

Abstract

Parents and Social Media: Nutritional Education Is Online! [†]

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Abstract: Poor eating habits have been correlated with an increased probability of developing chronic health problems, including weight gain. In particular, dietary choices during the first years of life can have a lasting impact on dietary preferences and habits. Parents strongly influence the child's relationship with food which will be maintained for the rest of their life; in particular, a greater sense of maternal self-efficacy is correlated with healthier eating habits and the child being less overweight. To date, there are few studies investigating the relationship between parental eating habits, self-efficacy in promoting healthy behaviors and the use of social media (SM). The general purpose of our study is to investigate the eating habits of families, food awareness and choices and the use of SM to search for pediatric nutrition content. The habits were collected through a questionnaire administered online on the most popular SM platforms. Data show that parents take care of their children's food choices (96.1%) and rarely comply with their requests (77.9%). More than half read product labels (56.1%) and the origin (43.9%) before purchasing. Overall, 44.1% are influenced by TV and newspapers regarding their purchases, while 39.4% are influenced by the opinions of their friends and relatives. Food style correlates positively with the influence of TV and newspapers ($r = 0.238$) and the influence of friends and relatives ($r = 0.231$). Overall, 77.1% aim to follow a healthy diet, even if fish (24.5%) and vegetables (36.3%) are difficult to include in the child's diet. Instagram (50.2%) and Facebook (36.3%) are the SM platforms most used to search for information on pediatric nutrition. Health professionals' (60.3%) and institutions' (24.9%) profiles are the most followed for reading articles and blogs (59.4%), but without direct interactions (78.9%). Only 20% are satisfied with the content found. Parental self-efficacy in promoting a healthy diet for their children correlates positively and moderately with encouragement to follow a healthy diet ($r = 0.340$) and control over the amount of snacks and sweets consumed ($r = 0.302$). The data demonstrate parents' interest in using SM to search for information on pediatric nutrition but indicates that few (33.3%) are satisfied with what they find online. Therefore, future educational interventions need to be refined to help parents to better influence children's eating habits.

Keywords: nutritional education; social media; pediatric nutrition; food awareness; self-efficacy



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