Understanding low-income parents’ decisions to participate in a subsidized fruit and vegetable buying program in four urban childcare centers

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Experimental Biology, Community and Public Health Nutrition Interventions

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Research context

- **Location** Boston, Massachusetts
- **Partnership** Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures
- **Program** Farm to Family (F2F)
  - subsidized fruit and vegetable buying program for families with children 3-5 years old, modeled similar to community-supported agriculture schemes
  - community-based institutions as recruitment and delivery vehicle
Research question

What factors do parents see as facilitating or inhibiting their participation in a subsidized food access program?
Methods

- Four Head Start programs
- Convenience sample of participants and non-participants
- On-site, semi-structured interviews in English
- Inquiry guided by social ecological theory
- Verbatim transcription analyzed using constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

Obese adult residents, 2008 and 2010 combined

Roxbury, 29% obese; 38% individuals below Federal Poverty Line

Source: Health of Boston, 2011
Findings Summary of sample characteristics

F2F participants, n=13
57% of total F2F participants

F2F non-participants, n=9

Similarities
- Female caregivers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds

Differences
- More F2F participants were college educated, married, working, had limited financial resources, had more children
Findings Participation process model

- Promotion
  - Didn't hear [n=6]
    - Inhibiting factors
      - No participation [n=9]
  - Heard [n=16]
    - Expectations
      - Participation [n=13]
    - Facilitating factors
## Findings: Major themes and sub-themes

### Individual context
- Head Start involvement (+)
- Resonating with values (+)
- Previous positive experience (+)
- Concern for quality (+)
- No time for involvement (-)
- Less experience preparing fresh (-)
- Skepticism about organic food (-)

### Family context
- Health concerns (+)
- Cost & health benefits (+)
- Getting vegetables into family diet (+)
- Limited agency in feeding and food decisions (-)

### Program context
- Convenience (+)
- Value (+)
- Direct staff to parent interaction (+)
- Hassle to prepare fresh (-)
- No/limited staff interaction (-)

(+) = facilitating factors; (-) = inhibiting factors
# Findings
Major themes and sub themes

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(+)= facilitating factors; (-)= inhibiting factors
Major themes Individual context

**Head Start involvement (+)**
“...I’m always involved in everything that goes on here at the program... I look at it as a way to support the [Head Start] program...” [p14: female, black/African American, married, participated last year]

**No Head Start involvement (-)**
“...I just feel like sometimes parents don’t take the time to like do things in the school [Head Start]... They could be busy like me...working ...they’re generally busy and don’t have time...” [np7: female, black/African American, not married, did not participate last year]
## Findings  Major themes and sub-themes

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Major themes Family context

**Health concerns (+)**

“I got it more because of her [my daughter], so she can eat because she’s, can I say overweight? **She’s my fat girl.**” [p22: female, Hispanic, married, did not participate last year]

**Limited agency in feeding and food decisions (-)**

“…[my mother] has her for the summer so I have to give her $100-150 [of my food stamps].” [p10: female, other, not married, did not participate last year]
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Major themes Program context

Value (+)
“It’s a lot for $5.00. So it **saves us money and it saves us time** and it saves us running around.” [p20: female, white, married, participated last year]

Convenience (+)
“I can pick up my child and I can pick up my vegetables…I think it’s convenient, that’s why I did it…” [p18: female, black/African American, never married, did not participate last year]

Hassle to prepare fresh vegetables (-)
“A lot of people say, oh, **fresh**? No, I don’t want. Some people say it’s a **hassle**. Some people say let’s stick with the cans or frozen stuff.” [p21: female, black/African American, never married, did not participate last year]
Discussion

- Indicators of social proximity to Head Start suggest a social facilitation effect on participation (Zajonc, 1965)

- Value was conceptualized in terms of getting a lot for money balanced with time saved for food shopping

- Convenience related to being able to accomplish multiple caring tasks at the same time (i.e. picking up child and vegetables)

- Many participation factors were similar to surveys of higher income community-supported agriculture members (Perez et al., 2003)
Summary

- Low-income parents’ participation was facilitated by factors that extended beyond monetary cost, were multidimensional, and related to individual, family, and program factors.

- Participation was related to modifiable and non-modifiable aspects of the program design.

- Similar subsidized food access programs should:
  1. consider the importance of staff to parent interactions during promotion
  2. consider design elements that can save time for participants
Questions, discussion…

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