How parents juggle work hours may influence kids' weight, research shows

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This is an image of a weight scale. Credit: CDC/Debora Cartagena

The way parents balance their work schedules may affect their adolescent children's eating habits, according to Penn State researchers. Those schedules may be even more important than the number of hours the parents spend at work, said Molly Martin, associate professor of sociology and demography.

Adolescents with moms and dads who spend more time at home, especially at breakfast and dinner time, generally have healthier eating behaviors and in some cases better exercise habits than most adolescents, according to the researchers.

For example, parents who spend time with their adolescent kids after school may increase the likelihood that those children will eat regular dinners, according to the researchers. Adolescents having mothers who stay home before school are more likely to eat breakfast.

Regular meals at home can help children and adolescents avoid weight problems, Martin said.

"Eating at home can help control portion sizes, for example, and if they don't eat breakfast at home, they might be more likely to eat junk food later in the day," she said.

Eating a regular breakfast is an important habit for parents to instill in their children, Martin said, adding that it can have long-term health benefits.

"Most parents might not consider eating breakfast as a health-related behavior, but it is one of the most important meals that helps kids maintain metabolism throughout the day," Martin said. She added that children, particularly daughters, who watch their parents skip breakfasts may be more likely to do the same.

A father's availability at home may also play an important role in influencing healthy weight behaviors, according to the researchers, who will report their findings today (Aug. 19) at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

"Fathers' availability significantly predicted whether or not children

played sports or exercised," said Martin, who worked with Adam Lippert, a former doctoral student in sociology and demography at Penn State and now a postdoctoral scholar in population and development studies at Harvard University; Kelly Davis, research assistant professor of human development and family studies; and Megan Lemmon, graduate student in sociology and demography, both at Penn State.

When fathers were at home, their children were more likely to eat fruit, Martin added.

Parents are actually spending more time with their children now than a few decades ago. They have shifted priorities from spending time on household chores to using that time to be with their children. Some of these scheduling adaptations may have improved their children's eating behaviors.

"It's probably not an entirely conscious decision parents make to spend time with their children to improve their children's eating habits," Martin said. "Parents want to spend time with their children and are feeling more of a societal push to do so, so they often choose times around their work schedules and their children's school hours."

Economic and social changes, such as flexible work schedules, telecommuting and greater social expectations that parents will spend more time with their kids, have increased parental availability to children.

The researchers studied data of 16,991 adolescents from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The data set is one of the few that allowed the researchers to examine parental availability and adolescents' eating habits.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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