



“Doing our best to keep a routine:” How low-income mothers manage child feeding with unpredictable work and family schedules



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 September 2016

Received in revised form

13 July 2017

Accepted 8 August 2017

Available online 9 August 2017

Keywords:

Routines

Child feeding

Food choice

Social ecological influences

Maternal employment

Qualitative methods

ABSTRACT

Significant changes in work and family conditions over the last three decades have important implications for understanding how young children are fed. The new conditions of work and family have placed pressures on families. The aim of this study was to explore the work and family pressures shaping the ways parents feed their young children on a day-to-day basis. Twenty-two purposively recruited low-income employed mothers of 3–4 year old children from a rural county Head Start program in Upstate New York reported details about the context of their children's eating episodes in a 24-h qualitative dietary recall. Participating mothers were employed and/or in school at least 20 h a week and varied in partner and household characteristics. Interview transcripts were open coded using the constant comparative method for usual ways of feeding children. A typology of three emergent child feeding routines was identified based on mothers' accounts of the recurring ways they fed their child. Mothers' feeding routines were distinguished by a combination of four recurring key strategies – planning ahead, delegating, making trade-offs, and coordinating. Work schedule predictability and other adults helped mothers maintain feeding routines. Unexpected daily events, such as working overtime or waking up late, disrupted child feeding routines and required modifications. These findings suggest that understanding how young children are fed requires recognizing the socio-ecological environments that involve working mothers' daily schedules and household conditions and the multiple ways that mothers manage food and feeding to fit environmental constraints. There is a need to look at more than just family meals to understand parents' daily strategies for feeding young children and their implications for child nutrition.

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1. Introduction

Global increases in obesity and nutritional inequalities have focused public concern on what and how young children eat. In the United States and other Western European countries, young children fall short of meeting dietary recommendations for health (Kirkpatrick, Dodd, Reedy, & Krebs-Smith, 2012; Pereira-da-Silva, Rêgo, & Pietrobelli, 2016). Growing social and economic inequalities are reflected in children's food and eating. In both the U.S. and Western Europe, low-income young children experience greater risk of obesity and poor nutrition compared to high-income

children (Ahrens et al., 2014; Larson & Story, 2015). Among the many historical changes that have affected young children's food and eating, the disparities in the nutritional well-being of young children have occurred within a changing social context of greater income inequality, greater work instability, and greater family complexity among low-income families (Alexander & Haley-Lock, 2015; McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Presser, 2003, pp. 394–410). Low-income children have also become the target of the increased marketing of highly processed foods (Larson & Story, 2015; Lobstein et al., 2015).

The research scope related to what young children are eating is narrowly focused on the type and quality of foods they are served by parents and other caring adults during meals and snack times and how frequently they eat evening meals together with their parents. Family meal routines, commonly defined as dinner meals

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eaten together by all family members, are linked to more nutritious diets among young children (Hammons & Fiese, 2011). This association may be in part because young children are less likely to eat foods known to be of poor nutritional quality when eating with adults (Skafida, 2013). Although parents agree that eating together is important, many low to moderate income employed parents report how demanding work and family conditions, including unpredictable and fluctuating working times for themselves and others and children's timetables for school and other activities, make it difficult to do so on a daily basis (Devine et al., 2006; Fulkerson et al., 2011; Hayter et al., 2015; Brannen, O'Connell, & Mooney, 2013; Tubbs, Roy, & Burton, 2005). While many parents aspire to routinely sit and eat with children (Fulkerson et al., 2011; Hayter et al., 2015), to cope with demanding work and family conditions many report using a variety of strategies including managing feelings of stress and fatigue, reducing time and effort, redefining and reducing expectations, and setting priorities and making trade offs to feed themselves and their children (Brannen et al., 2013; Devine et al., 2006; Hayter et al., 2015).

Despite the evidence to suggest that eating meals together has nutritional benefits for young children, getting families with young children to eat together may be impractical given the realities of asynchronous work and family schedules (Dixon et al., 2014), time and money constraints among single heads of households (Tubbs et al., 2005), and young children's biological needs (Brannen et al., 2013). Work and family pressures can negatively affect parents' ability to maintain consistent and predictable family routines that are positive for children's development, including eating meals together. A family's ability to regularly eat together is one aspect of feeding children. Understanding how parents feed young children beyond family mealtimes amidst work and family demands is necessary if we hope to improve young children's food and eating.

Significant changes in work and family conditions over the last three decades have important implications for understanding how young children are fed. The increasing labor force participation of mothers of young children has come under significant public scrutiny in debates over what and how children eat. In the U.S. and Western Europe, the rate of women who are working has nearly doubled over the last five decades (Miani & Hoorens, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Today, over two thirds of mothers with young children are working (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017; Miani & Hoorens, 2014). This growth in maternal employment has been accompanied by a rise in around-the-clock, non-standard employment and fluctuating and unpredictable working hours, especially among mothers with low levels of education in the U.S. (Clawson & Gerstel, 2014; Henly & Lambert, 2005; Presser & Cox, 1997; Presser, 2003, pp. 394–410). The changes in working conditions have occurred alongside widespread changes in family structure. Many families with young children in U.S. and Western European countries are increasingly lacking the financial and time resources to help assure their children's well-being as a greater number of parents find themselves as single heads of household (McLanahan, 2004). These changing work and family conditions may have importance for how young children are fed. Parents in precarious employment situations may have diminished control over money and time for children's food and eating. And families headed by a single parent may lack the social and financial supports available for feeding children in ways that meet guidelines for health. Low-income mothers, in particular, are overrepresented in jobs where they have little control over their employment conditions or schedules (Presser & Cox, 1997) and as single heads of households (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). These conditions can make it especially difficult to plan and prepare meals (Devine et al., 2006) and to eat meals together (Roy, Tubbs, & Burton, 2004).

The aim of this study was to explore the work and family

pressures shaping the ways parents feed young children on a day-to-day basis. This study built on prior research on family meal routines, which emphasizes the benefits of frequent family mealtimes, and about how families manage food and eating on a daily basis (Brannen et al., 2013; Devine et al., 2006; Dixon et al., 2014; Fulkerson et al., 2011; Hammons & Fiese, 2011; Hayter et al., 2015), by focusing on the ways in which work and family demands shape how low-income mothers feed young children on a daily basis including, but not limited to, how often they eat meals together. Low-income parents have limited time and money (McLanahan, 2004), are likely to experience precarious working conditions (Lambert, Fugiel, & Henly, 2014; Presser, 2003, pp. 394–410), and have complex household arrangements (McLanahan, 2004). New ways of understanding how young children are fed are needed in the light of these recent changes to work and family life given the importance of the preschool years in the establishment of young children's future food and eating habits (Birch & Fisher, 1998).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study relied on a purposive sample of 22 low-income women who were employed and/or in school at least 20 h a week, and who had a child between 3 and 4 years old new to Head Start, a federally funded preschool program for low-income children and families in the United States (Table 1). The Head Start program was located in a small city within a rural Upstate New York county. Employed and student mothers were selected because in U.S. families, women retain primary responsibility for feeding children even when faced with other work and family responsibilities and pressures (Bianchi, 2011; Jacobs & Gerson, 2004).

The mothers in this study predominately self-identified as non-Hispanic white, which is consistent with the demographic characteristics of the county where the study was located.

Mothers ranged between 23 and 44 years of age. Most mothers had some college education and worked in administrative, healthcare, food retail and service, and other retail occupations. All mothers worked at least part-time. Two mothers were full-time students and were also employed part-time in childcare and agriculture respectively. One mother was a part-time student and a part-time retail employee. Fourteen of the mothers had varied weekly work and/or school schedules. Fewer than half of all mothers had the same work and/or school schedules each week.

With regard to family situations, the median number of adults in mothers' households was two, and the median number of people under 18 years of age was three. Mothers reported diverse living situations. Half of the mothers lived with their Head Start child and a spouse or partner, five mothers lived alone with their Head Start child, and six mothers lived with their Head Start child and either their own parent or an adult child. Three mothers said that they split meal responsibilities for their Head Start child with another adult in their household and one mother said that she split meal responsibilities with her Head Start child's babysitter.

Only four mothers did not participate in either Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the Women Infant and Children's Nutrition Program (WIC). Many mothers talked about not having enough money to buy the foods they wanted for their child. For example, although they described wanting to be able to buy better quality snacks, more fresh fruits and vegetables in larger amounts, and/or a greater variety of foods to provide new experiences, they said that money was too tight. Only one mother categorized her money situation as "comfortable with some extras."

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