

Research Briefing N° 102

Food, Families and Work: Taking a Long View

This study investigates how the children of employed parents eat at home and other places and follows changes over time. It uses multiple research methods comprising secondary analysis of large-scale datasets and qualitative methods with parents and children including interviews, drawing and photographs.

Key words: food practices; children’s food; families; family meals; work-family; working families; maternal employment



Favourite foods by Bhav aged 5

Key findings

Since the combined working hours of British mothers and fathers are among the highest in Europe, the UK is a particularly important case for the study of families, food and work. Focussing on families in England, the study asks: How do the demands of work shape and influence family food practices? How do children negotiate food and eating? What foods do the children of working parents eat in different contexts – home, childcare and school – and how do parents manage children’s diets across settings? What is the gender division of food work (all the effort involved in feeding the family – planning, procuring and preparing food as well as coordinating and cleaning up) in dual earner families and how do parents account for it? When do working families eat together? How do changes in the eating habits of children and families relate to transitions, interventions and the changing contexts of children’s and families’ lives, such as changes in parental employment, family income, rising food prices and life events?

Findings, due in Spring 2014, will be of interest to policy makers, parents and organisations interested in children’s and families’ food and eating practices as well as those with an interest in how employed parents negotiate work and home. Through its innovative methodology, linking mixed methods research to a national survey, the study also seeks to contribute to furthering the exploitation of quantitative longitudinal (carried out over an extended period of time) data resources.

What we did

This longitudinal study aims to map and understand children’s and families’ food practices over time. It uses multiple methods including secondary analysis of large scale datasets and multiple qualitative methods including interviews with parents and children, drawing and photographs.

The study was funded as a collaborative grant between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Food Standards Agency (FSA) in 2009 (RES-190–25-0010). On 1 October 2010, responsibility

for nutrition policy transferred from FSA to the Department of Health (DH). As a result, the research project also transferred to DH. The follow on study is funded by ESRC and DH (ES/J012556/1).

How we did it

The qualitative fieldwork was carried out in two Waves between 2010-2011 and 2012-2013, with a two year gap between interviews. The sample was comprised of working parents and children (aged 2-14) drawn from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) and was spread throughout England. Secondary analysis of the NDNS and other data was carried out at both Waves.

The first Wave aimed to map and understand the effects of maternal/dual parental employment in the UK upon the quality of children's diets. First, it did so through the analysis of data from the NDNS and other large datasets (The Health Survey for England and the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children). Second, via a sample of 47 working parents and their children (aged 2-10 years) drawn from the NDNS, it used qualitative methods to understand how parental employment shaped eating habits and the diets of young children, and the role different settings (outside the home) and children themselves played.

In the second Wave, in-depth interviews with 36 of the same families have been carried out to examine the particular transitions and experiences that children and parents encounter and how these shape diets and food practices over time. Further secondary analysis of NDNS and other datasets (Understanding Society and the Millennium Cohort Study) has also been undertaken to examine the evidence about families eating together and how food work is shared in working families.

Further information

Publications from the study to date include:

[O'Connell, R. and Brannen, J. \(2013\). 'Children's food, power and control: Negotiations in families with younger children in England', *Childhood*. DOI: 10.1177/0907568213476900](#)

[Knight, A. et al. \(2013\). The temporality of food practices: Intergenerational relations, childhood memories and the family food practices of working families with young children, *Families, Relationships and Societies*](#)

[Brannen, J., O'Connell, R. and Mooney, A. \(2013\). 'Families, meals and synchronicity: eating together in British dual earner families with younger children', *Community, Work and Family*](#)

[O'Connell, R. \(2012\). The use of visual methods with children in a mixed methods study of family food practices. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2011.647517](#)

[Simon, A. et al. \(2012\). Designing a nutritional scoring system for assessing diet quality for children aged 10 years and under in the UK. *Methodological Innovations Online* 7\(2\), 27-40. DOI: 10.4256/mio.2012.009 \(pdf 0.3mb\)](#)

Further information about the study, including news about events and publications, can be found on the study website:

www.foodfamiliesandwork.co.uk/home

Information is also available on the ESRC website: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-190-25-0010/read> and <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/ES.J012556.1/read>

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