

# FOCUS ON RESEARCH

## HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE DIET OF YOUNG CHILDREN LIVING IN AREAS OF HIGH DEPRIVATION?

### Researchers

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### Aim

To investigate the factors that influence the food choices made by mothers of young children who live in areas of high deprivation

### Project Outline/Methodology

Three hundred mothers of two year old children living in areas of high deprivation in Dundee city and Fife were interviewed in their own homes. The study investigated the role of family characteristics; health knowledge and beliefs; and patterns of food purchasing, cooking and serving, in determining poor diet among disadvantaged children. Children were allocated a composite dietary score based on the foods they ate regularly. This was used in the analysis to identify the factors which predict a poor quality diet. The study also investigated what predicted mothers' intentions and behaviour in: providing breakfast, cooking with raw ingredients, and eating a meal together as a family.

### Key Results

Most (85%) of the children were classified as having a poor quality diet, based on current guidelines. Mothers' general knowledge about healthy eating was high, and did not predict the quality of the children's diet. Low levels of knowledge of specific dietary recommendations, and lack of confidence in their knowledge, were associated with a poorer diet. Lower frequencies of cooking with raw ingredients, providing breakfast and the family eating together, were also associated with a poorer diet.

Mothers identified many barriers to providing a healthy diet including a busy lifestyle and reluctance to change current diet. Concern that the child does not eat enough increased the risk of a poor diet. Mothers reporting that they were unlikely to restrict sweets, or that they found it difficult to provide 2-3 portions of fruit, were associated with an increased risk of a poor diet. Believing that a healthy diet would help the child to eat more decreased the risk of having a poor diet.

### Conclusions

This study has successfully conducted detailed interviews with a representative sample of mothers from disadvantaged areas. Many of the children had a poor diet and specific areas of concern were highlighted. The study has identified factors which predict the quality of children's diet, from which strategies can be developed to improve mothers' ability to plan and prepare healthy meals.

### What does this study add to the field?

This study has shown that mothers' intentions and perceived control are the most powerful predictors of the diet of their young children. It has identified that general knowledge about a healthy diet was very high, but knowledge on specific dietary guidance was lower. It has also shown that lack of knowledge on the specific guidance, predicts poor quality diet.

### Implications for Practice or Policy

Efforts should be made to promote more positive intentions to the preparation and serving of food (breakfast every day, cooking from raw ingredients, eating together). The benefits of these behaviours to the mother (enjoyment) and the child (improved diet, weight control) should be emphasised. Mothers could be encouraged to plan specific meals at which the family eats together. The impact on a child's weight from the regular consumption of high fat/ high sugar snacks and take-away meals could also be stressed. Health visitors could have an important role in helping change dietary behaviours.

### Where to next?

The effectiveness of the potential strategies to improve diet should be tested in a randomised controlled trial. The main question is whether a brief intervention delivered by health visitors can enhance mothers' confidence and improve their ability to plan, cook and serve healthier meals.

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