Focus Groups Reveal Children’s Perceptions of Physical Activity, Screen Time and Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

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Abstract

Objective: To improve the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) nutrition intervention by learning about Latino children’s perceptions of physical activity (PA), screen time and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB)s using focus group data.


Theory, Prior Research, Rationale: This study used the health belief model as its theoretical foundation. Research has strongly linked increased consumption of SSBs and sedentary lifestyles to obesity/overweight in youth. Improved understanding of the determinants will inform interventions to promote healthy lifestyles.

Description: Latino children who completed a 6-week EFNEP intervention (n=19) participated in focus groups and responded to open-ended questions. Focus group questions addressed perceived benefits and barriers to PA, screen time and beverage consumption. All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Evaluation: Transcribed data were subject to open-coding thematic analyses. Several key themes emerged from this study. Many children view PA as a means to get healthy and be more active. Children were aware of which drinks were unhealthy and felt that parents should either not purchase them or find a way to keep them out of sight. Many children said that screen time offers entertainment and that screen time activities make them “feel good.” Some children noted that devices make them lazy, unfocused, and unable to concentrate.

Conclusions and Implications: Focus groups with EFNEP youth participants provide in-depth insights into children’s perceptions of PA, screen time and beverage consumption, thus, allowing EFNEP to tailor nutrition education programs to the needs of program participants.

Background

Focus groups are an effective method for collecting qualitative data from relatively homogeneous populations about attitudes, perceptions, and opinions that may influence important behaviors. Research has strongly linked increased consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) and sedentary lifestyles to obesity/overweight in youth. Improved understanding of the determinants will inform interventions to reduce SSB consumption and promote healthy lifestyles. In this study, we sought to understand children’s perceptions of physical activity (PA), screen time and beverage consumption, with the goal of improving the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) family-based nutrition intervention program. In addition, feedback on attending the EFNEP nutrition education series was collected. This qualitative study used the health belief model as its theoretical foundation.

Methodology: Hispanic Children (grades K-8) who completed a 6-week series of the EFNEP nutrition education program (n=19) participated in focus group and responded to open-ended questions. To make children feel comfortable and to gain better insight into children’s opinions, a bilingual focus group guide was used. Also, focus groups were conducted by bilingual facilitator and note taker. Focus group questions addressed perceived benefits and barriers to physical activity, screen time and beverage consumption. All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data transcribed were subject to open-coding thematic analyses. Two researchers independently reviewed the transcript and compared codes and themes. These were then reviewed by another researcher who coded each quote and grouped those with similar content using the open-coding method of thematic analyses. Transcript codes were collated and themes represented the main messages conveyed. For validation, themes were discussed and reviewed by a research team and reviewed by the focus group facilitator.

Results

Physical Activity

Physical activity is the same as exercise.

- Kids stated that they liked walking, running, playing tennis, playing sports, exercising, doing pushups, lifting weights, going to the park, playing basketball or soccer, and playing Pokemon Go.
- Physical activity should be fun and tailored for each age group.

- Kids mentioned that they enjoyed playing with toys, basketball, jumping jacks, playing at the park, riding their scooter and bike, playing football and baseball, running, and jumping rope.

Screen Time

Screen time is used for entertainment.

- Kids hear “screen time,” most of them thought it referred to playing video games, watching TV, not exercising, using electronic devices such as Nintendo DS, laptops, phone, tablets, computer, Wii, and virtual reality glasses.
- Many kids mentioned that screen time helps them relax, feel good and helps take their mind off of daily stress.
- Many kids recognize the harmful effects of screen time on their bodies.

Beverages

- Kids know which drinks are unhealthy and recommend that parents not purchase them or figure out a way to keep them out of sight.
- The majority noted that water, apple juice, milkshakes (smoothies), and milk were healthier drink options.
- The majority said that sodas, such as Pepsi, Sprite, grape soda, and Dr. Pepper were not healthy.
- The majority of the kids recommended discarding unhealthy drinks from home. Some recommended only drinking half the amount each time.

Process

- Most kids really enjoyed the recipes and trying new foods during each class.
- They especially liked the cooking segment of the classes where they had a chance to try new foods.
- Most kids also enjoyed physical activities with their families.
- Many of the kids mentioned that they would like to have more activities, more fun games and less lecture, play soccer and freeze tag more often, have a healthy/unhealthy game about snacks and drinks, and go outside more often during the classes.

Sample Questions

- What does physical activity mean to you?
- What do you think of when you hear “screen time”?
- Why do you use these devices? Or how do you feel about playing on your devices for a long time?
- What types of drinks do you like?
- What are healthy/unhealthy drinks? Give some examples.
- Can you think of ways by which you can cut down unhealthy drinks? Tell us some ideas.
- What did you like about the nutrition classes that you attended with your family?
- What do you think would make the classes more fun or more interesting for you?

Strategies To Help Latino Families

- Share information about how to alleviate anxiety about cold weather and which winter activities can be done indoors during the cold season in order to be active throughout the year.
- Encourage parents to set limits on screen time since several of the kids preferred using their devices over being physically active; provide tips on how parents can monitor the content (like violent video games, etc.) of sites their kids are watching.
- Encourage parents to participate in physical activities with their kids.
- Encourage parents to enroll their kids into low-cost, organized physical activities (at community centers, etc.) so that their kids can play with other kids after school too.
- Encourage parents to reduce availability/access to sugar-sweetened beverages, such as fruit juices, sports drinks, energy drinks, & 100% juice.
- Kids could play games/learn key nutrition messages separately with the youth educators or part-time staff, while their parents engage in group discussions with the adult educator.

Study Limitations & Directions For Future Work

- Family-based curriculum should be developed to address both the parents’ and the kids’ differing learning styles.
- Additional focus groups should be conducted to find out kids’ preferred topics about healthy lifestyles and whether it would be necessary to tailor lessons to each age group/developmental stage.
- A majority of families in this study were from El Salvador so recipes were adapted for this population group.
- Several of the kids were newly arrived immigrants or were first generation offspring of immigrant parents, therefore lessons were taught to both parents and kids in Spanish.
- It was suggested by families that experiences and barriers related to their nutrition practices be discussed in a circle to facilitate dialogue and engagement. It was also recommended that barriers and strategies to overcome should be allowed to emerge from discussions.
- Families reported that evaluation surveys which are currently implemented in a group setting would be more effectively completed one-on-one in future interventions to help reduce language/literacy barriers.

Approval & Funding

The University of Maryland is an Equal Opportunity Employer with the Equal Access Programs.

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Sample Questions

- What does physical activity mean to you?
- What makes it hard for you to be physically active?
- What do you think of when you hear “screen time”?
- Why do you use these devices? Or how do you feel about playing on your devices for a long time?
- What types of drinks do you like?
- What are healthy/unhealthy drinks? Give some examples.
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