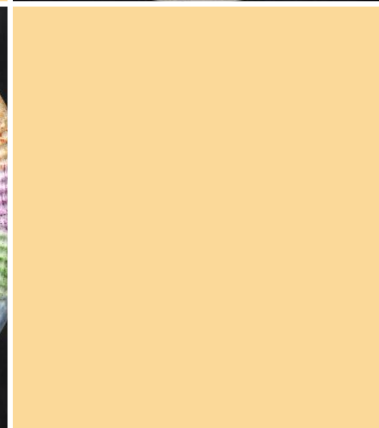


Food and families who work: A summary



Recent research reports that children of working mothers have less healthy diets. Given Government's aims to tackle health inequalities and increase labour force participation, this finding is important. The current study set out to examine this issue further through a mixed methods approach that made use of the Department of Health's National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) as a resource for secondary analysis and a sampling frame for a linked qualitative study.

Key points

1. Secondary analysis of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) and Health Survey for England (HSE) found no relationship between maternal employment and the quality of children's diets. Similar results are found in the qualitative sub sample of 48 families from the NDNS. Other factors, such as maternal education may better predict children's diets than maternal employment.
2. Secondary analysis of NDNS 2008/9 data identified the mother as the main food provider in almost all (93%) families with a child aged 18 months to 10 years. Men in about a third of the two parent families in the qualitative sample did some cooking on weekdays. Where both parents were employed full time, this rose to half. Both fathers' work patterns and cultural factors seemed important in explaining their involvement in meal preparation.
3. Family meals were important to nearly all families in the qualitative study, but less than a third managed to eat together on weeknights. The synchronisation of family members' timetables was more important for family meals than parents' working hours. Children's routines and 'body clocks' were also important, as were the coordination of tastes and preferences.
4. Nearly two thirds of children in the qualitative sample ate in at least one childcare setting once or more times during the week. In some cases, foods eaten in school and childcare expanded the child's tastes and supplemented or compensated for eating at home. But in other cases the food in other settings was considered to be of poor quality and diminished children's diets.
5. Parents in the qualitative study emphasised the importance of fruit and vegetables for a healthy diet. However, parents were not always willing or able to control what children ate and providing healthy food was not always a priority. In practice, food priorities included fostering children's independence and self-control, getting the child to eat something rather than nothing and avoiding 'aggro' or children developing 'hang ups'.



Background

Research suggests that the nation's diet is more likely to improve if healthy eating policies take into account the changing patterns of family life. Because food work in the UK remains gendered, the continued rise in mothers' employment and dual earner households may be important. Recent studies report that children of working mothers have less healthy diets. The current study set out to examine this finding further through a mixed methods approach which made use of the most detailed and up to date diet data available, the Department of Health's rolling National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS).

Study design

The study involved secondary analysis of the NDNS Year 1 (2008/09) the Health Survey for England (HSE, 2007-8) and the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC, 'Children of the 90's'). A range of outcome measures was used, including a measure of overall nutrition quality, which was specifically designed for the project. Case studies of 48 working families sampled from the NDNS and differentiated by income level and the quality of children's diets was also undertaken. This part of the study sought to complement the NDNS findings and provide a fuller picture. It employed qualitative methods, including interviews and a range of visual methods with children, to understand the social processes which influence children both within and outside the home.

Findings: Negotiating food and eating in everyday life

Gender division of food work

Secondary analysis of NDNS 2008/9 data identified the mother as the main food provider in almost all (93%) of families with a child aged between 18 months and 10 years. This was the case irrespective of social class, income and whether mothers were employed. The qualitative study showed in practice that the picture was more complex.

- Most mothers fitted their work hours around their children's care, even when they worked full time
- Men in about a third of the two parent families (n=42) did some cooking on weekdays
- Where both parents were employed full time, men did some weekday cooking in about half of the two parent families

Women's responsibility for feeding the family was often facilitated by mothers fitting work around children's care and this was taken for granted in most, but not all, families. All but one father who made at least one weekday meal worked non-standard hours, suggesting that men's work patterns are important in taking responsibility for making meals. On the other hand, not all men who worked non-standard hours and could have contributed to making meals did so (6/15). This suggests that other 'cultural' factors are also important.

Policy and Practice Issues: Mothers are largely responsible for children's food even when they also do paid work. What can policy makers do to encourage a more egalitarian division of labour where men are playing a more active role?

"[My son] would never eat another vegetable if I weren't cooking. It's one of the reasons why I cook. [My husband] would do bangers and mash, or Knoll noodles or cereal." (Mother of boy aged 3 and baby aged 8 months)

'I normally go down on my knees if they say 'no', I normally go down on my knees and go 'pretty please'... I go on and on and on and on till I get it' (Girl, aged 8).

"Eating together is like a shared experience... It's a time, a social time. Because we're busy and we're running around, you know it's at time also to sit down and just say 'How was your day?'" (Mother of girl aged 4)



Findings: Food strategies

When asked what helped and hindered feeding the family on working days, working parents emphasised the importance of time. They described a number of strategies for saving, buying and 'shifting' time i.e. re-sequencing food preparation. Resources (money, food skills, kitchen appliances) influenced which strategies they used:

- Saving time: 'Quick and easy' foods that everyone likes
 Planning meals in advance
 Freezer food 'you can just stick in the oven'
- Shifting time: Bulk cooking and freezing meals/components
 Slow cookers for stews/casseroles/hotpots prepared the previous evening
- Buying time: Children eating meals in school/childcare so no need for hot meal
 Paid help (nanny and aupair)
 Use of 'fast' (takeaway) food, especially on Fridays

Policy and Practice Issues: Which tips might help busy working parents in preparing meals for the family? How might standards for pre-prepared and fast food play a part in helping busy families feed children more healthily?

Findings: Family meals

Previous research has shown the wider benefits of family meals. Almost all parents suggested family meals were important and gave a variety of reasons. But despite their efforts to make 'proper' meals, getting everyone together to eat at the same time was more difficult. When we examined meal patterns on weekdays we found that:

- About a third of families did not usually eat together at all during the week
- In many families children ate with one parent with the other parent eating separately
- Family meal patterns did not vary by mothers' working hours or social class
- For family meals where all ate together the synchronisation of family members' timetables was more important than parents working hours
- Children's routines and 'body clocks' were also important, especially the need for children to eat early, as were their food preferences and tastes.

Policy and Practice Issues: How can work-family life policies address the issue of more time for families?

Findings: Children's food in different settings

Overall, nearly two thirds of children ate in at least one childcare setting at least once during the week. Types of childcare used by families in the qualitative study were (from most to least frequent): nurseries, afterschool clubs, breakfast clubs, informal care such as grandparents and friends, child-minders and nannies.

There has been a gap in our understanding of children's eating across different settings, but the study found that eating in other settings has a range of effects for children. It can:

- *Mirror* foods eaten at home
- *Supplement* or *extend* the range of foods eaten at home
- *Expand the child's tastes* about what they wanted to eat at home
- *Substitute for* or *supplant* foods eaten at home
- *Compensate* for diet/food practices at home
- *Diminish* overall diet and food eaten at home

Although some parents suggested they lacked information about children's eating in other settings, many assumed that the food on offer in formal childcare was nutritionally balanced.

A particular area of concern for some parents using informal childcare was that they felt unable to voice their wishes about what their children ate there.

Some parents identified a conflict when grandparents routinely provided childcare, since there was a tendency for them to 'treat' children with sweets, biscuits and ice cream and to readily acquiesce when children asked for these things.

Policy and Practice Issues: Children's food in other settings may play an important part in their overall diets highlighting the importance of regulating food in childcare settings as recommended in a recent review by the School Food Trust. But how might informal care, such as that provided by grandparents, be encouraged to avoid too many unhealthy snacks or treats?

Findings: Children’s food and control

Parents are largely responsible for food shopping and preparation and as a result take control over what younger children eat at home. But food is also an important way in which children exercise their own control, exerting pressure on parents and sometimes resisting their authority.

We found, as might be expected for this age range, that most children conformed to parental norms and expectations. Some did not conform however, but seemed rather to rebel or to exert a significant amount of control themselves. The following patterns of control by children and parents were identified:

- ‘Authoritative’ (n=20). In these families there was considerable parental control over children’s diet and children broadly accepted this with little resistance.
- ‘Permissive’ (n=19). In this category there is lower control by parents and (therefore) little resistance from children.
- ‘Authoritarian’ (n=3). The pattern here was of strict overt or covert parental control and children rebelled or resisted.
- ‘Egalitarian’ (n=5). In these families, children had a lot of freedom to express their preferences not only deciding what they ate, but influencing the families’ diet, for example through introducing new types of food or meals.

Although parents talked about what made a healthy diet, with the emphasis usually placed on the inclusion of fruit and vegetables, providing healthy food was not always their priority when it came to feeding their children. In practice, the food that parents provided, prescribed or restricted was guided by a range of objectives.

| Control Practices | Objective or task at hand |
|---|--|
| Some foods restricted and some encouraged | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a healthy, culturally appropriate diet• Foster appreciation of ‘good’ (morally and nutritionally) food• Facilitate the whole family eating the same meal• Avoid waste for financial or cultural reasons |
| Foods neither restricted nor encouraged. Children given freedom to select foods | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foster a healthy attitude towards food - avoid ‘hang ups’• Foster independence and self-control• Get the child to eat something rather than nothing• Avoid ‘aggro’ |

Policy and Practice Issues: Promoting healthy eating and healthy food may not be sufficient to address poor diets. Some parents may be unwilling or unable to control children’s food intake and providing a healthy meal/snack may not always be the ‘task at hand’.

Next steps

A follow-up study of our 48 families will be undertaken to understand better the particular transitions and experiences that children and parents encounter over time and how these shape changes in their food habits. Secondary analysis of two new waves of the NDNS cross-sectional data will also be carried out to consider changes over time and how family meal patterns relate to socio-demographic factors and age of child. Through its innovative methodology, linking a qualitative study to a national survey, the study also seeks to exploit further quantitative longitudinal data resources through mixed methods.



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The Thomas Coram Research Unit is a multidisciplinary research unit within the Institute of Education. Its principal function is to carry out policy-relevant research within a changing world. The focus of its research is children and young people both within and outside their families. This includes care, education, health and social settings.

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