

Parents' work-life stress hinders healthy eating

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In a tight economy, with fewer jobs, many people end up working harder and sacrificing more to stay employed. A new study finds that one of those sacrifices is sometimes their own and their family's nutrition.

While prior studies have implicated [working mothers](#) in providing less healthy family [food environments](#), this is one of the first studies of family nutrition to look at fathers — in particular a population of urban fathers, who face higher rates of unemployment and under-employment. According to lead author Katherine Bauer, an assistant professor of public health and researcher at Temple's Center for Obesity Research and Education, the study is also one of the first to look at work/family conflict for both [parents](#) and to focus on families of adolescents.

Of the 3,709 parents of adolescents surveyed by the researchers — many of whom were from a racial or ethnic minority group and lower income — only 64 percent of fathers and 46 percent of mothers were employed full-time.

Mothers employed full-time "reported fewer family meals, more frequent fast food for family meals, less frequent encouragement of their adolescents' healthful eating, lower fruit and vegetable intake and less time spent on food preparation, compared to part-time and not-employed mothers," said Bauer. Meanwhile, the only difference among fathers by employment status was that full-time employed fathers reported significantly fewer hours of food preparation than part-time or not working fathers. However, regardless of employment status, mothers

were spending more hours on food preparation than fathers.

When looking at the role of work-life stress, for both moms and dads greater stress levels appeared to interfere with healthful eating opportunities. For example, parents experiencing high levels of work-life stress reported having one and a half fewer family meals per week and eating half a serving less of fruits and vegetables per day, as compared to parents with low levels of work-life stress.

Bauer noted that over time these differences can add up to have a big impact on parents' and children's health. She's careful to note, however, that the burden of this problem not fall solely on mothers, and instead be approached holistically by the whole family, the community and society.

"Our work underlined the need to take into account the competing pressures that so many families — especially those that are lower income — are experiencing," said Bauer. "There's a great need to help parents find realistic and sustainable ways to feed their families more healthfully while taking into consideration all of the stresses on parents these days."

She suggests that spouses, partners and teenagers chip in to help with grocery shopping and preparing and serving healthy [family meals](#).

"We need to teach kids how to cook," said Bauer. "We know if kids have cooking skills and good eating habits, not only will they be healthier, but as adults they'll put those skills to use to feed their own children more healthfully."

"Parental employment and work-family stress: Associations with family food environments" was recently published online in *Social Science and Medicine*. The study was funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Provided by Temple University

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