

## 'Fast Food Dads' stereotype a myth according to new research

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When many people think of single, non-resident fathers providing meals for their kids, they conjure up the image of dad piling the kids into the car for a quick trip through the McDonald's drive through.

But single dads apparently don't get enough respect when it comes to providing for their kids' nutrition according to a study led by an Iowa State University sociologist that dispels the myth of "fast food dads." It's the first to show that kids who spend time with their non-resident fathers actually eat slightly healthier than those who don't.

Associate Professor of Sociology Susan Stewart and Ball State University Assistant Professor of Sociology Chadwick Menning used existing data collected between 1994-96 from more than 10,000 families from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine the relationship between family structure, non-resident fathers, and adolescent eating pattern. The results of that study are in a paper titled "Fast Food Dads? The Effect of Family Structure and Nonresident Father Involvement on Adolescent Eating Patterns," which they'll be presenting on Sunday, Aug. 12, at the American Sociological Association annual meeting in the New York City Hilton.

"Regarding the non-custodial father being the 'fast food dad,' we did not find evidence to support that stereotype," said Stewart, who is author of the book *Brave New Stepfamilies: Diverse Paths Toward Stepfamily Living* (Sage Publications). "We found that non-resident father involvement -- so kids with an involved, non-custodial dad -- actually eat

better and more nutritious food than kids whose dad is not involved. They are less likely to skip breakfast and lunch, and eat vegetables more often. They also eat more simple sugars, but they're more likely to eat regular meals."

The data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health initially surveyed adolescents in grades 7-12 in 1994-95 and conducted follow-up interviews with a subset of respondents in 1996. The second wave of data from that study provided numerous measures of adolescents' diets, including the frequency of eating fast food within the last week. The researchers examined effects of family structure and controls on adolescent diet, skipping meals, and food monitoring from more than 15,000 families in the first wave of data, and more than 11,000 in the second wave.

While the data is more than 10-years-old, Stewart said that just makes the idea of "fast food dads" more of a myth today since families are now more health conscious.

"We're not going to see this 'fast food dad' effect appear all of a sudden I doubt, because if we were going to see it, we would have seen it 10 years ago -- more so than today," she said. "That's because 10 years ago, we really weren't talking about childhood obesity."

With the exception of a 1997 study that found that children in single-parent families have been shown to consume significantly more fat than children in intact families, the effect of family structure on children's eating patterns had not previously been explicitly examined. Stewart and Menning wrote in their conclusion that adolescents in non-traditional family households are more likely to display unhealthy eating habits such as skipping breakfast and lunch, eating fewer vegetables, consuming more fast food, and less parental monitoring of meals. The exception was children in father-stepmother homes, who were generally similar to

children from biological parent households.

"We found that kids in non-traditional families -- single-parent families and stepfamilies -- do consume less-healthy diets than those in traditional families overall," said Stewart. "That includes greater frequency of fast food."

And while the study found that children may eat better when non-resident fathers are involved, those same kids also tend to eat more.

"It does appear that children with involved non-resident fathers, through their consumption of more regular meals including vegetables and simple sugars, may be eating a greater amount of food, which may put children at greater risk of obesity -- depending on children's physical activity levels and other factors," the researchers wrote in their conclusion.

"There are other things that go into obesity," said Stewart. "There's activity level, and there's heredity, and other kinds of things. We weren't able to look into the mechanisms for this -- like are children feeling more stress (because of their parents being apart) -- at least not in this paper."

The researchers plan to do further analysis on sex, race and class differences in the effects and differences by the children and their fathers' weight status. Stewart is also working with researchers from ISU's Department of Human Development and Family Studies on research to examine the relationship between stress and childhood obesity. That study is being funded by a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture.

Source: Iowa State University

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