Voices of Moms

An Ethnographic Approach to Understanding Feeding Choices in Families with Young Children

A Concept Hatchery and 1000 Days Collaboration
Background

Goals
In 2016, Concept Hatchery and 1000 Days set off on a journey to talk to moms in the US about how they their children. Our goal was to understand challenges around nutrition in families with children under two, and uncover the motivations and drivers of behaviors for the women making family food choices.

Locations
This research focused on four communities in California as well as urban and rural locations in Kentucky and Mississippi. We chose these locations to look for different contexts that would help provide broader insight into the types of experiences moms might have. By looking broadly, we seek to discover the common themes in the experience of moms everywhere, particularly low income moms, when they are providing food for their children.
Participant income

To better observe the impact of poverty, we recruited participants from a range of lower incomes*. Specifically, we looked for three categories: annual household incomes that fell below 185% of the federal poverty level, household incomes at or just over the living wage for their communities, and households living between the gap of WIC qualification and the local living wage.

*Participant household income was self reported. For some families, particularly in low-income families, annual income was not a reliable and consistent number. Money for some low income families come in bursts of odd jobs or seasonal work, rather than in an annual salary. “Household” is also a vague concept when multiple people – not necessarily immediate family - share a roof, split expenses, and frequently move.
Understanding mom’s mindset

regardless of income, moms juggle many challenges when making food decisions for her family
Babies start with similar foods to other babies, but diets quickly diverge as solids are introduced.

When babies are born, they are fed formula or breast milk.

Baby food is added, and then transitioned to adult foods.

Eventually the child is eating whatever the family eats, whether a healthy or unhealthy diet.

This toddler started with breast milk as an infant, and has now joined his family for cut up pieces of grilled chicken and string beans.

This baby started with breast milk, but is now beginning to get his first taste of hot dogs and baloney sandwiches with his siblings.
Eating is a family affair – mom is only making one meal for the family. A child can eat only as well as her family eats.

Wanda and her husband try to buy fresh quality ingredients and cook healthy meals. Their boys eat the same nutritious foods as their family, with few snacks.

With six children, Lisa is not filling any special request for food. Her kids can eat her soul food, or make their own sandwich.

Lorena’s family eats microwave and fast foods. Her daughter will eat a few bites, but also demands cakes, ice cream, and other snacks readily available at home.
Snacks can become dominant

When asked to describe what they eat, people often underestimate the consumption of snacks. Snacks are often unplanned, so they receive little thought. However, moms are keenly attuned to their children’s hunger, so when meals are not eaten, children are given less nutritious foods as meal substitutes. Children have a surprising amount of decision-making power over their food, and can push for snacks simply by refusing to eat meals. This shown in the journal example below from Aloise, a grandmother primary care provide for a two-year-old in Kentucky.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>½ banana</td>
<td>10:45am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grapes</td>
<td>1:00pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teddy grahams &amp; milk</td>
<td>2:15pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orange popsicle</td>
<td>2:45pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noodles, cheese</td>
<td>3:40pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackberries, Cheez Its, apple juice</td>
<td>5:30pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vanilla pudding cup</td>
<td>7:00pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When a child is underweight, moms prioritize high-calorie foods over nutrition

Mom faces tremendous pressure from pediatricians and society to have large babies. A mom with a small baby in the 30th percentile is much more worried than one with a large baby in the 70th percentile.

“I was trying to keep his weight up. He’s a little better. The Pediasure has really been picking up his weight. I can always count on him drinking that if he doesn’t eat his food.” – Chloe, Oakland CA

“My first pediatrician was terrible. She was always on our case about his weight. He was sitting comfortably in the 50th percentile. He never dropped below it. She misread his weight and accused us of malnourishing and neglect. I was a first time mom. I had post partum depression. I cried and was so upset.” - Kathy, Somerset KY

“I was like, you know what – at this point it’s about getting enough calories in his body to keep it running. I realize we need to get him healthy foods, but at the same time a brownie is not going to kill him. If he will eat it, give it to him.” – Mimi, Fresno CA
The added challenge of sleep deprivation

In addition to experiencing a massive increase of household tasks and responsibilities upon the arrival of a new baby, moms also experience sleep deprivation in a way few other people do. The endless cycle of feeding, burping, and changing a newborn, pumping milk, cleaning bottles, getting a few hours sleep, and starting all over again takes it toll on a mom’s ability to perform other tasks. Single working moms who breast feed have a particularly difficult time, since they need to pump throughout work, then feed throughout the night, while holding down a regular job.

The moms we spoke with told us about how tired they were. The chronic lack of sleep causes forgetfulness, anxiety, and errors in judgment. One mom told us she could remember her child’s first three months only through the photographs, since she had been so sleep deprived she could not form short-term memories.

“He drinks milk all throughout the night. He drinks every three hours. Through the day and night. I pump at work and drop it off with the sitter. I haven’t slept more than 3 hours ever. I’m very sleep deprived.” – Charlotte, Los Angeles CA
The impact of poverty

Low income families face additional challenges impacting nutrition
Transportation barriers

Even when cheaper or free food is available, low income families might not be able to get to the food. A three-mile journey might as well be thirty miles if there is no car and there are young children to take along.

Public transportation can be expensive. Low income moms sometimes rely on the charity of friends, family, and even strangers to offer rides. They are not in control of when these rides might be available, which makes planning difficult.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are harder to transport, store, and manage, and therefore require more frequent and smaller shopping trips. Low income families often compromise freshness for durability and long-term storage in order to bridge between unpredictable shopping trips.

“I go to the food banks. I have a double stroller, so I make her walk and put the food in her seat. It takes hours. On top of that I have three crying children that just want to go home. It’s not necessarily worth it. It costs $5 to get on the bus. Sometimes it’s easier to just spend $5 on a pack of meat at the store here.”

– Chloe, Oakland CA
Lack of safe storage or cooking space

We met families that do not have access to safe food storage or cooking spaces. Jennifer’s family in Malaga was behind on rent, and when their refrigerator broke it wasn’t fixed by the landlord. Chloe in Oakland did have a small, possibly unreliable refrigerator in the small hotel room where her family of five lived. She cooks in the room, on counters and ledges, using appliances plugged into extension cords.

These are common situations for struggling families in poverty. Safe storage of food and safe food preparation facilities are luxuries that comes from more stable incomes. Parents have no choice when what little money they have goes to keeping a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. Children become vulnerable not just to bad nutrition, but to food poisoning, burns, and home fire hazards.

“I’ll plug the cord in. We’ll just open the window. It gets kind of smoky. If he’s running I can’t cook, because he’ll pull the extension cord.” – Chloe, Oakland CA
Cyclical food patterns

Poverty creates weekly or monthly cycles of food availability coinciding with paychecks and WIC benefits. Low-income moms may have full pantries and refrigerators if our visit coincided with a recent payday, or show us almost bare kitchens if we arrived towards the end of the month. In these leaner times, families rely on cheaper foods like pasta, beans, or tortillas until the next check arrives. Fresh fruits and vegetables in particular are difficult to store, and therefore are only sometimes available right after payday. These predictable weekly and monthly cycles are not seen as disruptive, but as a natural result of the paycheck cycles.

Transportation barriers create their own unpredictable cycles. A family with no car might only stock up when a friend with a car offers a ride. This may lead to over-purchasing and food spoilage unless the family is very skilled at food management.

The feast-or-famine mentality exacerbates the concept that treats should be eaten whenever they are available, since the availability of high-value food is not predictable.

“The first week after payday, the fresh produce goes. The second week we have more processed foods, like spaghetti with canned meat sauce. We’ll have more cheap, convenient meals the second week.” – Kathy, Somerset KY, shows us her second-week refrigerator
Small setbacks have ripple effects

For a family just making ends meet, an unexpected need can throw off financial balance. A month’s worth of food may be lost if a refrigerator breaks. Cell phones stop working so rent can be paid. A flat tire that is not repaired can cost a much-needed job.

In this environment of precarious existence, parents pay the toll of constant emotional stress. In extreme situations such as impending homelessness, moms have only enough bandwidth to take care of hunger – not nutrition - for their children, while they focus on finding a solution to keep the family stable.

“He makes enough for us to be okay. It’s just unexpected things come up sometimes. We live very much paycheck to paycheck. We live comfortably unless there’s a surprise, and that will throw us off for a couple weeks.”

– Kathy, Somerset KY
When you’re living in poverty it’s like the spokes of a wheel. If any one spoke goes, the entire wheel collapses.

— Desta Reff, Director, Baby University, Clarksdale MS
My moms are dealing with so many other issues. I had a mom say there are 15 people living in her house. She didn’t even have a place for her baby to sleep. With all that going on, how can she really decide all these facts and benefits? She’s worrying about where she is going to live.

- Dontae, WIC peer counselor, Jackson MS
WIC and SNAP

There are many factors that lead to underutilization of WIC
Food that is accessible

Families in poverty may have less time to shop, plan, and cook with unfamiliar or high-effort foods

Using government-subsidized foods often restricts what a family may buy. When people adopt these benefits, they need to learn how to use the new foods.

We heard the most problems in Mississippi, where WIC benefits provided few fruits and vegetables, and only offered shelf stable milk and eggs rather than fresh. Kentucky moms liked the flexibility of receiving an eWIC card and the relative variety of product choice available to fit their needs.

“In Maryland I could buy canned beans with WIC so I used that option a lot. In California, all we could get was a dried pound of beans. It’s a pain to go through the process to cook beans. The last thing anyone does if they have kids to take care of is to soak beans at breakfast for dinner.” – Wanda, Lexington KY
Food that meets my standards

Inflexible program benefits lead to under-utilization

Moms have difficulty using WIC when it doesn’t align with their values about food, or if it provides foods that their children won’t eat. Kathy doesn’t trust the brand of baby food that is provided. Wanda’s healthy family prefers whole milk to nonfat, but only receive nonfat milk benefits. Tanya’s baby refuses banana baby food but likes fresh bananas; Mississippi WIC provides baby food but not fresh fruit for her to make into baby food. Charlene wants to introduce her baby to a wide range of flavors but WIC only offers five flavors of baby food. All of these moms are caught in the gap between what is provided and the healthy foods they want to feed their children.

We heard the greatest complaints from moms in Mississippi, where the “WIC store” provides products directly. Fresh foods are rare. Even the milk is shelf stable, and the eggs are powdered. These restrictions make WIC a much less appealing option for moms.

“I use WIC for the supplement formula, but I won’t use it for his baby food. They have contracts, and their food is still Gerber. There have been too many recalls for my personal comfort. They also cover Beechnut, but not Beechnut naturals or organic. I know that beggars can’t be choosers.” – Kathy, Lexington KY
SNAP affects relationships

Requiring partner participation in qualifying for SNAP reduces utilization

For some moms, qualifying for food stamps would mean reconnecting with former partners or inviting them back into their lives. This can be a significant problem for some moms who want a clean break for a variety of personal reasons, or for the welfare of her children.

“We don’t want to back on food stamps because I like the custody arrangement I have with my ex-husband. I don’t want to go back into court and change everything.” – Wanda, Lexington KY
Differing state rules hinder adoption

For many families living on little money, moving to live with family or to find a lower cost of living is common. Finding a stable situation where they can afford to raise a family is a goal that may motivate parents to move with a young child several times before she reaches kindergarten age.

Qualifying for WIC in each new state, learning new rules about what food is allowed, even switching a baby’s formula from state to state, are all institutional barriers that reduce WIC utilization.

Wanda has moved two times with her young family; from California to Maryland to Kentucky. With each move comes different benefits and different restrictions, and she evaluates whether it is worth her time to qualify in the new state.
Last words

Moms are under tremendous pressure, juggling many competing priorities while they try to do what is best for their children. Nutrition is only one of many considerations, and only in understanding the full context of their lives can we provide the support they need to provide the best for their families.
I feel stressed and frustrated with the kids running around and screaming, and I’m going from here to there… then I have to feed them and I have no brain, and I am trying to cook but I can’t do anything well. I can’t concentrate on food… I make whatever, whatever is easier.

— Jennifer, Malaga CA
Nutrition is only one of too many considerations a mom must juggle.

- How have I dealt with this in the past and how did it work out?
- What do other moms do?
- I need the children to calm down so I can work. Maybe food will help.

- Who do I trust here, or can I only trust myself?
- Is this something he might choke on?
- What about that article I read? Where was that?

- Is this expensive food that should be limited?
- Do I have time and is it safe for me to make this food now?
- What is he willing to eat?

- What is he underweight? Does he need more calories?
- How have my own parents dealt with this?
- Will other people judge me if they see me feeding this way?

- What did WIC say about this? The pediatrician?
- Does this food express the way I love him?
- What about that article I read? Where was that?

- I am running out of ideas on what to cook. I think my family is bored with my food.
- Is this food the right nutritional value for what he needs now?
- If I make this food, will everyone in the family eat it or will I have to make another meal?

- Oh I am so exhausted! I haven’t slept more than 3 hours at a time since he was born.
- What kind of habits do I want him to have when he grows up?
- I want to pass on our food culture to this child.

- What food is about to expire and needs to be eaten now?
- Does he need a special treat to feel better?
- Is he actually hungry or just bored or upset?
It's only been recently realized that I should probably take into account my own sanity in taking care of this child.

— Mimi, Fresno CA