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## **Parents and Caregivers are Focused on Their Kids' Nutrition, but Obstacles to Healthy Eating are Common**

(Washington, D.C.)— Our dietary habits as young children have an especially strong influence over how we eat for the rest of our lives, demonstrating the importance of promoting good nutrition early on. Yet the past year has shone a spotlight on the challenges of raising children while balancing many other priorities. Understanding the decisions made by parents and caregivers—and the hurdles they face while trying to provide food for their children—provides valuable information for improving the dietary habits of children nationwide.

A new survey by the International Food Information Council (IFIC), "Knowledge, Understanding and Behaviors When Feeding Young Children," examines how parents and caregivers consider current diet recommendations for kids ages 2 to 10, how they interpret and implement nutrition advice, and what information sources adults rely on when making food and dietary choices for children.

While parents and caregivers report having good access to nutrition information and overall feel confident that they're meeting their child's nutritional needs, many cite obstacles, such as how to introduce variety into kids' diets and how to translate aspirations into positive behaviors.

"As a parent myself, the contrast between knowing what a healthful diet looks like and actually getting a child to eat nutritiously is extremely relatable," said Ali Webster, IFIC's director of research and nutrition communications. "We all want to provide the best we can for our kids, and this research highlights that when it comes to nutrition, the decisions parents and caregivers make around their children's diets aren't always straightforward – everything from taste, price and nutrition to personal and cultural preferences need to be considered."

### **Eating Habits of Young Children**

When asked about the consumption of different types of foods, two in three respondents (69%) said their children eat dairy products two or more times a day, while 74% and 63% said their kids eat protein

and fruit two or more times per day, respectively. Just one in five (19%) said their child eats grains at least three times a day. While 91% said that their children eat vegetables at least once per day, only one in five (19%) said they eat them 3 or more times daily.

Indeed, vegetables emerged as the food that parents and caregivers have the most difficulty in getting their child to eat, with 41% stating that dark green vegetables are a challenge and red and orange vegetables posing difficulties for 28%; acceptance of beans, peas and other legumes (39%) and seafood (35%) are also common hurdles. Children seem to be the least resistant to consuming dairy, fruit and whole grains.

In alignment with these challenges, broadening kids' palates is a big priority for parents and caregivers: two out of five (42%) said they wish they could improve their child's willingness to try new foods and 37% want to increase both the variety of foods and the amount of vegetables children consume. However, they cite major obstacles, including the pickiness of their child (39%), the cost of healthy foods (30%) and the taste of healthy foods (23%).

The vast majority of parents and caregivers (88%) report limiting or avoiding sugar in their children's diets, but an almost identical amount (90%) say their child eats sweets at least once a day, nearly three in four (74%) say their child regularly drinks juice and 25% say their child often drinks regular soda, highlighting examples where nutritional realities might be falling short of aspirations.

Respondents' efforts to raise children with healthy diets don't stop at the foods they eat or don't eat. Most kids consume at least one form of dietary supplement, with 63% currently taking a multivitamin, 43% taking a single vitamin or mineral supplement, and 32% consuming nutrition supplement drinks. Of parents and caregivers who give dietary supplements to their children, over three in four (77%) consider them to be very or extremely important to their overall nutrition, with the most commonly chosen reasons for consuming them being importance in growth and development (52%) and to fill nutrition gaps (51%).

### **Confidence, Satisfaction and Challenges in Providing Nutritious Diets for Children**

More than two-thirds of parents and caregivers (68%) are very or extremely confident that their child is getting the nutrition they need for growth and development. When parents and caregivers make food choices for their kids, growth and development is the top consideration (59% of respondents ranked in their top three), followed by kids' immune systems (41%), their digestive health (23%) and reducing risk of developing health conditions later in life (23%). A large majority of respondents is very or extremely confident that their child's diet meets the needs for these top priorities.

More than two-thirds (69%) of parents and caregivers say they're extremely or very satisfied with the amount of information and guidance available regarding healthy eating and nutrition for children, and 85% feel they know enough to make informed decisions about their child's diet.

However, for many parents and caregivers, staying up to speed on their child's nutrition remains a challenge: nearly two out of five (38%) said they find it hard to keep track of their child's nutritional needs, and of these, 83% said they could make better choices for their children if it were easier to understand the needs of their child.

### **Influential Sources of Information for Parents and Caregivers**

Medical professionals are far and away the most influential source of information about nutrition for parents and caregivers (the top choice of 35%), followed by their own parents or in-laws (7%), guidelines from nutrition or pediatric associations (7%), and nutritionists working for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (6%). (About one in five respondents, or 22%, reported taking part in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and 9% said they receive WIC benefits.)

Parents and caregivers are largely aware of federal dietary guidance, with half (51%) saying they know at least a fair amount about the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) and 69% knowing at least a fair amount about MyPlate. SNAP and WIC recipients are more likely than those who don't receive food assistance to say they know a lot about MyPlate (39% vs. 31%). In addition, nearly two-thirds (64%) of all respondents say they look at Nutrition Facts labels often or always, and 62% say the same about ingredients lists.

Nonetheless, the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans highlight that children often fall short on recommended intakes of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and that they get too many calories from added sugars, saturated fat and sodium, a reminder that translation of knowledge into practice is difficult, especially when facing the hurdles of feeding young children.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Kids' Diets, One Year Into the Pandemic**

Like [many other recent IFIC reports](#), the survey looked at some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—which, according to respondents, are fairly modest when it comes to children's diets.

More than half (57%) of parents and caregivers say their children's nutrition has not changed during the pandemic, while 31% say it improved at least somewhat. Of those with kids whose nutrition improved, 16% credited healthier foods, 15% pointed to homemade meals, and 15% cited better monitoring of food intake and options.

However, the pandemic's negative impacts on nutrition were noted for over one in 10 children (11%) whose nutrition has gotten worse since the start of the pandemic. Of this subset, 23% of parents and caregivers blamed changes to snacking habits, 22% said it was due to a limited variety of food or access to fresh food and 21% blamed food choices that were unhealthy or convenient.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in clear shifts in the way parents and caregivers buy and prepare foods for their children. Cooking more at home was the largest change, with 54% saying they were spending more time in the kitchen. Other common changes were looking for foods with a longer

shelf life (27%), buying foods to improve their child's immune function (25%) and doing less in-person grocery shopping for their child (22%). The economic effects felt by so many throughout the past year were also seen here: 17% said the pandemic has made it more difficult for them to afford the foods they would usually buy for their child.

## **Methodology**

Survey results were derived from online interviews of 1,199 U.S. adults, conducted December 12, 2020, to January 4, 2021, by Dynata. Results were weighted to ensure proportional representation of the population, with a margin of error of  $\pm 3.1$  points at the 95% confidence level, based on the general population sample of  $n=1,000$ . An additional 199 interviews were conducted among adults who identified as Black, African American, Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish descent to assure adequate number of respondents to support comparisons. The research was supported by Abbott.

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*The International Food Information Council is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that promotes science-based information on nutrition, food safety and agriculture. Visit <http://www.ific.org>.*