

Nutrition advice best served with family in mind

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Researchers at the University of Sheffield and Royal Holloway, University of London will argue today that the nation's diet is unlikely to improve significantly if healthy eating policies fail to take into account the diverse nature of contemporary family life.

Recent government initiatives have attempted to change people's dietary behaviour and the amount of exercise they take. But, despite compelling evidence of the need for healthier eating, families remain ambivalent about altering their eating habits.

The researchers argue that if government initiatives, such as improving the quality of school meals or increasing the nation's consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, are to succeed they need to acknowledge that families have differing domestic routines, relationships and resources and this affects how and what they eat.

Much of the current policy literature provides factual information on healthy eating and is aimed at individuals rather than families. However, the researchers discovered that decisions about what to eat aren't simply a matter of individual choice but are instead rooted in people's diverse family circumstances, embedded in the routines and rhythms of their everyday lives, subject to their available resources and shaped by their social, ethnic and religious ties.

Most people are aware that they need to eat 'five-a-day' but many don't achieve these targets because they are forced to act within their

circumstances. Poorer families may be acting rationally when serving 'junk' food to their children knowing that 'healthier' meals will simply go to waste. To truly improve the nation's diet a better understanding of social and cultural conventions is required in order to inform more effective health advice and social policy around families and food.

Professor Jackson of the University of Sheffield said: "If government advice on healthy eating is to have a serious impact, it needs to be framed within a better understanding of the diversity of our everyday family lives.

"Policies and interventions have often looked to redress a perceived deficit in family relationships and practices (e.g. parenting skills). Although government policy makes some acknowledgement of the impact of poverty and other social factors, this often takes second place to the 'blame' culture.

"People may have been shocked to see mothers sneaking 'junk' food into schools after Jamie Oliver's high-profile intervention but instead of turning the spotlight on them, the government needs to look at the root causes of why parents behave in this way."

The research provides convincing evidence that food is a powerful lens through which to view recent changes in family life (and vice versa). As families are changing - with fewer and later marriages, more single-person households, increased numbers of divorced and separated couples - so too are food cultures. This has included the rise of 'convenience' foods, new cooking technologies and an increased emphasis on snacking rather than formal meals.

Funded by The Leverhulme Trust, the research provides new insights into contemporary family life and challenges many received ideas about families and food.

Other research findings include:

-- While the emphasis on women's body size and shape is often seen as a current preoccupation, the research shows that women's magazines have been full of dietary advice since the 1940s, even though the nature of that advice has changed dramatically over time

-- The introduction of 'Healthy Start' (food support benefit for pregnant women) has meant that a higher proportion of pregnant and postnatal women met the recommended intakes for key nutrients, like calcium, folate, iron and vitamin C but at a cost of a considerably increased calorie intake. The results also suggested that 'Healthy Start' women ate significantly more portions of fruit and vegetables per day.

-- While many people have seen the decline of the 'family meal' as a sign of the breakdown of contemporary family life, the research suggests that even in the Edwardian period (in the early 1900s), family meals were a middle-class aspiration rarely achieved in practice

Dr Graham Smith of Royal Holloway, University of London added:
"One of the most important changes can be found in the ways that different generations see food and family. So, for example, a study of a community in Bradford found that family and food meant different things to different generations. While the oldest generation saw food as a reminder of a distant homeland and the family as a refuge in a new country, the youngest celebrate their food and families as contributing to multiculturalism."

Source: University of Sheffield

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