

# A Qualitative Investigation of Teachers' Information, Motivation, and Behavioral Skills for Increasing Fruit and Vegetable Consumption in Preschoolers

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Using the Information–Motivation–Behavioral Skills model as a framework, researchers qualitatively assessed preschool teachers' perceived motivation, facilitators, and barriers related to getting preschool children to eat fruits and vegetables (FV).

**Methods:** Individual, semi-structured interviews with 28 Head Start teachers in central North Carolina.

**Results:** Participants reported the need for FV-related information (Information) to improve FV consumption in children, perceived themselves to be parents at school (Motivation), and reported using conditional rewards and punishment statements to get preschoolers to eat FV (Behavioral Skills).

**Conclusions and Implications:** Nutrition educators may use the Information–Motivation–Behavioral Skills model to develop education materials targeting increases in preschoolers' FV consumption. To motivate preschool teachers who see themselves as parents at school (Motivation), nutrition educators can provide teachers with FV-related information that was reported as their needs (Information), and supportive feeding practices (Behavioral Skills) to get preschoolers to consume FV.

**Key Words:** fruit, vegetables, child, preschool, motivation, child care (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2013;45:793-799.)

## INTRODUCTION

Few preschool children (3- to 5-year-olds) in the United States consume adequate fruits and vegetables (FV).<sup>1</sup> An even greater need may exist among preschoolers from low-income families, because lower-income individuals are less likely to meet the daily FV recommendations.<sup>2</sup> This poor consumption during early childhood can pose problems that should be addressed through evidence-based interventions, because the preschool period is a critical stage for forming lifelong eating habits,<sup>3</sup> and because FV consumption has been associated with diet-related chronic diseases.<sup>4</sup> A number of factors shape preschool children's FV intake, including repeated exposure to foods, food neophobia ("unwillingness to eat novel foods"<sup>5</sup>), and parental food preference.<sup>6,7</sup> For children attending

preschool, peer consumption<sup>8,9</sup> and teacher feeding practices<sup>10,11</sup> also influence preschoolers' FV consumption and acceptance.

Because more than half of children spend their waking times at center-based preschools,<sup>12</sup> parents often share their role as caretaker and mealtime managers with preschool teachers. In response to this trend, researchers and nutrition educators have attempted to improve the way teachers interact with children, encouraging the development of healthy eating habits.<sup>13-16</sup> Despite these efforts, teachers' practices are not always supportive of building healthy eating habits,<sup>17,18</sup> which can be counterproductive (eg, contributing to a child's dislike of FV or unwillingness to try new foods). These counterproductive practices could result from a lack of standardized guidelines about,<sup>19-22</sup> and

limited training for teachers that support, healthy eating among preschoolers. In a study of 4 Western states, < 24% of staff from preschools included in the study received yearly training related to child feeding, with the majority receiving training from Child and Adult Care Food Program personnel who focus their efforts on program compliance rather than establishing an eating environment that models and encourages healthful eating behaviors.<sup>17</sup>

Although much attention is paid to parental influence on child FV consumption,<sup>23-28</sup> little is known about the impact teachers have on preschoolers' FV intake and the factors that mediate their influence.<sup>10,11</sup> The ultimate goal of this project was to develop theory-based educational intervention to assist preschool teachers in increasing preschoolers' FV consumption during mealtimes, particularly teachers who serve children from low-income families. To achieve the overall goal of this project, the first step and the purpose of this study was to assess Head Start teachers' perceptions related to increasing preschoolers' FV consumption using the Information–Motivation–Behavioral Skills model (IMB) as the theoretical framework. Head Start is a federally funded preschool

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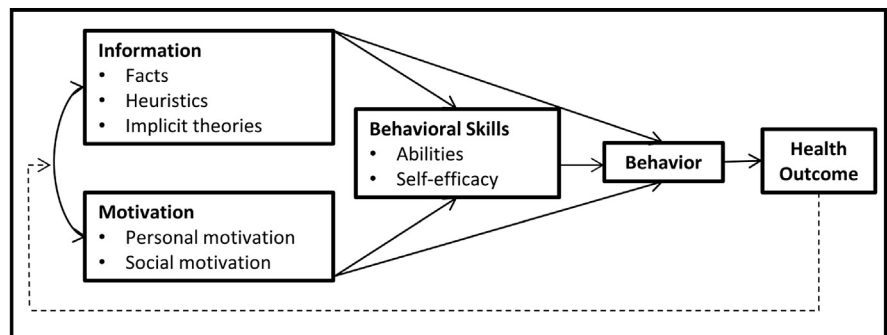
program serving children from low-income families.

The IMB model originated in human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome research<sup>29,30</sup> and has more recently been applied to the nutrition field.<sup>31</sup> The Figure represents the IMB model in general.<sup>32</sup> Each construct (Information, Motivation, and Behavioral Skills) of the model includes subconstructs that could affect an individual's behavior, resulting in the desired health outcome. Information is composed of facts, heuristics, and implicit theories. Motivation consists of personal motivation and social motivation. The Behavioral Skills construct is divided into 2 subconstructs: abilities and self-efficacy. The Information and Motivation constructs directly influence the Behavioral Skills construct and directly or indirectly affect Behavior. The Behavioral Skills construct directly impacts the Behavior construct. By articulating factors that teachers perceive to influence preschool children's FV consumption to the IMB model, the researchers were able to build part of the framework for this intervention.

## METHODS

### Research Design

To explore teachers' perceptions related to increasing preschoolers' FV consumption, researchers conducted in-depth, face-to-face, individual qualitative interviews with Head Start



**Figure.** Information–Motivation–Behavioral Skills model with subconstructs.<sup>32</sup>

teachers. North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board approved the methods included in this study.

### Sampling and Recruitment

The investigators used a convenience sample<sup>33</sup> to recruit 28 Head Start preschool teachers from 7 centers serving predominately African American and Hispanic children in central North Carolina. To be included in this study, participants had to be preschool teachers or teacher assistants, be over the age of 18, work with 3- to 5-year-olds, and be present with preschool children during mealtimes. Researchers recruited teachers during staff meetings and in individual classrooms.

### Measurement Instruments

To increase consistency in data collection, in all interview sessions interviewers used a standardized interview guide, including major questions

along with probes. The principal investigator and researchers with community nutrition expertise drafted the questions in the interview guide. Research lab members edited the guide to improve the clarity and appropriateness of language in questions for the target audience. The Table lists the main questions in the interview guide. Before data collection, to improve the credibility of the data,<sup>34</sup> the interviewers completed training on ethics related to research with human subjects and how to remain open, unbiased, and nonjudgmental during the interview process. As part of the training, interviewers also conducted a pilot test as a mock interview, with observer feedback.

### Data Collection Procedures

Two trained graduate research assistants with no prior relationship with the preschools or the teachers conducted one-on-one interviews with 28 Head Start teachers. In the first

**Table.** Main Questions in the Preschool Teachers' Interview Guide<sup>a</sup>

Topic	Questions
Motivators	What are some reasons why you would want preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies? Can you tell me what are some reasons why you or someone wouldn't want preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies? When you're trying to get preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies, how does it make you feel?
Barriers	What are some challenges to getting preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies?
Behavior Skills (Facilitators)	How do you get preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies? What are some tricks/strategies/tactics/rules that parents should not use to get their child to eat fruits and veggies? If you could have anything at all to help you get preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies, what are things you might need? What are things you might want to learn about how to get preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies? If any, what are some things you might want to know how to do to get preschoolers to eat fruits and veggies?

<sup>a</sup>Questions are not presented in the order found in the interview guide.

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