

Parental Practices to Support Healthy Eating Among Children

Children ages 11 to 14 years old in the U.S. often consume less than the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables and excess amounts of sugary foods. In particular, kids may consume unhealthy food during independent eating occasions when parents or caregivers are not around. This may be contributing to the high obesity rate among adolescents, which is a serious concern because obesity can lead to health complications.

Researchers at land-grant universities and collaborating institutions are working to understand how parenting practices influence kids' eating behaviors when a parent or caregiver is not present. Project findings are used to develop educational tools and materials that help parents and caregivers promote healthy eating behaviors.

Bringing together researchers from nine states and the District of Columbia, this project is able to reach a wide range of geographic areas and demographic groups. Working together helps standardize protocols and coordinate efforts so research is efficient and reliable.



W4003: Parental practices supporting positive eating behaviors during independent eating occasions among early adolescent children is supported in part by USDA NIFA through Hatch Multistate Research Fund allocations to participating State Agricultural Experiment Stations at land-grant universities. The project is also supported by additional partners and funding sources. Participating institutions include: Baldwin Wallace University, Brigham Young University, University of the District of Columbia, University of Georgia, George Washington University, University of Hawaii, Kansas State University, University of Minnesota, Ohio State University, Oregon State University, University of Wyoming.

Learn more: <https://nimss.org/projects/18523>

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Project Highlights

Project members studied independent eating occasions among children ages 11 to 14 and examined how parenting practices and demographic factors influence the foods and beverages consumed. This information could help tailor interventions.

- Results from a survey of 622 adolescents and their parents or caregivers showed that modeling healthy screen time behaviors during family meals and making healthy foods available in the home were associated with increased intakes of fruits and vegetables when kids ate on their own. These and other findings were published in the [Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#), a high-impact journal that reaches registered dietitians and others who provide diet and health information to parents and children.
- Researchers found that gender, age, ethnicity, mode of school attendance, and weight influenced the types of foods and beverages kids consumed when they ate on their own. A manuscript was submitted to Ecology of Food and Nutrition.
- Interview data from caregivers and kids suggested how the COVID-19 pandemic affected kids' independent eating occasions and related caregiving practices. Findings are published in the [Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior](#).
- Researchers are examining the relationship between sleep, mental health (for example, anxiety and inhibitory control), and eating behaviors among young people.
- Researchers are planning to study how food security affects parenting practices and kids' choices during independent eating occasions.

Project members are examining artificial intelligence approaches and food and nutrition apps that can be used to promote positive parenting practices, such as making fruits and vegetables more available, that support healthy food choices when kids eat on their own. Going forward, researchers will design and pilot an intervention that incorporates these tools. Once fully tested, interventions will be shared with nutrition and health professionals so they can help children meet dietary recommendations and maintain healthy weight.

