

# Nutrition Services, Population and Public Health

## Evidence Review: Executive Summary

### Birth to Six Years

## Purpose

This report presents the evidence around nutrition messages and effective strategies to influence knowledge, skills and capacity of parents of children ages 0-6 years, to improve their eating behaviours. Findings will be used to: 1) inform program planning in Nutrition Services, Population and Public Health (NS PPH); 2) support alignment of key messages and strategies, and 3) identify collaborative opportunities within and external to AHS.

## Methods

- A multi-step, systematic process was used for article search, retrieval, selection, critical appraisal and synthesis.
- Studies were included if they:
  - Outlined single, multi-level or multi-component parent-targeted strategies in home, child care or community settings.
  - Reported on: 1) parent behaviours that influence child eating practices and/or; 2) innovative strategies to promote a healthy feeding relationship

## Parent-Targeted Strategy Evidence

- **4407** articles from database searches and citation lists
- **532** for full text review
- **32** appraised and synthesized
  - **13** systematic reviews
  - **19** primary research

## Current State

Recent surveys about the eating behaviours of children and youth show:

- A high prevalence of excessive sugar & sodium intake in young children.
- Lower vegetable & fruit intake.
- A decline in food skills of children as fewer families prepare meals “from scratch”.
- A preference by adults aged 18-34 years to obtain nutrition information from social media versus reliable professional sources (potential parent population).

## Key Findings

### Education interventions in community, child care and home settings

- A variety of education strategies targeted at the parent(s) (e.g. education sessions, print resources) and at the child (e.g. classroom sessions, picture books) showed some effectiveness for improving various aspects of healthy eating practices for the family and child.
- Participatory interventions designed for both the parent(s) and child such as food preparation and cooking sessions improved healthy eating outcomes including an increase in vegetable/fruit intake and family meals prepared and eaten at home.
- Key aspects of effective interventions included: 1) multi-strategy, simple and targeted messages for parents and caregivers around desired behaviours and; 2) education lessons for children or children with their parents accompanied by age-appropriate hands-on activities.

## Multilevel and multicomponent strategies

- Multi-level and multi-component (personal, institutional, socio- and physical- environments) strategies increase the likelihood of behaviour change.
- Social marketing methods that align across sectors and involve families show some effectiveness if messages are consistent, frequent, and behaviour-change focused.
- Socio-economic position influences the effectiveness of individual behaviour change strategies. Some evidence exists around effectiveness of community based strategies or policies aimed at structural changes to the environment. These strategies would have a wide reach, long duration, focus on altering the environment, and/or address social factors that create barriers to healthy eating.

## Implications for Program Planning and Practice in NS, PPH

- Education can positively influence the nutrition practices of parents with children ages 0-6 years. However, it is essential to include support for parents with behaviour change and food literacy skills.
- NS PPH has tools and resources to support parents, child care centres and community organizations when working with parents. Novel and creative methods to reach to more parents to improve nutritional practices and outcomes are warranted.
- Determining the feasibility, cost-effectiveness, audience reach, and potential barriers and facilitators to healthy eating practices for all program plans is necessary.

## Summary and Recommendations

- Implement coordinated, multi-component strategies that include parent engagement activities focused on skill training and behaviour change. Incorporate hands-on learning.
- Leverage existing NS PPH programs as well as internal and external partner opportunities to implement a more systematic, coordinated approach in home, child care and community settings, ensuring equitable access to all families across the province.
- Use innovative methods to encourage positive parenting and feeding relationship principles and role modeling of practices such as increasing vegetable and fruit intake, choosing healthy beverages, taking time for family meals and improving food skills.
- Communicate to parents with clear, purposeful, simple, actionable and targeted messages using multiple methods and platforms. Messages may need to be personalized for mothers, fathers and grandparents.
- Mitigate health inequities, recognizing that families in low socioeconomic position and those from various ethno-cultural groups may be unintentionally excluded from mainstream activities.
- Implement effective and ongoing train the trainer opportunities with partners through conferences, webinars, on-line modules, websites, newsletters and social media forums.
- Ensure priorities and programs stay relevant to families by: 1) following the affecting Alberta parents, and; 2) monitoring nutrition and health outcome surveillance data.
- Develop and implement a strong evaluation plan with clear and measurable outcomes.

## Evidence Strengths and Gaps

- More research is needed to understand how parent engagement strategies can be incorporated effectively into other population health promotion strategies such as supportive environments, healthy public policy, community action and health service reorientation
- This review focused on personal skill development. Most studies reported short term outcomes with overall weak study designs.
- It is well recognized that action across all 5 population health promotion strategies is needed to achieve long-term health outcomes. This report highlights opportunities applicable to the Alberta context based on the findings of this evidence review.

**Suggested Citation:** Alberta Health Services (2020). A review of effective strategies to improve feeding behaviours of children aged 0-6 years. Nutrition Services, Population and Public Health. Calgary, Alberta, Canada.