

## DETERMINANTS OF CHILDREN'S EATING PRACTICES

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There is an increasing recognition of the importance of developing good eating habits in childhood as a preventative measure against nutrition-related diseases in adulthood (Storey 1979). Identification of the factors that influence children's food habits is necessary for the planning of effective nutrition education programs. In 1979 a study was undertaken to identify the determinants of the dietary practices of children in Perth.

The sample studied comprised 590 children (aged 9 to 11 years) from schools of low to high socioeconomic status. Children and their parents completed questionnaires to assess children's dietary practices and their determinants. The factors considered included child factors (sex, nutrition knowledge and food preferences), family factors (family food habits, parental education, occupation and nutrition knowledge), and community factors (school and television). Scores were developed for nutrition knowledge, good nutrition practices and television viewing. Satisfactory questionnaires were obtained from 97 per cent (n = 570) of the children and from 90 per cent (n = 515) of the parents.

The results showed that the major influence on the child's diet is his/her mother. Her nutrition knowledge score was significantly related to the child's nutrition practices and knowledge and was positively influenced by her education, occupation and socioeconomic grouping.

Child factors have a smaller but important influence on food choice since up to 20 per cent of children prepare their own breakfast and 26 per cent buy lunch or snacks from the school canteen each day. The child's good nutrition practices were positively influenced by his/her nutrition knowledge. Television also influences eating habits. The television viewing score was related to erroneous beliefs about specific foods and increased consumption of undesirable foods. Increased knowledge decreased these effects. Fifty per cent of children requested foods seen advertised on television and the majority of parents complied at least occasionally. Formal nutrition education at school seemed to have little influence on eating habits. However, the type of food available at the school canteen influenced the nutrition practice score. Frequency of use of the canteen was inversely related to the nutrition knowledge of the mother.

These results highlight the need to improve the nutrition knowledge of mothers and children. Particular emphasis should be placed on wise food choice from school canteens and desensitisation to television advertising.

STOREY, E. (1979). Food Nutr. Notes Rev. 37 : 168.