RESEARCH BRIEF

Intergenerational Family Conversations and Decision Making about Eating Healthfully

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore how youth, parents, and grandparents discuss issues related to eating healthfully and unhealthfully and to identify intergenerational strategies for educators to improve this communication.

Design: In three intergenerational focus groups, each with 4-8 families, a trained moderator asked questions about family practices and conversations for eating healthfully and unhealthfully.

Setting: Three focus group sites, each with Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Program sites (PANEP) programs serving low-income populations and multigenerational clientele, based in geographically and culturally diverse communities in Pennsylvania.

Participants: Forty-four individuals (21 pre-teens, 16 parents, and 7 grandparents) from 17 families.

Phenomenon of Interest: How youth, parents, and grandparents discuss and influence each other's healthful and unhealthful eating practices.

Analysis: "Strength" of evidence determined by repetition of ideas across focus groups and from the respondents' quotes providing in-depth information.

Results: Families demonstrated a wide range of ways that family communication is associated with the adoption of healthful and unhealthful patterns of eating. Parents and grandparents expressed anguish over their struggle and inability to help their children eat more healthfully. All three generations enumerated strategies for dealing with disagreement.

Conclusions and Implications: Grandparents, parents and children indicate that they need opportunities to learn together and communicate about ways to improve nutrition behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

The rising problem of childhood overweight and the unhealthful eating practices of American children and families have been well documented.[1] Nutrition educators employ a variety of methods to target healthful eating messages to reach families with school-age children. Nutrition education is often targeted to parents, because extensive research reveals that family members, especially parents, serve as the primary influence on children's eating practices.[2-5]For instance, research has shown that parents are effective models of appropriate (and inappropriate) eating behavior,[6,7] and their parenting styles (eg, degree of rigidity in the way they establish and enforce rules relating to eating) influence eating patterns, including problematic eating patterns such as overeating in preadolescent girls.[4,8]

Whereas nutrition scientists and educators are aware of the importance of family communication dynamics in shaping how children select, prepare, and consume food,[2-8] most outreach education programs are crafted to reach only monogenerational audiences, without the active participation of other generations. Even when programs are deemed family oriented or family focused, the nutrition information is often presented either to parents[9] or children,[10] with instructions to take that information home to share with other generations. To illustrate an inherent limitation of such an approach for influencing family patterns of food selection, a study of children in a school program on choosing fruits and vegetables found that children were limited in their ability to make better choices at home because it was the parents who continued to make decisions about what food was brought into the home.[10] Little information is available for nutrition educators regarding how to help

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