

Parents' influence on children's eating habits is limited

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As primary caregivers, parents are often believed to have a strong influence on children's eating behaviors. However, previous findings on parent-child resemblance in dietary intakes are mixed. Researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health reviewed and assessed the degree of association and similarity between children's and their parents' dietary intake based on worldwide studies published since 1980. The meta-analysis is featured in the December issue of the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

"Contrary to popular belief, many studies from different countries, including the United States, have found a weak association between parent-child dietary intake," said Youfa Wang, MD, PhD, MS, lead author of the study and an associate professor with the Bloomberg School's Department of International Health. "This is likely because young people's eating patterns are influenced by many complex factors, and the family environment plays only a partial role. More attention should be given to the influence of the other players on children's eating patterns such as that of schools, the local food environment and peer influence, government guidelines and policies that regulate school meals, and the broader [food environment](#) that is influenced by food production, distribution and advertising." He added, "Parents need to be better empowered to be good role models and help their children eat a healthy diet."

Wang, along with colleagues from the National Institute on Aging and the University of Zaragoza in Spain, systematically reviewed and

analyzed relevant studies published in different countries between 1980 and 2009. They compared the correlations between parent-child pairs' dietary intakes, by type of parent-child pairs (for example, mother-daughter vs. father-son), world regions and dietary assessment methods, and over time. They found differences in parent-child dietary intake resemblance, across nutrients and dietary assessment approaches. In addition, the meta-analysis provided evidence that correlations have become weaker over time. Compared to non-European countries, in particular, parent-child correlations in intakes of energy and total fat seem to be weaker in the U.S.

"Findings of this study will help enhance our understanding of the factors that may affect children's [dietary intake](#) patterns and provide useful insights for developing effective intervention programs to promote healthy eating in young people," said May A. Beydoun, PhD, a co-author of the review, staff scientist at the National Institute on Aging, and a former postdoctoral fellow at the Bloomberg School. "More research is needed to study the parent-child resemblance in the diet, the differences in the association between population groups, and the determinants."

More information: "Do children and their parents eat a similar diet? Resemblance in child and parental dietary intake: systematic review and meta-analysis" was written by Y Wang, M A Beydoun, J Li, Y Liu, and L A Moreno.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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