

Barriers and Solutions to Having Healthy Mealtime Routines for Children: A Focus Group and Pilot Study of a Meal Calendar Website



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the barriers that parents face in helping their families establish healthy and consistent family mealtime routines. Using parent focus groups we interviewed 42 parents of 5-to-8-year-old children to brainstorm ideas for how to encourage children to be more involved in mealtime preparation and planning. Using the feedback from parents we designed and pilot-tested a mealtime planning web-tool with 100 parents. Parents used the tool for one month and then provided feedback.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What barriers do parents face in making healthy mealtime routines for school-aged children?

Can a web-based mealtime calendar planning tool help parents get children more involved in mealtime planning and preparation?



SURVEY RESULTS

Mealtime Climate Scale	4.11
Mealtime Planning and Preparation (1-5 scale mean)	
▪ Dinners planned in advance	3.69
▪ Child helps choose meals often	3.03
▪ Child helps prepare meals often	2.81
▪ Child knows meal in advance	3.65
▪ Child sets the table	3.60
▪ I want my child to help plan meals	3.84
▪ I want my child to help prepare meals	3.82
▪ Challenge – Choosing healthy meals	3.31
▪ Challenge – Choosing balanced meals	2.76
▪ Challenge – Time to plan dinner	3.37
▪ Challenge – Time to cook healthy	3.34
▪ My child helping would slow me down	3.24
▪ My child helping might get hurt	3.91
▪ Most important part of meal – healthy food	4.45
▪ Most important part of meal – being together	4.74
▪ Most important part of meal – teaching child	3.80

1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree

BACKGROUND

Healthy and consistent family mealtimes have been associated with numerous benefits, such as:

- Eating healthy – more fruits, vegetables
- Increased academic performance
- Decreased risk for obesity, eating disorders
- Decreased risky child behaviors
- Decreased drug and tobacco use

Many barriers have been identified that influence the consistency of healthy family mealtimes, such as:

- Differing family schedules
- Parental work schedules
- Use of media, distractions
- Lack of planning
- Different food preferences
- Lack of time to prepare healthy food
- Picky eaters, kids won't eat food

METHOD

Part 1 – Parent Focus Groups

Participants

- Participants included 42 parents of 5-to-8-year-old children
- Sample consisted primarily of highly educated, Non-Hispanic White mothers (with 6 fathers)

Procedure

- Participants met in small focus groups with a trained facilitator to discuss barriers to healthy mealtime routines
- Parents reviewed and critiqued 4 nutrition and USDA websites
- Parents completed surveys about child and family routines

Measures

- Surveys included questions about family mealtimes, child participation in preparing and making foods, and parental beliefs about health, obesity, routines
- Reviewed websites included: USDA SuperTracker, NourishInteractive, EatRight.org, Natl Agric. Library

Part 2 – Website Pilot Study

Participants

- Participants included 100 parents of 5-to-8-year-old children
- Sample consisted primarily of highly educated, Non-Hispanic White mothers (with 12 fathers)

Procedure

- Participants completed a survey and gave initial feedback prior to having access to the web-tool
- Participants were given approximately 1 month of access to use the web-tool (along with instructions)
- After 1 month, participants completed a follow-up survey about their family routine patterns and thoughts about the mealtime calendar web-tool

Measures

- Parent online surveys asked questions about the design and functions of the web-tool
- Surveys included questions about family mealtimes, child participation in preparing and making foods, and parental beliefs about health, obesity, and routines

Parent Focus Groups

RESULTS

Website Pilot Study

- Parents reported a lack of interest in using the 4 websites that they reviewed because the sites were too complex, not user-friendly
- The main frustrations/barriers reported were:
 - **lack of time** (for meal preparation, decisions)
 - **lack of planning / run out of ideas** for meals
 - **keeping children busy**, and “**out of the way**”
- Brainstorming by parents resulted in the following suggested needs:
 - a **weekly meal calendar** to plan out meals
 - include **recipes, shopping lists, child tasks**

What did parents like about the tool?

- Easiness - drag-n-drop foods into calendar
- Printing recipes, calendars, child tasks
- Using child tasks to get kids involved in meal
- Having children help choose meals
- Recent foods list and pictures of foods

What would parents change about the tool?

- Have more options (vegan, more recipes)
- Options for a monthly calendar
- Allow users to remove food choices
- Make the tool more mobile-friendly
- Add more meals per day (snacks)

CONCLUSIONS

- Parents want their children to be more involved in regular mealtime planning and preparation, but barriers exist
- Common barriers include **lack of time** and **lack of planning/organization**
- The pilot-testing of the website showed that parents like having something to help them stay organized, give them meal ideas, and get children involved
- At Time 2 survey, **59.7% of parents said they would use calendar again**, 24.7% said maybe (w/changes), 15.6% said no
- We need to **encourage parents to engage their children more in mealtime planning and preparation** to teach children about healthy routines



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