

# Hispanic Mothers' Views of the Fathers' Role in Promoting Healthy Behaviors at Home: Focus Group Findings



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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

**Background** Overweight and obesity prevention interventions rarely take into account the unique role of fathers in promoting healthy home environments.

**Objective** To use qualitative methodology to examine the views of Hispanic mothers of children aged 2 to 5 years regarding fathers' roles in promoting healthy behaviors at home.

**Design** Nine focus groups were conducted in Spanish with Hispanic mothers of preschool-aged children (N=55) from October to December 2015.

**Participants/settings** Hispanic mothers were recruited from churches, community agencies, and preschools located in five Zip codes in the southwest part of Oklahoma City, OK.

**Analysis** Questions examined the views of Hispanic mothers regarding fathers' roles in promoting healthy behaviors at home. Focus groups were audiorecorded, transcribed in Spanish, translated into English, and coded and analyzed for themes by two coders using NVivo version 10 software.

**Results** Four themes were identified: fathers' disagreement with mothers about food preferences and preparation, fathers' support for child's healthy eating, fathers' support for child's physical activity, and fathers' lack of support for a healthy home food environment. Fathers' traditional expectations about the type of foods and portion sizes adults should eat conflicted with mothers' meal preparations. Mothers reported that, although they favored eating low-calorie meals, the meals fathers preferred eating were high-calorie meals (eg, quesadillas). In general, fathers supported healthy eating and physical activity behaviors for their children. Supportive behaviors for children included preparing healthy meals, using healthier cooking methods, grocery shopping with their children for healthy foods, and asking the child to participate in household chores and/or play sports. Fathers' unsupportive behaviors included bringing high-calorie foods, such as pizza, and sugary drinks into the home, using sweets and savory foods for emotion regulation, and displaying an indulgent parental feeding style.

**Conclusions** Mothers' views of fathers' perceived roles in child eating and physical activity, and maintaining a healthy eating environment, have important implications for the success of promoting healthy behaviors in the homes of Hispanic families.

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THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT HAS AN IMPORTANT INFLUENCE on family eating behaviors at home.<sup>1</sup> Among Spanish-speaking Latino families, determinants of food in the home have been explained by mothers' food preparation skills, family members' food preferences, and culinary traditions.<sup>2</sup> Parental food practices modeling consumption of fruits and vegetables in Hispanic homes have been positively associated with availability and accessibility of fruits and vegetables.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, parental acculturation level, as assessed by language spoken at home, and perceived benefits of consuming fast food have been inversely related with availability of fruits and vegetables at home.<sup>3</sup> Attention to the home food environment is important because of its association with consuming a healthy diet.<sup>4</sup> Availability of

high-calorie foods in the home and parents' frequent consumption of soda and energy-dense snacks have been linked with decreased diet quality in Hispanic children.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, attention to the multiple aspects of the home food environment is critical because of the influence of food available and family eating behaviors.<sup>6-8</sup> Yet, there is limited research documenting the role fathers have in home food availability or support for family healthy eating.

Parents also have the ability to model healthy physical activity (PA) behaviors for their children that can last a lifetime.<sup>9,10</sup> Although qualitative studies have reported Hispanic parents' views of their role in promoting healthy food behaviors at home,<sup>2,11-13</sup> few studies have described parents' views regarding fostering PA behaviors.<sup>11,13,14</sup> Hispanic

parents' engagement in child activities, and modeling PA, were identified as practices that encouraged preschool-aged children's PA.<sup>14</sup> Turning the television off was discussed by Hispanic parents as an important strategy to help overweight children lose weight.<sup>13</sup> Mexican and Mexican-American fathers participating in focus groups described employing an authoritarian or authoritative approach to family PA and being more physically active than mothers.<sup>11</sup> In the United States there is an obesity prevalence gap between racial and/or ethnic groups that seems to widen during the early developmental years.<sup>15</sup> Non-Hispanic black and Hispanic/Latino children have greater sugar-sweetened beverage intake at age 2 years and fast-food intake at age 3 years, and a higher prevalence of having a television in the room where the child sleeps at age 4 years than do non-Hispanic white children. All have been documented as early risk factors for childhood obesity.<sup>16</sup> Thus, identifying parental and familial factors that may affect children's food and PA behaviors and, thus, childhood obesity prevalence in minority groups is important in the progression to health equality.

Important examinations of fathers' child-feeding and PA behaviors have gained attention.<sup>17-19</sup> Multicultural fathers' full-time employment status has been associated with fewer hours of home food preparation than their part-time/employed counterparts; fathers' life-work stress was associated with less encouragement of child's healthful eating, less frequent family meals, lower consumption of fruits and vegetables, and more consumption of fast foods.<sup>20</sup> However, limited studies have examined the role of Hispanic fathers in cultivating healthy family behaviors at home.<sup>21,21,22</sup> Findings from these few studies suggest that fathers contribute to the availability of unhealthy foods in the home,<sup>2,21</sup> and may not support mothers' healthy eating or engagement in PA,<sup>22</sup> but support child PA.<sup>11</sup> An exploration of mothers' views of fathers' roles in supporting a healthy home environment and children's eating and PA behaviors may be a way to gain information on family-life aspects to inform obesity prevention interventions. This is especially relevant among Hispanic families for whom nuclear and extended family is important.<sup>23</sup> Hispanic preschool-aged children have the highest prevalence of obesity in the United States, whereas adults have the second highest.<sup>24,25</sup> The first step in developing effective interventions to promote healthy behaviors is gaining an in-depth understanding of why individuals behave the way they do.<sup>26,27</sup> Focus group research is carefully planned to allow researchers to develop an understanding of why groups adopt new behaviors and maintain these behaviors once they have been initiated. The purpose of the present study was to use qualitative methodology to examine the views of Hispanic mothers of children aged 2 to 5 years regarding fathers' roles in promoting healthy behaviors at home.

## METHODS

### Recruitment and Participants

A purposive sampling method<sup>28</sup> was used to recruit participants from churches, community agencies, preschools, and daycare centers located in five Zip codes in the southwest part of Oklahoma City, OK, where the highest concentration of Hispanic families live.<sup>29</sup> Recruitment was conducted with the assistance of a community health worker who visited

sites to attract information-rich cases (individuals who are personally experiencing the phenomenon being studied) whose responses to the interview questions would provide detailed information about feeding behaviors in Hispanic families with preschool-aged children.<sup>30</sup> A screening was conducted to ensure that the inclusion criteria of self-identification as Hispanic, living with the target child and the child's father, and family being low income per Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program eligibility criteria<sup>31</sup> were met. Fifty-five Hispanic mothers of children aged 2 to 5 years children participated in nine focus groups conducted from October to December 2015. The University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol. All participants provided written informed consent before data collection.

### Qualitative Methodology

Researchers (K.R.L., P.B., and M.C.) formulated the focus group interview questions based on input from a participatory planning group of six community stakeholders (a Head Start teacher, a director of a bilingual child development center, a nutrition and wellness educator working with Hispanic families, a social worker, a family and community partnership coordinator of a nonprofit organization, and the director of health services of a community agency) with an interest in the well-being of the Hispanic Community in Oklahoma City, a literature review of nutrition and health promotion studies,<sup>32-36</sup> and the investigators' previous experience working with Hispanic families. After the initial draft was developed, the interview guide was reviewed by the stakeholders, and modifications were made. Then, the interview guide was translated into Spanish using Marin's double translation methodology,<sup>37</sup> and was pilot-tested with two mothers with characteristics similar to the target group. Amendments were made after the pilot test. Discussion topics included foods the child eats, challenges to keeping preschool-aged children healthy, family member(s) that helped mothers to keep their preschoolers healthy, and mothers' eating habits. Sample questions from the interview guide are shown in [Figure 1](#).

A brief demographic characteristics questionnaire was constructed. Participants' acculturation was assessed with two questions: years of residence in the United States and the language that participants generally read and speak (response options: only Spanish, Spanish better than English, both equally, English better than Spanish, and only English).<sup>38</sup> These proxies were used to discuss the possible relationship of mothers' acculturation level with mothers' perceptions of fathers' behaviors. The questionnaire was translated into Spanish using similar methodology as indicated before.<sup>37</sup> Participants completed the questionnaire before the focus group.

Focus groups were moderated by the principal investigator (K.R.L.), who had prior training in focus group research, and assisted by two student observers. The principal investigator is bilingual (Spanish-English) and has experience working with Hispanic families from different countries in community-based programs. The groups (n=9) were held at the local Latino Community Development Agency in Oklahoma City, OK. Focus groups lasted approximately 120 minutes and had six participants on average. All focus groups were conducted

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