

Children eschew the fat if dads aren't lenient

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New research indicates that father's are more likely than mother's to have an impact on childhood obesity. A study by Texas AgriLife Research showed that lenient fathers allow their children more trips to fast-food restaurants which have been linked to obesity in children. Credit: Texas AgriLife Research photo by Kathleen Phillips

This Father's Day, dad's choice of where to eat could literally tip the scales on his children's health.

A father's use of restaurants and his perceptions of [family meals](#) carry more weight, so to speak, than mothers', according to a Texas AgriLife Research study, published recently in The [Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior](#).

"Dads who think that dinner time is a special family time certainly do not see a fast-food restaurant as an appropriate place for that special

family time, so this means that his kids are spending less time in those places. Dads who have no trouble eating food in a fast-food restaurant are going to be more likely to have kids who do so," said Dr. Alex McIntosh, AgriLife Research sociologist.

Childhood obesity study points to father's role

New research indicates that father's are more likely than mother's to have an impact on childhood obesity. A study by Texas AgriLife Research showed that lenient [fathers](#) allow their children more trips to fast-food restaurants which have been linked to obesity in children. (Texas AgriLife Research photo by Kathleen Phillips)

The study began as a 15-month look at parents' use of time and how that impacted meal choices. It aimed at the difference between fast-food and full-service restaurants because numerous studies have shown a correlation between fast-food consumption and weight gain.

Of particular interest for the research, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was parental choice of restaurants as a connection to [childhood obesity](#), McIntosh said.

Almost as an afterthought, the researchers decided to ask children in these families also to record what they ate and whether it was at home or out. If a meal was eaten out, the name of the restaurant was not required.

"It never occurred to me that we would have data on them eating out and where they were eating out. But the kids — if they said they ate out, they always wrote down where they ate by the name of the restaurant," McIntosh said. "So it was just a matter of tracking down information about the restaurant to find out if they were full-service or more like a fast-food place."

That's where the real meat of the study was revealed, according to McIntosh.

"We had been analyzing the data for a long time when it occurred to us that because the kids had done such a great job in their time diaries that we would actually be able to distinguish between a meal at a fast-food restaurant versus a meal at a full-service [restaurant](#)," McIntosh noted. "And somewhat to our surprise, it was father's time spent at fast-food restaurants — not mother's time spent there — that was associated with kids' time spent in a fast-food place."

"For a long time fathers have been told that they need to spend more time with their children. But often when this message is being transmitted, the message is 'you should be having fun with your children,'" the research said.

McIntosh said the message to fathers should be that they have some responsibility just like mothers to raise healthy, well-adjusted children. Also, fathers need to know more about nutritional content of fast food.

The only instances of mothers being more lax on the use of fast-food restaurants are those who are neglectful and those who are highly committed to their work, McIntosh said.

"So mothers are not unimportant when it comes to eating out choices," he said, "but in terms of statistical findings, the father findings are stronger.

"Traditionally academics have blamed mothers for everything that goes wrong with children, especially when it comes to food," he added. "But I think it's pretty clear that fathers have a substantial influence over what [children](#) are eating. And if that's the case, then they need to be the target of education just like mothers."

Such education might help a father change some of his own selections when at a [fast-food restaurant](#) with his family or at least have an effect on what restaurants they choose to go to, he noted.

"When I mention these findings in class, my students say they can fully understand, because when they're with dad, he gives them choices," said McIntosh, who also is a professor in the recreation, parks and tourism sciences department at Texas A&M University. "They are the ones who get to choose where to eat or, if they are in a grocery store, what to buy as a snack.

"So basically all you really need is a dad who says, 'no, I think we ought to eat someplace else and this is why,'" he said. "It's about a father taking more of a responsible role when he's parenting."

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