

# Determinants of Children's Use of and Time Spent in Fast-food and Full-service Restaurants

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Identify parental and children's determinants of children's use of and time spent in fast-food (FF) and full-service (FS) restaurants.

**Design:** Analysis of cross-sectional data.

**Setting:** Parents were interviewed by phone; children were interviewed in their homes.

**Participants:** Parents and children ages 9-11 or 13-15 from 312 families were obtained via random-digit dialing.

**Main Outcome Measures:** Dependent variables were the use of and the time spent in FF and FS restaurants by children. Determinants included parental work schedules, parenting style, and family meal ritual perceptions.

**Analysis:** Logistic regression was used for multivariate analysis of use of restaurants. Least squares regression was used for multivariate analysis of time spent in restaurants. Significance set at  $P < .05$ .

**Results:** Factors related to use of and time spent in FF and FS restaurants included parental work schedules, fathers' use of such restaurants, and children's time spent in the family automobile.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Parenting style, parental work, parental eating habits and perceptions of family meals, and children's other uses of their time influence children's use of and time spent in FF and FS restaurants.

**Key Words:** child, parental work schedules, parenting style, fast food, restaurants, family, meal (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2011;43:142-149.)

## INTRODUCTION

According to data on food expenditures in the United States, food away from home accounted for 48% of total food expenditures in 2008, as compared to 34% in 1974.<sup>1,2</sup> The trend from home-prepared food to food prepared by others coincides with the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in this country.<sup>3</sup> Analysis of food prepared away from home, as compared to food prepared at home, indicates that restaurant offerings are higher in calories and fat and lower in nutrients.<sup>4-6</sup> Parents of 10- to 13-year-old children reported that lack

of time and accommodation of activities of family members resulted in the need to obtain food away from home.<sup>7</sup> The top 3 reasons that adults in another study chose fast food were rapid service, convenient location, and good-tasting food, but availability of nutritious food was less important.<sup>8</sup> However, there exist other possible explanations for eating away from home.

The purpose of this study was to identify determinants of children's use of and time spent in fast-food (FF) and full-service (FS) restaurants. The relationship between children's use of FS or FF restaurants and time

spent in them and parental work, parenting style, perception of family meals, usage of and time spent in these restaurants by parents, and other uses of time by children was investigated.

To explore such reasons, theories from economics (the household production model, or HPM)<sup>9,10</sup> and sociology (role strain theory)<sup>11</sup> drove the perspective of the present study. Each of these complementary explanations was selected for its past association with outcomes in children. The HPM predicts that outputs from family members rely on income and time as resources for achieving goals; work outside the home by mothers or fathers is considered a constraint on time that could be devoted to family activities. Other away-from-home uses of time by parents, such as running errands, may also determine the activities in which children engage with their parents. Role strain theory provides an argument that household members may fail to achieve those goals because of lack of time and the interference of demands from other

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doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2010.04.002

roles. The classic case of role strain considers the demands of household obligations (eg, provision of healthful meals) in potential conflict with the demands of work (eg, long work hours, unpredictable work schedules). Other factors of importance within this literature are characteristics of work, such as work control and work importance, that potentially influence family life.<sup>12</sup> However, none of these theories captures the entirety of factors that influence household members' behavior. So the HPM and role-strain theory models are supplemented with (1) parental socialization via modeling,<sup>13</sup> (2) parenting style theory,<sup>14</sup> and (3) family ritual theory.<sup>15</sup> With regard to socialization, fathers and mothers, for example, transmit their alcohol consumption, tobacco consumption, and eating habits to their children.<sup>16</sup> The authors argue, for example, that parents' use of time spent in eating in FF restaurants may serve as a model for children.

Prior research indicates that the time mothers invest in cooking or in activities with their children reduces children's risk of overweight.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the time entailed by maternal employment potentially increases the risk of obesity in children.<sup>17</sup> In addition, parenting styles may predict the way that parents feed their children and their children's body size. Parenting styles, as characterized by Rhee et al,<sup>18</sup> include authoritative (respect for child's opinions, but clear boundaries), authoritarian (strict disciplinarian), permissive (indulgent without discipline), and neglectful (emotionally uninvolved, without rules). In their study, children with parents who used authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful parenting were at greater risk for overweight as compared to those with more authoritative parents.<sup>18</sup> Hubbs-Tait et al reported that restriction of some food and pressure to eat other food were practices used by parents classified as authoritarian, whereas modeling, monitoring food intake, and promoting children's responsibility for food selection were used by authoritative parents.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, parental criticism and worry about their children's health and eating habits adversely affect children and could encourage obesity.<sup>20</sup> Impacts on children's eating also may re-

sult from parental perceptions that dinner represents an important family ritual.<sup>21</sup> Work hour and work day flexibility benefits families, as these conditions often allow more parental involvement in children's activities and have positive health benefits.<sup>22</sup> Orientations toward and conditions at work, such as work control or autonomy and the importance of work relative to other roles, affect children and family life in general.<sup>22,23</sup>

The purpose of this study is to determine whether parental work schedules and other attributes of work, parenting style, and perceptions of dinner as an important family ritual are related to children's use of and time spent in FS and FF restaurants.

## METHODS

Data used in this paper come from the study, "Parental Time, Income, Role Strain, Coping, and Children's Diet and Nutrition." A sample of 312 families was obtained via random-digit dialing, with a response rate of 48%. This response rate is equal to or better than that of recent studies of multiple members of families, the rates of which run from 49% to 23%.<sup>24</sup> Both parents (if the household was dual-headed) and 1 child between the ages of 9-11 or 13-15 participated in the sample of 2-parent households; an oversample of single-headed households made up 20% of the participating families; however, the non-response rate of children lessened this percentage in the overall sample. Age ranges of children were selected to capture prepubertal and postpubertal children; 12-year-olds were considered most likely to be in a transitional stage in this regard.

Using a questionnaire, each parent was interviewed by telephone to obtain data on their work, eating habits, perceptions of dinner, and demographic characteristics; these interviews took about 32 minutes. They also responded to a self-administered income questionnaire and maintained a 2-day time diary. Because of the detailed nature of questions regarding parents' various sources of income, over 20% of the sample of parents did not complete this questionnaire. Using a questionnaire, children were interviewed for an hour in

person with questions regarding how their mothers and fathers parented them, mother's perceptions of their eating habits and weight, and their own perceptions of their eating habits and other health behaviors. After the questionnaire was finished, children's height and weight were measured,<sup>25</sup> and a multipass 24-hour dietary recall (with the use of a 2-dimensional booklet containing food models) and 24-hour activity recall were conducted. The children were then instructed in maintaining 2-day food intake and 2-day activity diaries. The 24-hour activity recall and 2-day activity diaries obtained data on what children did during each day, how much time they spent in each activity (main activity), and where and with whom they performed each activity. The activity recall extended from the time the child went to bed 2 nights before the interview until the child went to bed the previous night. Time spent in various activities was averaged across the 3 days. Interviewers were instructed in anthropometry and dietary assessment by members of the research team who are registered dietitians (KK and JA). Dietary intake and anthropometric data are not reported here. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Texas A&M University after a full review, and written consent (adults) and assent (children) were obtained.

## Measurement

**Parental work.** Based on their responses to the telephone questionnaire, the authors determined whether the parents were working and, if they were, whether or not their work schedule was standard in terms of days of the week (Monday through Friday) and time of the day (8 AM-5 PM).<sup>26</sup> Those whose schedules included either one or both weekend days were classified as having a non-standard work day; those whose schedules diverged by at least 3 hours from the 8 AM-5 PM time period were characterized as having nonstandard work hours. The authors used 5 standard items to measure perceptions of work control developed by Hage and Aiken,<sup>27</sup> including "There can be little action around here until a supervisor approves a decision" and "A person who wants to make his or her own

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