Perceptions of Healthful Eating and Influences on the Food Choices of Appalachian Youth

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Overview of presentation

– Description of research context
– Discussion of research design and methods
– Results
– Discussion
Research Context

– Faith Moves Mountains
  • Decade-long CBPR project
  • Current project is faith-placed intergenerational intervention to promote energy balance

– Central Appalachia
  • High levels of poverty, health disparities
  • Physical isolation, but economic integration
  • Small, rural communities
  • Dense social and kinship networks
Research design and methods

– Focus groups part of formative research
  • 11 focus groups (4-6 participants per group) with youth ages 8-17
  • Groups divided by age – 8-10, 11-14, 15-17
  • Recruitment through churches and community centers
  • Led by local residents
  • Questions pre-tested in individual interviews with local youth
Data analysis

- Focus groups recorded, transcribed
- Three researchers hand-coded transcripts
  - Developed and refined codebook
  - 86% intercoder reliability between 3 coders
  - Identified and refined themes and subthemes
  - Member checks from staff and FG participants

- Sample description
  - 87% white, non-Hispanic
  - 55% girls, 45% boys
  - Most felt family had “more than they needed to live well” (42%) or “enough to get by” (23%); 18% “sometimes struggling to make ends meet; 18% no response
Themes identified

– Three main categories
  • Healthful eating and nutrition knowledge
  • Influences on dietary selection
  • Recommendations for healthy eating programming

– Some differences by age and gender in emphasis on themes
Healthful eating and nutrition knowledge

– Youth commonly equated healthy eating with fruits and vegetables
  “Eating right is like eating fruits and vegetables.” The food pyramid.” (11-14 girl)

– Portion control and limiting suboptimal food items recognized as important

– Importance of balancing diet and physical activity; sense that PA balances out poor dietary choices

 When asked if she ate too much unhealthy food, a girl [15-17 group] responded “yeah, but I walk with my mom a lot
Healthful eating and nutrition knowledge

– Sense that knowledge not enough to change behavior

• Youth in every age group expressed confidence in their own knowledge about healthy vs. unhealthy foods

• Suggested that youth prioritize other factors over health in making food choices

  “Broccoli’s a healthy food but most people don’t like broccoli. But it’s a healthy food.” (11-14 girl)
Influences on dietary selection

– Taste was predominate behavior motivator
  “I don’t eat them [healthy foods] because they taste nasty”
  (11-14 boy)
  “I just don’t like healthy food” (8-10 girl)

– Convenience recognized as important
  “If you’re going somewhere and you don’t have a lot of time, it’s so much easier to go through a drive-through than it is to stop off at home and make something or go to a sit-down place long enough to make a salad or something healthy like that.” (15-17 girl)

– Cost
  “I don’t know if I eat as much as I should, but fruits and vegetables are so expensive. If they weren’t so expensive I would eat them all the time.” (15-17 girl)
Influences on dietary selection

- Sensory triggers and advertising

  “Advertisements are everywhere. And they’re so good. I have dreams about a big Wendy’s burger sometimes.” (15-17 girl)

  “Like you see a commercial on TV of like this steak hitting the grill and it’s all sizzling everywhere…” (11-14 boy)

- Suggested advertising be used for healthy foods

  “If it had a catchy label or a name or something, or like a nice catch tune on the commercial for cauliflower or something.” (11-14 girl)
Youth recommendations for healthy eating programs

– Focus on role of social influences on eating
  “it’s kind of hard to go to a group where people don’t want to eat healthy and you’re the only one sitting there eating an apple or something.” (11-14 girl)

– Interest in gardening and cooking classes
  “And you can like hang out with your friends and cook. So you learn and hang out and have fun.” (11-14 girl)

– Lack of interest in nutrition education
  “We have our health classes at school and those are kind of hard to pay attention in. Cause you hear it from when you’re really, really little all the way up to when you’re the age that we are now.” (girl, 15-17)
Additional findings

– Gender differences
  • Boys more likely to discuss healthful eating in terms of specific dietary knowledge or beliefs; reference food pyramid; talk about how food and nutrients function in the body
  • Girls more likely to discuss cost and convenience issues, as well as taste preferences and other sensory cues

– Age differences
  • Younger children focused more on nutrition facts and knowledge
  • Middle age group (11-14) commonly referred to taste
  • Oldest youth more likely to emphasize social aspects of eating in design of healthy eating programs
Discussion

– Although nutrition knowledge may be oversimplified, the vitally important message of “eat more fruits and vegetables” is well understood.

– Perspective fits well with increasing scientific consensus that nutrition education alone is not enough – need to address social and physical environmental factors shaping eating choices.

– Role of advertising is key, shaping taste preferences and behavior.
Discussion

– Youth recognize role of environmental factors in shaping their behavior
  • Live in a rural food desert
  • Issues of cost and access commonly raised

– Regional differences not that great
  • Although Appalachia is a distinct geographic and cultural region, with history of gardens and subsistence agriculture, few youth mentioned home gardens and processing of foods
  • Appalachia not the socially isolated region it once was, with youth exposed to advertising, fast food, other previously “urban” influences
Discussion

– Age and gender

• Younger children’s focus on “nutrition facts” may reflect widespread nutrition education in elementary schools

• Focus of older children, especially girls, on cost and access, may reflect attention to adult’s (particularly mothers’) concerns
Limitations

– Study limited to one small part of Appalachia

– Possible selection bias – through churches, mostly from 2 parent families

– Don’t know if interactions between boys and girls led to gendered patterning of responses
Implications for research and practice

- More research needed on nutrition knowledge, self-perception of knowledge, and associated behavior

- Resistance to further nutrition education suggests greater focus on other approaches warranted

- Important to tailor interventions by both age and gender
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