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Research report

A qualitative study of parents' perceptions and use of portion size strategies for preschool children's snacks ☆

Christine E. Blake ^{a,*}, Jennifer Orlet Fisher ^b, Claudia Ganter ^c, Nicholas Younginer ^a, Alexandria Orloski ^b, Rachel E. Blaine ^c, Yasmeen Bruton ^b, Kirsten K. Davison ^c^a Department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior, University of South Carolina, 915 Greene Street, Columbia, South Carolina 29208, United States^b Department of Public Health, Center for Obesity Research and Education, Temple University, 3223 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19140, United States^c Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, United States

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Increases in childhood obesity correspond with shifts in children's snacking behaviors and food portion sizes. This study examined parents' conceptualizations of portion size and the strategies they use to portion snacks in the context of preschool-aged children's snacking. **Methods:** Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with non-Hispanic white (W), African American (AA), and Hispanic (H) low-income parents ($n = 60$) of preschool-aged children living in Philadelphia and Boston. The interview examined parents' child snacking definitions, purposes, contexts, and frequency. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Coding matrices compared responses by race/ethnicity, parent education, and household food security status. **Results:** Parents' commonly referenced portion sizes when describing children's snacks with phrases like "something small." Snack portion sizes were guided by considerations including healthfulness, location, hunger, and timing. Six strategies for portioning snacks were presented including use of small containers, subdividing large portions, buying prepackaged snacks, use of hand measurement, measuring cups, scales, and letting children determine portion size. Differences in considerations and strategies were seen between race/ethnic groups and by household food security status. **Conclusions:** Low-income parents of preschool-aged children described a diverse set of considerations and strategies related to portion sizes of snack foods offered to their children. Future studies should examine how these considerations and strategies influence child dietary quality.

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Introduction

A dramatic increase in the prevalence of obesity among young children in the United States has occurred alongside shifts in snacking behaviors (Piernas & Popkin, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). While snacks are considered to be an important part of a healthy diet for preschool-aged children (USDA, 2014), many snack foods consumed by children tend to be energy-dense and of low nutritional quality (Adair & Popkin, 2005; Piernas & Popkin, 2010). Moreover, the frequency of snacking among US preschool-aged children has increased such that over 25% of preschool-aged children's energy intake today comes from snacks (Piernas & Popkin, 2010). Snack-

ing also represents a key source of "empty" calories, which offer few nutrients beyond energy and are seen as the root cause of dietary imbalances (Maillot & Drewnowski, 2011), particularly among low-income preschoolers who are vulnerable to both poor diet quality and higher rates of obesity (Gubbels et al., 2009; Ogden, Reynolds, & Smith, 2006). In light of these trends, the promotion of healthy snack behaviors is a central component of many interventions to improve children's diet to prevent or treat childhood obesity (Sharma, Chuang, & Hedberg, 2011; Williams et al., 2014).

While interventions may direct attention toward the quality of snacks offered to children, much less emphasis is placed on snack portion size. The average portion size of foods consumed by US children has increased over the past 40 years (Nielsen & Popkin, 2003; Piernas & Popkin, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). This trend is problematic because larger portion sizes have been linked to greater energy intakes among children during specific eating occasions (Fisher, Rolls, & Birch, 2003; Huang, Howarth, Lin, Roberts, & McCrory, 2004; McConahy, Smiciklas-Wright, Mitchell, & Picciano, 2004) and across the course of a day (Fisher, Arreola, Birch, & Rolls, 2007) in experimental and observational studies. This work highlights the need to concurrently address portion while promoting healthy snacking.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ceblake@sc.edu (C.E. Blake).

The central role that parents play in shaping children's dietary behaviors is widely recognized (Savage, Fisher, & Birch, 2007; Ventura & Birch, 2008). Surprisingly little, however, is known about the determinants of portion sizes offered to young children, particularly around snacking. Preliminary research suggests that parents are generally unconcerned about the portion sizes they serve their children and typically make decisions about portion size based on child specific characteristics such as the child's appetite (Crocker, Sweetman, & Cooke, 2009). At the same time, promising results from a pilot intervention indicate that education and skill building activities around portion size can lead to improvements in parent rightsizing of child food portions (i.e., serving appropriate portion sizes) (Small et al., 2012). Research is needed to understand the definitions and considerations that influence the portion sizes offered by parents to young children, particularly around snacking, as well as the specific strategies that parents use to manage portion sizes.

The objective of this research was to qualitatively examine parents' conceptualizations of child snack portion sizes and the strategies they use to portion snacks. The proposed work focused on low-income and ethnic minority parents of preschoolers because this population has been underrepresented in child feeding research (Wardle & Carnell, 2007) and are at greater risk of obesity (Drewnowski, 2009; Drewnowski & Specter, 2004). Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of non-Hispanic White, African American and Hispanic low-income parents of preschool-aged children who participated in a broader study of parenting around child snacking (Davison et al., 2014). To our knowledge, no research to date has examined parents' portion size definitions and strategies specific to child snacking. This research addresses a significant knowledge gap, given that child snacking and the food portion size independently predict higher energy intake and unhealthy weight gain in children.

Methods

Participants

Participants were low-income non-Hispanic white, Hispanic, and African American parents of children aged 3 to 5 years who reported primary responsibility for feeding the child most of the time. Inclusion criteria included parental age of at least 18 years and household income $\leq 185\%$ of the poverty level determined by self-reported income or program eligibility (e.g. WIC or SNAP eligible) and child without severe food allergy (ies) (e.g. eggs, nuts, dairy), chronic medical condition (e.g. diabetes) or developmental disorder that influenced feeding. Participants were recruited in Philadelphia and Boston through in person recruitment and flyers posted in WIC offices and online community listings such as Craigslist. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Temple University and Harvard School of Public Health. Parents were provided \$45 in compensation for their participation and fare for public transportation to the interview site.

Procedures

Parents completed a 60–90 minute in-depth interview in English or Spanish with a trained research assistant. The interview guide, which was structured for the broader study on parenting around child snacking, included questions about parents' conceptualizations of child snacks, purpose for giving snacks, child snacking contexts, and frequency of giving different snacks (Fig. 1). Five research assistants including one bilingual assistant (English-Spanish) conducted the interviews. An expert in qualitative methods trained the interviewers to conduct the qualitative in-depth interviews during a two-day workshop. After completing the interview, parents completed a brief questionnaire that included standard demographic

questions including age of parent, age of child, education, income, gender, race/ethnicity, number of children in household as well as household food security using the USDA 6-item short form of the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module (USDA, 2014).

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and later verified by the interviewer. Field notes were completed immediately after each interview to provide a description of the setting and other observations not captured directly through the interview to facilitate data analysis. For the broader study on parenting around child snacking, a combination of grounded theory and theory-guided approaches were utilized to analyze the data (Charmaz, 2000; Greene, 1993). A preliminary list of food parenting practices was developed based on prior food parenting theory and research for the broader study. Initially, a single node, "portion size", was used to code all passages related to portion size. All members of the research team coded a set of five transcripts using the initial code list, including the "portion size" node, to assess its appropriateness and identify other important food parenting practices to add to the coding scheme. New codes were added as needed based on consensus achieved through multiple peer debriefing meetings. A smaller team of three research assistants then used the coding scheme to code all remaining transcripts; research assistants did not code transcripts for the interviews that they conducted. All transcripts were double coded and discrepancies in coding were discussed at weekly meetings and resolved (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Thematic coding of all text passages coded as "portion size" using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000) was conducted by a single research assistant to identify and define sub-themes; this analysis was conducted through peer debriefing during research team meetings to clarify interpretation of coded passages and theme definitions. Parents' conceptualization and definition of a child portion size, considerations for determining appropriate portion sizes of snack foods served to their preschool-aged children, and strategies they employ to deliver "properly portioned" snacks emerged as important themes at this point in the analysis. Use of considerations and strategy themes were classified as most, many, some, and few based on the proportion of parents who mentioned the theme during the course of the interview to provide a reference for the salience of each theme among this group of parents. The use of portion size subthemes was then compared across parent race/ethnicity and household food security status to gain a better understanding of within and between group differences in the mention of portion size definitions, considerations, and strategies.

Results

Sample characteristics

Participants were 60 low-income parents of preschool-aged children (18 white, 22 African American, 20 Hispanic; 93% mothers). One grandfather and one aunt were included as they fulfilled a parental role as primary caregivers of the preschool aged children. Approximately half of parents had a high school education or less with the remaining half reporting some post high school education such as technical school or college. Slightly less than 40% of parents were married, or living with a partner and over 50% were overweight or obese. Parents participated in multiple US federal assistance programs that have income eligibility requirements including the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (70%), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (80%), free or reduced cost school meals (47%) by older siblings, and Head Start (35%); 43% experienced household food insecurity during the preceding year (Table 1).

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