

Study: Stressed parents less likely to prepare homemade dinners

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When parents experienced even brief bouts of stress early in the day, they were less likely to serve a homemade dinner at night, according to a new study.

Links between stress and meals were more common in some racial groups, authors wrote in the study “Momentary Parental Stress and Food-Related Parenting Practices” (Berge JM, et al. *Pediatrics*. Nov. 22, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-2295>).

The food parents serve as well as pressure and restrictions they place on eating can play a role in a child’s weight. There have been some indications that parental stress and their food-related behaviors are linked, but studies have been limited.

Researchers set out to learn more about these relationships using data from the National Institutes of Health-sponsored Family Matters study on 150 low-income children ages 5-7 from six racial/ethnic groups in Minnesota.

The team visited participants’ homes and used a smartphone-based application known as ecological momentary assessment (EMA) to monitor emotions and behaviors in real time. Through the EMA, parents provided feedback throughout the day about their mood, physical activity and eating practices. They also answered questions following family meals.

Results showed parents were less likely to prepare homemade dinners if they were stressed or felt depressed earlier in the day. These links were most significant for African-American and Latino parents.

In addition, the study found one-unit increases in parental stress and depressed mood were associated with greater odds (45% and 42%, respectively) of pressuring children to eat later in the day. The links between these feelings and eating pressure placed on children were strongest for Native American and Somali parents. There were no associations between these feelings and food restrictions.

Authors said their findings can help identify families at higher risk of not serving nutritious dinners and tailor interventions. They suggested educating families about the impact of stress.

“Many parents may be unaware that their stress levels or depressed mood could influence what they serve their child for dinner or their own parent feeding practices,” authors wrote.

Resources

- [AAP clinical report "Preventing Obesity and Eating Disorders in Adolescents"](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on nutrition for toddlers](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on nutrition for grade school children](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on nutrition for teens](#)
- [AAP News stories on obesity](#)

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