

Population Health

title	Family Structure and Children's Eating Patterns: Secondary Analysis of the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) Study 2002
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INTRODUCTION

A variety of family and social factors influence children's eating behaviours such as availability of and preference for particular foods, portion size, cultural values regarding food types and preparation, parents' beliefs and practices, mealtime structure and feeding styles. With a decrease in average family size worldwide and many families consisting of one parent or two parents working outside the home, the influence of family structure on children's eating patterns is of interest.

OBJECTIVE

This paper presents data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey, a WHO collaborative study, illustrating the influence of family structure on children's reported food behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised data from the 2002 Irish HBSC study, which is part of a WHO international collaborative study conducted in 35 countries in 2001/02 (www.nuigalway.ie/hbsc). The overall study aims are to gain new insight into, and increase our understanding of young people's health and well-being, health behaviours and their social context. In Ireland, a nationally representative sample of schools, stratified by region, was randomly selected and individual classrooms within these schools were subsequently randomly selected for inclusion. Data were collected via self-completion questionnaires from 8424 schoolchildren, administered by teachers in the classroom. The response rate was 83% of schoolchildren. Data entry was conducted according to the International HBSC protocol. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Royal College of Physicians, Ireland.

Family structure was measured by students indicating who they live with, with eight response options provided: 'mother', 'father', 'stepmother', 'stepfather', 'grandmother', 'grandfather', 'I live in a foster home or children's home' and 'someone or somewhere else'. These variables were dichotomised to show if children lived with one parent or two.

Fruit and vegetable consumption was measured by a set of questions regarding the frequency of their consumption; these were dichotomised at daily consumption or more of the foodstuffs. Breakfast patterns during the week and the weekend were determined by asking children 'How often do you usually have breakfast (more than a glass of milk or fruit juice)?' with response options of 'never' to the number of days

per week and per weekend, respectively. These variables were dichotomised into those who never ate breakfast during the week and those who never ate it at the weekend. Students were asked if they were on a diet to lose weight, with response options 'yes', 'no but I should lose some weight' and 'no because my weight is fine', which was dichotomised into those on a diet and those not on a diet. Students were asked how often they snack and were provided with a seven-point Likert-type scale with the response options: 'rarely or never', 'once a day' to six or more times a day'. These variables were dichotomised into snacking twice daily or less and more than twice daily. Separate questions for weekday and weekend snacking were provided.

Associations between family structure and the likelihood of the various outcome measures (food behaviours) are expressed in odds ratios from logistic regression models in SPSS, version 12.0. Considering the reported effects of age, gender, social class and family factors such as family size and maternal employment on eating patterns, these variables were controlled for in the analyses. See table 1.

Table 1 - Associations between Family Structure and Food Behaviours

	OR (95% CI)
Breakfast consumption during the week	0.66 (0.53-.84)**
Breakfast consumption at weekends	0.92 (0.65-1.32)
Fruit consumption	1.12 (0.93-1.36)
Vegetable consumption	1.29 (1.07-1.55)**
Dieting behaviour	0.91 (0.70-1.18)
Snacking behaviour during the week	1.09 (0.91-1.31)
Snacking behaviour at weekends	1.15 (0.96-1.38)

OR: odds ratio; CI: confidence interval

*P<0.05, **P<0.01, ***P<0.001

Adjusted for age, gender, parental social class, family size and maternal employment.

RESULTS

Family structure was significantly associated with breakfast consumption during the week and with daily vegetable consumption. Children living in one parent families were more likely to miss breakfast during the week and less likely to report daily or more vegetable consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

Living in two parent families is associated with healthful dietary practices. Further work on investigating the barriers and constraints to healthy eating for one parent families is warranted. Health Professionals need to be cognisant of the influence of more recent changes in family structure in Irish society when promoting healthy eating practices.

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REFERENCES

Available on request.