

Researcher investigates parental influences on child nutrition

April 11 2012, By Jim Ducibella

A child brings home a new recipe from school, or wants to talk to his parents about a nutrition lesson he or she learned in class that day.

Is the recipe tested? Does a conversation take place?

If yes, why? If not, why not?

Dr. Scott Ickes wants to know.

Ickes, assistant professor in William & Mary's Kinesiology and Health Sciences department, has been researching those issues this year in conjunction with the Williamsburg [Community Health](#) Foundation and the Williamsburg/James City County Public Schools.

Ickes considers it an ideal situation for his multi-faceted research into [nutrition](#) epidemiology. The Williamsburg Community Health Foundation has been identified by the Center for Disease Control as a role model program, and has been lauded for its success in improving children's nutrition and physical activity.

“The nutrition community is starting to connect [child nutrition](#) with learning and cognitive development in the long-term picture,” he said recently. “It's not just about helping a child grow, not be undernourished or not be obese, but helping them have access to a healthy diet that supports the whole body and mind to grow and develop optimally.”

“I’ve been shining light on family, traditionally mothers -- but more recently fathers -- to look at how parenting influences whether programs are effective.”

He began work last semester by interviewing parents where positive changes had been made. This semester, he and his team have been seeking to interview parents who would not be open to something new. Some of the interviews were conducted in group sessions; others were to be private to allow for more in-depth, sensitive discussion.

“What is it about families that either enables or impairs nutritional messages that kids get in school?” Ickes asked.

Not surprisingly, parents who place a priority on health and nutrition for their families, who make time for it, are much more likely to be open to seeing their children as “agents of change.” Those have been easier to identify than parents resistant to new influences.

But Ickes’ research reaches into other areas as well. Which parent is more influential? How do parents view the role of their children’s school in the development of a sound nutritional plan?

Forever, it seems, and throughout the world, women have been the driving force for their family’s nutrition. They most often are the ones procuring it. Almost always, they’re the ones preparing it.

But, Ickes says, placing all of the emphasis on women limits the research. Women often live in partnerships, and those partnerships are vital to understanding how economics affect the healthy habits of families.

“My personal hypothesis is that men have an important role to play in shaping healthy behaviors in families, even if they aren’t preparing the

food,” he said. “They have important role-modeling possibilities when it comes to physical activity, self-esteem for both male and female children and they have a role in supporting their spouses in ways that can really benefit the nutrition, all the way from pregnancy, to breast-feeding, to feeding at young ages, right up through adulthood.”

As for how parents view the role of schools and child nutrition, Ickes has been a bit surprised.

“Many parents are very encouraged and grateful for the opportunity their children have to learn about nutrition and to be physically active,” he said. “On the other hand, an appreciable number of people express concerns; they want to allow their children to be children, and not to have nutrition information delivered at such a young age that children become overly focused on the specifics of what is healthy and what is not. They don’t want them becoming too serious, to the point where a child’s body image might be influenced.”

While he argues that it should never be too early to be aware of good nutrition, Ickes concedes that [parents](#) who want less school involvement have a point.

“We need to frame our nutritional approach to determine what is healthful as we struggle with underweight, overweight and eating disorders,” he said. “We need to ask ourselves as a society: how do school programs deliver a message about being healthy that doesn’t push kids too far one way or the other?”

Ickes has set a May 31 deadline for filing a report with the Williamsburg Community Health Foundation. Perhaps by then he will know the answer to his last question.

Provided by The College of William & Mary

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