
How Does the Transmission of Diet Behaviors Differ by Parent and Child Gender in Brazil?

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INTRODUCTION

Diet is a key driver of obesity and an important mechanism in the transmission of obesity from parent to child. Parents can influence their children's diets directly by controlling what food is in the house and by preparing family meals. They can also indirectly influence diet by modeling healthy eating behaviors, including consuming more fruits and vegetables and fewer fried and other high-calorie foods.

Past research in this area has primarily focused on the role of mothers on the diets of their children, which overlooks the influence fathers may have on the transmission of diet behaviors. Including both parents is an important step toward a more complete understanding of the transmission of health within families. In addition to exploring the roles of both mothers and fathers, this brief reports on research that compares the influence of each parent on same- vs. different-gender offspring. That is, the authors ask whether mothers may have the same or more influence over the diets of their daughters or sons and likewise if fathers have the same or more influence over the eating habits of their sons or daughters.

Because social inequalities structure many aspects of family life, including resources, the quality of food, and the amount of time parents spend with their children, the parent-child transmission of diet behaviors likely differs in higher- and lower-socioeconomic status (SES) families. This is particularly important because in middle- and high-income countries, obesity is more prevalent among poor families.

Brazil is one such middle-income country that has experienced rapid economic growth and persistent inequality as well as rapid changes in nutrition and growing rates of obesity. The authors use data from the 2008–2009 Brazilian Expenditure and Income Household Survey and its supplemental Food Consumption Survey to explore how parent-child associations in diet behavior may differ by parent gender and child gender as well as how gender differences vary in lower- and higher-socioeconomic status households.

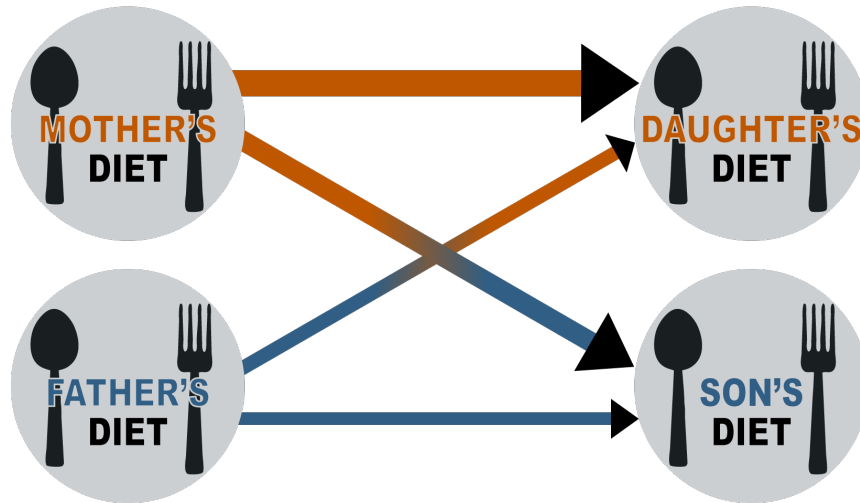
KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Both mothers' and fathers' diets are significantly associated with both their sons' and daughters' diets.
- ▶ Mothers' diets have a stronger association with their daughters' diets than fathers' diets with daughters' diets (**mother**→**daughter** > **father**→**daughter**). Mothers and fathers have a more similar influence on their sons' diets (**mother**→**son** = **father**→**son**) (*see figure*).
 - This finding shows a difference by parent gender only for daughters.
 - In other words, an increase in a mother's consumption of fruits, vegetables, grains, meats, and eggs has a greater influence than does a father's consumption on whether his daughter consumes these foods.
- ▶ These gender differences exist in lower-SES households, but not in higher-SES households.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In Brazil, obesity is shifting from higher- to lower-socioeconomic status individuals. This study suggests that gender differences in parent-child associations of diet may contribute to the reproduction of health and obesity within families. Gender plays an important part in the intergenerational transmission of diet behavior from parent to child, especially in lower-socioeconomic status households. Policies and interventions aiming to reduce the burden of obesity and improve nutrition among Brazilian children should consider improving the diets and health of parents, especially mothers.

Effect of Mothers' and Fathers' Diets on Daughters' and Sons' Diets



This figure shows that mothers' diets more strongly influence daughters' diets than do fathers' diets ($\text{mother} \rightarrow \text{daughter} > \text{father} \rightarrow \text{daughter}$). Mothers and fathers have a more similar influence on their sons' diets ($\text{mother} \rightarrow \text{son} = \text{father} \rightarrow \text{son}$).

REFERENCE

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