



Childhood obesity prevention: Parents awareness of the sugar content of foods fed to children and its impact on their food preferences

K. Olorunnisola, A. Setarehnejad and R.M. Fairchild

Department of Healthcare and Food/Food Industry Centre, School of Health Sciences, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, UK

Childhood Obesity is a complex consequence of unrestricted energy consumption, food preferences and excessive consumption of added sugar⁽¹⁾. Shaped by parents' awareness and nutrition literacy, values, behaviours, socio-economic status, and beliefs, as well as the quality of school lunches and access to fruit and vegetables⁽²⁾. Sugar accounts for 12% of total energy consumption in UK children: over twice the maximum recommended⁽³⁾, and more than half of this comes from snacks and sugary drinks⁽⁴⁾. Carers (parents/guardians) have a significant impact on their children's food choices through the meals they supply in the house and their feeding procedures, which help or impede the development of good eating habits. The study aimed to explore the ability and motivations of parents of 6-month to 5-year old children to embrace cooking their children's food without adding sugar or opt for foods with reduced sugar.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 parents of children between 6 months and five years via creches in areas of high and low multiple deprivations of Southeast Wales. Data were collected on parents' socio-economic status, nutritional knowledge/literacy, meals/snacks fed to the children, and their experience of feeding them. An inductive thematic analysis was carried out on the cleaned data with the identified themes and sub-themes.

Majority, 70% of mothers prepare their children's meals from scratch, and around 28% of these use recipe books. More than 65% of mothers do not add sugar when preparing food, while 80% are aware of the negative consequences of giving sweet foods to children. Over 80% of mothers give cereals for breakfast, but around 20% add sugar and 25% add fruit to the cereal. About 50% of them give biscuits, yoghurt, squash, chocolate, cakes and Ice-cream. More than 80% of parents encouraged their children to try new, low-sugar foods. Sweet foods are used as treats by 65% of parents, while 70% neither bribe nor use sweet foods as a reward. Around 20% of parents reported that their children prefer fruits to sweet foods when given the choice. Also, 60%, 30%, and 10% of mothers stated that price, quality and the foods their children like determine the foods they buy respectively.

Results suggest that providing accessible low-sugar recipes and food options could improve mothers' experiences of preparing and feeding their children with low-sugar foods that could help them develop a preference for low-sugar foods.

References

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