

Fathers are vitally important to their kids' health and to public health research

11 April 2019, by Jess Haines



Research with Canadian families found that modelling of healthy food intake by fathers, but not by mothers, was associated with a healthier diet among their children. Credit: Shutterstock

Helping our children to develop healthy eating, exercise and screen-time behaviours is an important public health goal globally.

This is because [behaviours established early in life also often track into adulthood](#). And these behaviours have a big impact on a person's risk for chronic diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes and [cardiovascular disease](#).

However, many Canadian [children](#) are not establishing healthy habits early in their lives. National data suggests that [70 per cent of four- to eight-year-old children](#) do not consume the recommended number of servings of fruits and vegetables and close to [80 per cent of three- to four-year-olds exceed screen time recommendations](#)

Because children's health behaviours emerge early in life and [in the context of their family](#), engaging parents in health promotion is critical.

Fathers are largely missing from this picture. A 2017 review of family-based health interventions

found that [fathers made up only six per cent of all parent participants](#).

It matters how Dad eats and moves

Emerging research suggests that fathers are critical stakeholders in the development of children's health behaviours.

[International research studies](#) have found [associations between fathers' eating and activity behaviours and those of their children](#), suggesting the important influence of fathers' role modelling.

Research with families in the Guelph Family Health Study found that [modelling by fathers, but not mothers](#), of healthy food intake was associated with a healthier diet among their children, which points to the unique role of fathers.

Given the important role fathers play in the development of their children's health behaviours, it is important to include them in health-promotion interventions.

Research supports involving both parents to maximize impact. One review of parenting studies found that [programs including both mothers and fathers resulted in better child outcomes](#) than those programs with only mothers.

Healthy eating is not 'women's work'

Despite men's increasing involvement, women remain responsible for the majority of house and family work in Canada. On average, [Canadian women spend one hour more each day than men on unpaid household work](#), including caring for children and meal preparation.

By including only mothers in our health-promotion efforts, we may inadvertently reinforce these inequitable gender norms and practices —for example, the notion that providing healthful foods is

"women's work."

Provided by The Conversation

It could also result in less effective family-based interventions, as families may be less likely to implement and sustain [behaviour](#) changes that reinforce these inequalities.

Fathers matter to health research too

It is also important to engage fathers in [family](#)-based research, so that public health interventions are informed by those with lived experience of fathering.

We recently hosted a conference that brought together international experts, students, health professionals and community stakeholders —to [identify effective strategies to engage fathers in family-based health and obesity-related research](#).

The recommendations include targeting recruitment specifically at fathers. Research has shown that fathers are interested in participating in child [health research](#), but [report that they often don't participate because they do not feel like they have been asked](#). Researchers need to use the words "father" or "dad" rather than non-specific words such as "families" or "parents" when recruiting for child [health](#) studies.

It is also important for researchers and public [health professionals](#) to honour the diversity among fathers and families, incorporating differing cultural traditions and recognizing that fatherhood varies along with ages, ethnicity, location, sexual orientation, country of origin and socioeconomic, marital and custodial status.

Engaging [fathers](#) effectively in [health promotion](#) efforts may help Canadian children to develop healthier eating, activity and screen-time behaviours early in life. It may also support more equitable divisions of labour between parents.

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