

Child nutrition and parental time allocation

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Preschool children are in a period of nutritional risk: their diet is in a transitional stage; they are rapidly growing; have high nutrient needs; their gastric capacity is small. Studies have shown the malnutrition-mortality relationship holds across diverse populations and that even mild to moderate child malnutrition has significant effects. Australian dietary surveys have somewhat neglected two-to-four year-olds (1) and there have been few studies on nutritional status and Soc-economic variables among preschoolers in developed countries. Within households the child's nutritional care (NC) is a question of parental inputs including the provision and feeding of nutrients, child care and time. Although some attention has been devoted to distribution of women's time between household and paid work, no studies have explored the interactive processes between NC of preschoolers and parental time allocation (PTA) to daily activities.

Our major research questions were: for parents, what constitutes the NC of young children; how do parents allocate their time to various activities during a day, including care and feeding of the child; and how does PTA relate to child NC? We used the qualitative research methodology, viz. the grounded theory approach (2), to explore, describe and extract meanings on the interactive processes between PTA and child NC. Parents in Filipino migrant households in Melbourne were interviewed on at least two occasions, and their two-to-four year old children assessed for nutritional status by height and weight. Preliminary analysis of the themes and concepts emerging from our data regarding parents perception of NC has identified patterns as well as interesting slants to nutritional givens, eg most define NC in terms of "feeding the child" with implied prerequisites for "timing" and food as a resource. Deviations from patterns include definitions of NC as "weighing", "injections"; purpose, "will affect their brain"; problems encountered, "I lack time to prepare the kinds of meals that I think are good for them", etc. which will have important implications for nutrition education programmes particularly directed towards child nutrition.

Although 90% of the children were ≥ 50 th percentile (P50) for ht/age and wt/age on the Philippine reference (FNRI/PPS) only 33% and 42% resp were $\geq P50$ on the NCHS reference commonly used in Australia. Of the boys examined 60% were $\leq P50$ for wt/ht on the NCHS but all were $\geq P50$ on the FNRI. Our findings suggest that young first generation Filipino Australian children will tend to be located in the region of the NCHS associated with poorer nutritional status. In a multi-racial country such as Australia the adoption of single anthropometric standards for nutritional assessment purposes needs to be reconsidered.

1. Lester IH. Australia's food and nutrition. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 1994.
2. Strauss A and Corbin J. Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques. California. Sage Publications. 1990