of two cultures and combined practices from both. For example, in a qualitative study of 10 Mexican mothers living in *colonias* (neighborhoods) along the US–Texas border, researchers found that mothers primarily focused on their children, and that their goal was to provide the best available resources for their children and engage in food practices that would make their children happy, healthy, and well fed.²⁸ Our goal was to better understand attitudes and feeding behaviors of Latino mothers living in San Diego, a US–Mexican border region, using focus-group methodology.

METHODS

Design and Sample

We conducted four focus groups between April and May 2011. Mothers were recruited through flyers distributed in two low- to middle-income elementary school districts and Spanish-language parent groups in east and south San Diego County. All parents who responded to the flyers were allowed to participate. Forty-one Latino mothers with elementary

school-aged children participated. Upon completing the focus group and short questionnaire, mothers received a \$20 gift card. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, San Diego.

Focus-group discussions were conducted in Spanish, consisted of 10 to 11 participants, and lasted 1 to 1.5 hours. Two took place at an elementary school on a school day during morning hours and two took place at the school district office during after-school hours. Before the start of the focus groups, each mother completed an informed consent and self-administered questionnaire that assessed maternal demographics including age, education, family income, and employment status.

Focus groups were facilitated by two Mexican-American bilingual (Spanish/English) researchers trained in qualitative methods and experienced in conducting focus groups. Each facilitator had a note taker who assisted with follow-up questions. To explore the maternal role in feeding as well as feeding behaviors and attitudes, we developed a guide of focus-group questions that was based on researcher expertise, previously conducted key informant interviews, and empirical literature. Facilitators followed the guide, which included questions about maternal attitudes toward feeding and specific feeding behaviors, including cooking practices and reinforcement methods (Figure 1). For the purpose of confidentiality and coding, women were assigned a number, which they said aloud every time they spoke. Focus-group discussions were audio- and videotaped. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by a certified Spanish translator. When the audio was unclear, the transcriber stated “inaudible.” Transcripts were played back to confirm the “inaudible” segments, and video recordings were then accessed to clarify these segments. A second translator reviewed the tapes and included information regarding context, such as laughter among participants and head nods in the videotapes. Videos were used to quantify hand raises when answering country of birth. Head nods were noted and provided reassurance of specific themes that were being verbalized by participants.

Analytic Strategy

We used focus-group methodology and qualitative methods.²⁹ Focus groups were transcribed verbatim in Spanish to maintain the integrity of the participants'

When do your children eat and who feeds them?
 What strategies do you use to feed your children?
 How do you get your children to eat?
 Who does the cooking in your home?
 Who does the grocery shopping in your home?
 What do you think about healthy eating, cooking, and shopping?
 In the past few months, has anyone made changes in the way they shop or cook to make food healthier?
 Do you think you could change the way you cook, shop and eat?
 What do your children eat after school? What types of snacks do they eat?
 How do you motivate your child to eat healthful foods?
 How many of you set or try to set limits on when or what your children should eat?
 What kind of limits? How do you do it (eg, do you use rules)?

Figure 1. Focus group guide for Latina mothers of school-aged children in San Diego, CA.

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