The Role of Parental Influence on Tween Nutrition

A Strategy Formation Workbook for the Lexington Tweens Nutrition and Fitness Coalition
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I. **Purpose of Workbook:** The purpose of this workbook is to help the Kentucky Tweens Nutrition and Fitness Coalition develop a marketing plan to promote thoughtful parental involvement in nutrition among tweens (9 to 13 year olds) in Lexington, Kentucky. This workbook presents a mixture of local focus group data and national data.

II. **Understanding Tweens:** A desire to be accepted by peers is of key importance in understanding tween motivations. Tweens can be divided into groups by age, and gender. Multiple siblings in the same family typically have different nutritional desires and habits. Lexington tweens choose many of their own meals and snacks.

III. **Understanding Parents:** Parents of tweens face several challenges when it comes to feeding their children well. They are concerned about their ability to role model healthy behaviors for their children, and often harbor guilt for not doing so. Time is perhaps the largest barrier to tween nutrition. Parents are also concerned about difficulties they experience in getting their tweens to try new foods; and about the cost of healthier foods as compared to other options. Finally, many Lexington parents note that they would like help attaining the knowledge necessary to make healthier nutrition choices for their children.

IV. **Reducing Sweetened Beverage Consumption:** Sweetened beverage consumption has increased dramatically for tweens over the past 30 years, and has several nutritional consequences, including replacement of healthier beverages such as milk. Benefits of reducing sweetened beverage consumption include improved nutrition, fewer “sugar highs”, weight loss, and improved athletic
performance. Tweens are open to trying healthier beverages. Barriers to encouraging healthier beverages include monetary cost, trouble setting limits, peer influence, less availability, and lack of knowledge about which beverages are “healthy”.

V. **Encouraging Healthier Snacks**: Lexington parents are more willing to limit tweens to healthier snacks than to limit snacks entirely. Controlling tween nutritional intake and better appetite at mealtimes are seen by parents as benefits of encouraging healthier snacks. Tweens are amenable to healthier snacks so long as they are given opportunity to choose snacks, and that the snack items are convenient for them. The largest barrier to tween snack control is a lack of supervision at snack times. The cost of healthier snacks and the added time required for preparation are also barriers to encouraging healthier snacks.

VI. **Encouraging Healthy Meals at Home**: Meals eaten at home are the exception, not the rule, in some Lexington families. The frequency with which parents eat meals with their children is associated with positive dietary behaviors. Benefits of home meals include time to communicate with children, a period of family relaxation time, and the notion that home-prepared meals cost less than meals eaten at a restaurant. Lexington parents and tweens often have overwhelming schedules that appear to preclude them from taking the time necessary to plan and prepare meals at home. Another barrier to family mealtime is differing food preferences within a family, which are seen as discouraging to parents who make the family meal choices.

VII. **Reducing Restaurant Visits/Promoting Healthier Restaurant Menu Choices**: The cost of eating out and parental guilt associated with not cooking at home are primary motivating factors for decreasing restaurant patronage. Increases in nutritional information and choices at restaurants make it easier for parents and tweens to make healthier restaurant choices. The Coalition should decide which of these behaviors to promote. Lack of time to cook at home and the ability of all family members to choose foods they enjoy at restaurants are potential barriers to the Coalition’s chosen product in this area.
Parental support and involvement is a crucial part of tween development (Affect, 2000). The Center for Weight and Health (CWH) considers parental involvement to be an important strategy for preventing overweight because of the many ways in which parents can influence energy intake and physical activity (CWH, 2001).

The “most promising” strategies are for parents to:

- Improve limit-setting
- Avoid using food as reward
- Model healthy behaviors

“Somewhat promising” strategies are for parents to:

- Improve family communication
- Improve the child’s self esteem (CWH, 2001)

Parents have been shown to influence their children’s dietary behaviors through direct communication, role modeling, and by fostering self efficacy and overall self-esteem.

- Parental knowledge of overweight and general nutrition knowledge has been related to a decreased risk of overweight among their children (CWH, 2001).

- Parents’ physical activity levels have been shown to predict their children’s physical activity levels (Kalakanis, Goldfield, Paluch et al., 2001).
• Parents’ own dietary behaviors have been shown to influence children’s dietary behaviors (Rimal, 2003; Lee and Birch, 2002).

• Parent-child communication has been shown to impact children’s nutrition knowledge, and indirectly impact their eating behaviors (Rimal, 2003). Some researchers believe support, encouragement, and sharing positive beliefs about physical activity have greater impacts on behavior than role modeling (Welk, 1999).

• Parent’s self efficacy (i.e., their confidence in their ability to regulate eating behaviors) has been shown to influence children’s self efficacy. This is important because children’s self efficacy has a stronger impact on their eating behavior than nutritional knowledge (Rimal, 2003).

Finally, studies show that parents are not always willing to admit overweight in their own children. In a study of obese children’s parents, most parents knew the dangers of childhood obesity and expressed concern about heart disease as a consequence of obesity, but 35% did not think their child was overweight (Myers and Vargas, 2000).
The purpose of this workbook is to help the Kentucky Tweens Nutrition and Fitness Coalition develop a marketing plan to promote thoughtful parental involvement in nutrition choices among tweens (9 to 13 year olds) in Lexington, Kentucky. Research is the bedrock of any marketing plan, and so this report summarizes tween and parent characteristics, perceptions, and ideas that will be useful to coalition members in making evidence-based decisions. The information reported here is based on marketing research conducted with tweens and their parents in Fayette County by the Lexington Fayette County Health Department. Kentucky research includes 27 focus group interviews conducted with tweens, 24 group interviews conducted with parents. The focus groups, which were conducted in Spring and Summer 2004, included a diverse group of respondents from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. To augment our understanding of Lexington’s growing Hispanic population, limited data was obtained from two focus groups consisting of Hispanic respondents (one parent and one tween group). Other published and unpublished research is also included in this report.

This workbook is organized into two parts. Part one provides a description of the tween and parent audiences the coalition has chosen to address. Part two discusses specific nutritional behaviors that were chosen initially as potential targets by the coalition and came up frequently in the focus groups. As you read this report, please consider which topics and ideas would be most appropriate for the coalition to address.

- **Reducing Sweetened Beverage Consumption**: Tween and parent ideas about soft drink intake, setting limits, and introduction of healthier drink options
- **Encouraging Healthier Snacks**: Parent and tween perceptions about tween snack food intake, setting limits, and problems of supervision
- **Encouraging Healthy Meals at Home**: Parent and tween descriptions of meals eaten at home and time for family meals
- **Reducing Restaurant Visits/Promoting Healthier Restaurant Menu Choices**: Tween and parent descriptions of motivations to eat out and restaurant food offerings

A list of ideas, derived from the focus groups, is placed at the end of each section. Marketing questions, designed to help the coalition select strategies and develop a marketing plan, are placed throughout the report.
Part I: Audience Segmentation: Understanding Tweens

Social marketers are committed to understanding everything they can about their consumers – the people they hope to reach. In this report, there are two consumer groups: tweens and their parents. In understanding tweens, it is important that we explore the developmental characteristics of the tween years, ages 9 to 13, and the motivating or driving forces in their lives, in addition to their nutritional habits. In understanding parents, it is important that we explore motivating or driving forces in their lives, in addition to some of the barriers that may prevent achievement of their nutritional goals for themselves and their children.

General Characteristics

In an extensive review of the literature, Affect, Inc. (2000) found that, despite rapid developmental changes and a fragile self-esteem, the tween years are a positive, optimistic phase of life. During these years, tweens are developing their self-identity and seeking ways to define and express themselves. They fantasize about being rich, famous, and successful, and seek ways to express their individuality. Distinctive social needs and desires for tweens are: belonging, mastering new skills, gaining a sense of power and freedom, and having fun.

- **Being accepted by peers** is one of the primary motivations for this age group. Tweens want to be popular and prefer “hanging out with friends” to all other activities, including watching television and playing video games. Friends have a major impact on their emerging self-image. Because they look to peers for approval, tweens have a deep fear of humiliation. Peer influence was the single most commonly-mentioned reason for activity in the Lexington focus groups, and was seen as similarly important in decisions about where and what Lexington tweens eat.

- Despite attempts to become independent, tweens also have a **profound need for unconditional love, support, and guidance from parents**. Perceived parental expectations are important and prevent many tweens from engaging in risky behaviors, such as drinking and smoking.

- The tween years also are time for **mastering new skills**. Tweens need acceptance, a sense of control, and opportunities to discover their talents.
By understanding these differences, it is possible to select specific segments to receive special attention and increase program effectiveness and efficiency by tailoring strategies to address their special needs and wants.

• Tweens are exploring freedom and independence in complex ways. They are developing a sense of control and enjoy the power of making their own choices. They like to influence adults and want freedom. Although interested in learning the rules, tweens also begin to question authority. They need opportunities to make small decisions and try new things, while still being able to rely on parents to make big decisions. The opportunity to try new things is particularly important in tween nutrition, as Lexington tweens indicated a strong desire for choice and exposure to new foods in their meal and snack options.

• Tweens also like to have fun. Never underestimate their desire to be silly and frivolous. They especially like to “gross out” adults and play with friends.

Segments in the Tween Population
Social marketers recognize that it is not possible to be “all things to all people” and attempt to identify subgroups or segments in the consumer population that share needs, wants, and values that make them likely to respond to public health interventions similarly. Differences within the tween population that should be considered in designing programs to promote physical activity include age and gender. By understanding these differences, it is possible to select specific segments to receive special attention and increase program effectiveness and efficiency by tailoring strategies to address their special needs and wants.

Age
Significant changes in physical and emotional maturation take place during the tween years, creating important differences between younger and older tweens. Younger tweens (9 to 11 years of age) have an increasing need to be recognized as individuals. They look to peers for validation and advice, but also respond to family encouragement and attention, e.g., when parents or other relatives attend games they play. In contrast, as tweens enter middle school, they begin to feel more self-conscious as they begin to compare themselves to teenagers. They admire teenage role models and spokespersons in the media and begin to watch television shows and read magazines geared to teens (Aeffect, Inc., 2000). Lexington tweens, for instance, recommended high school celebrities (talented athletes and
student leaders from local schools) as the best spokespersons for new programs aimed at increasing physical activity and nutrition. Finally, the Lexington research found that older tweens are at times reticent to participate in activities with younger tweens, preferring instead to hang out with peers their own age or older.

**Gender**

There are also major differences between girls and boys (PortiCo Research, 2002). Girls tend to be even more concerned about being with friends and place strong value on beauty and glamour. Less emphasis is placed on getting girls to be physically active and they are usually given fewer options than boys. Relationships with friends carry less emotional weight for boys than girls, yet boys still want to feel group belonging (Michael Cohen Group, 2003). Boys are motivated by messages that express power, bravery and “good versus evil” (Affect, Inc., 2000). Lexington focus group data shows that middle school girls are more likely than boys to skip meals because of body image issues.

**Differences between siblings**

It is tempting to assume that children in the same family have similar eating habits and tastes. Importantly, most Lexington parents of multiple children who took part in the focus groups tell us that, within their households, nutritional behaviors vary from one child to the next. For instance, one child may be characterized by the parent as a “picky eater”, while another may be seen as an “overeater”. Attempts to improve tween nutrition in Lexington at the family level must realize the diversity of nutritional habits that may be found within a family.


**Tween Nutritional Characteristics**

The following tween nutritional habits and motivations were displayed in the focus groups. These should be kept in mind as the marketing plan is developed.

- Lexington tweens look to their peers in making nutritional decisions.
- Many Lexington tweens know how to cook some foods and choose some meals and most snacks on their own.
- Many Lexington tweens report that they commonly eat late at night, between 9 pm and 2 am.
- Lexington tweens report engaging in activities other than eating (often television viewing) at mealtimes.
- Fruits are typically high on the list of foods tweens enjoy and consider to be healthy.
- Tweens like having a variety of food choices.
- Tweens make a lot of their own food choices, probably more than in generations past.

Lexington tweens report high consumption of less nutritious snack-type foods during meals when they’re permitted to make their own food choices. Many Lexington tweens report making their own breakfast choices, with some simply choosing not to eat. They often choose their own lunches. A few Lexington tweens whose families experience particularly frenzied evening schedules routinely choose their own dinners, and several tweens report choosing their own late night snack.

There is ample focus group evidence that Lexington tweens desire both choice and variety in foods. It appears, however, that tween desires to be independent from their parents may overshadow their desire to try new foods. Tweens would be very likely to try new foods, provided that their peers would approve of the new food.
The following ideas are the most common tween suggestions for improving their dietary choices:

- Make the healthy food appear more appetizing.
- Limit the supply of unhealthy foods.
- Involve tweens in choosing healthy foods.
- Advertise healthy foods as effectively as unhealthy foods are advertised.
- Educate them about the importance of a nutritious diet.

When asked about how to improve their dietary choices, tweens suggest making the food appear more appetizing.
Parents who participated in the Lexington focus groups report several concerns and barriers that they must confront in order to achieve what they consider to be healthy diets for their children. These concerns can be divided into the following topics:

- Role Modeling and Guilt
- Time
- Variety/Trying New Foods
- Cost
- Knowledge/Skills

**Role Modeling and Guilt**

**Guilt and Tween Food Choice**

Lexington parents are aware that they should serve as dietary role models for their children, though many feel as though they could be better examples. As a result, many Lexington parents report feeling guilty about what their families eat and drink. For some parents, this guilt, combined with other barriers listed above, leads to a sense of hopelessness about changing family eating habits. For parents of tweens, this sense of hopelessness is magnified, as tween desires for independence often lead parents to let the tweens make their own dietary choices.

> Well, I know I can be a better example, because I don't eat real healthy.

> Well, mine don't care to eat in the morning, and I feel guilty about that because I do go down and the food is there ... And I will sometimes grab bananas, and if they say, “I’m hungry,” in the car, I’ll say, “Here’s a banana.” But, in general, they choose not to eat.
These choices, of course, are limited by what foods are made available to the tween, particularly at home. Some Lexington parents, aware of tween desires to choose their own foods, prefer to allow this independence but control the options

A lot of it is if you buy sherbet versus all ice cream, and that’s all you eat. To me, one is a little healthier than the other … Not that the other is bad, it’s just, if you’re watching weight for your children and watching health.

They get to make the choice, but you’ve ultimately made the choice: you eat what I’ve set out.

If it’s not there, they can’t eat it.

Positive Role Modeling Messages
Despite the guilt associated with role modeling, many Lexington parents seem keenly aware of the importance of modeling good nutrition choices for their children, while acknowledging that their own food preferences may make this a difficult task.

If you have a negative attitude towards a certain food or a certain activity or a certain thing … even though they might not have ever tried it, they’re not going to try it.

And I’m sitting here killing myself trying to eat something I know is really nasty, but I know it’s good for me, and I’m sitting there and I’m eating it, and my youngest daughter [thinks], “If Mommy ate it, I guess I’ll eat it, too.”

Mothers and Fathers
The Lexington parent focus groups were comprised of far more mothers than fathers. This fact is important in considering the data itself. In the focus groups it became clear that mothers tend to make most of the dietary decisions for families. Still, Lexington fathers are also important role models of nutrition to their children. Some mothers noted that their spouses had a tendency to undo their attempts at fostering healthy food choices.

And it’s my husband, my husband has programmed my daughter: “Oh, I never would drink milk when I was little,” …I just want to smack him. Or, “…I don’t like green beans because of the texture.” And so she won’t. But I have to go, “I’ll give you a dollar to try this green bean,” and she’ll try it and she’ll go, “Oh, I like it,” and …I have to bribe her.
Other barriers to teaching nutrition. Some Lexington parents note a reluctance to spend too much time teaching and modeling nutrition to their children for fear that they’ll take the message too seriously, leading to an eating disorder. Still other parents show an opposite concern, citing a priority for child satiety over nutrition.

My daughter . . . she watches her weight. She used to wear a 0, and now she’s fat because she wears a 7. And so, she is constantly on a diet, she’s constantly doing—I think we’ve got every tape that’s out there—she’s constantly doing somebody’s aerobics or Tae-Bo or something because she’s too fat.

I guess that total nutrition part kind of comes in second. You try to give them what they need, but you want to make sure they’re full.

Time
The most common barrier to family nutrition as reported by Lexington parents is time. Many tweens and parents report harried schedules, particularly in the evening, that leave little or no time for the planning, preparation, and clean-up necessary for a family meal. This leads to a significant reduction in the number of meals eaten together as a family and a significant increase in eating out. Further, food hurriedly prepared at home or chosen from a restaurant is likely to be less nutritious than foods prepared for more relaxed family meals.

I used to not get off ‘till 5:30. Time I got home it was 6 o’clock. By the time we got through eating and getting dinner finished and dishes, it was 7:30. It’s time to go back to bed, get up, do it all over again.

It’s hard to eat a salad when you’re sitting in the car trying to get from point A to point B.

Especially if you’re like me: I have to be at work at 7:00, so I get myself up at 4:30, and it’s just like a chore, just, well, I’ve got to wake up everybody in the house, and I go through the house and say, “Well, no one wakes me up.” But, with all that said, it’s just…it’s a big rush basically, trying to provide them a good, nutritional breakfast.
Variety/Choice

Tweens are somewhat puzzling to their parents in that they want variety, yet tend to balk at trying new foods at their parents’ request. Parents note that this is a significant barrier to introducing healthier foods.

They go through stages: Mom and Dad don’t know anything, and ... no matter what you tell them, they’re going to do...and I was the same way.

I have to beg my daughter to try things because she thinks, “... I’m going to hate it,” and then she’ll try it and go, “Oh, I like that.”

Parents also desire a variety of food options. Many parents report/say that years of cooking the same foods for their children have left them less than eager to prepare meals at home.

I get tired of feeling like I cook the same thing, having to think of something to cook is as much trouble as cooking sometimes.

As discussed above in the Role Modeling section, many parents are responding to tween reluctance to try new foods at the parent’s insistence by allowing tweens more freedom in choosing their own foods.

I got tired of fighting the battle of, “You have to eat enough of this,” or; “I’m going to count bites”. I just got so tired of that a long time ago, I just quit.

I kind of stopped cooking because I have a thing: if I cook something and you don’t want to eat it, then it upsets me ... because I stood over that stove and cooked and you didn’t eat that.
Lexington parents feel as though healthy foods cost more than unhealthy foods. Further, the healthy foods that tweens are more likely to eat and/or are time-saving (e.g. individually packaged and heavily advertised healthy foods) are priced even higher.

Healthy snacks are good, but junk food is so cheap—bad, bad junk food, 99-cent cheese puffs. You can buy really cheap junk, and it’s really tempting.

Perhaps the most effective way to reduce food costs, according to Lexington parents, is to plan shopping lists and avoid buying extraneous foods.

_We’re trying to make a game out of... how little we can spend and still not be hungry or anything. And so I quit buying crackers because they’re expensive. So I quit buying crackers, hence, we didn’t need as much cheese and buying other stuff. And he lost ten pounds from not eating cheese and crackers for three months._

_And more so in this country... eating vegetables is expensive... very expensive.... You go to Kroger and you pick stuff out for a little salad... there goes 7, 8 dollars. (Lexington Hispanic parent)_

_The three of us went to the grocery store for the first time in probably a month, and we walked out and he said, “Well, how did we spend so much money?” and I said, “Because the two of you decided we needed all of this instead of just a little bit of this.” ...I said, “That’s why... we make a list before we go,” and I think making that list before you actually go keeps from buying things that you don’t need, as well._

Lexington parents feel as though healthy foods cost more than unhealthy foods.
A final barrier to Lexington parents’ offering healthier foods to themselves and their children is a lack of knowledge. Lexington parents frequently noted a desire for an easily accessible and minimally time-consuming source of information on identifying and preparing healthier foods. Further, Lexington parents are disappointed with the large amount of food advertising their children are exposed to, and with the mixed messages they receive from diet ads. Lexington tweens are also concerned about these mixed messages.

Right now, with the Atkins thing going, a lot of things are low-carb. There's a lot of things, but when they put that, slap it on there, it's like all of a sudden nobody is looking at the sodium or the fat, they're looking at the carbs.

We need to educate ourselves on what we're buying and bringing into our homes.

Well, on commercials, they advertise diet pills and everything like that, but they don't advertise drinks, healthy drinks, healthy food or anything. You have to go through magazines to find that stuff. But they advertise diet pills more than healthy food. (Lexington tween)

Then, for example, we as Latin people have a very different form of thinking, whereas we normally are accustomed to preparing food a certain way, but this culture requires us to adapt to using a lot of other things that are not adequate for the children's nutrition... for example... in my family there has always been a problem with obesity... but nonetheless we have never really learned how to start... lets say a diet... or a form of balanced nutrition beginning as a child... I feel it would be a good option. (Lexington Hispanic parent)

As a final thought in considering parent attributes, Borra, Kelly, Shirreff, et al. (2003) list the following as the most significant parental barriers to good child nutrition:

- Reluctance to take on another battle with their children
- Lack of knowledge on how to get children to eat well
- Limited time
- Difficulty in practicing good eating behaviors themselves
- Lack of self confidence in ability to help children or themselves eat right.
Part Two: Nutrition-Based “Products” for Coalition Consideration

The following four sections are designed to help the coalition select which products to promote and develop a corresponding marketing plan. Each section is subdivided according to the “4 P’s” of marketing:

- **Product.** The item(s) or behavior that the coalition would like to see parents and tweens adopt. Benefits of adopting the item(s) or behavior.
- **Price.** Barriers to and competition against adopting the product. These barriers can include, but are not limited to, monetary cost.
- **Place.** Appropriate places and partners that should be considered in efforts to “sell” the product.
- **Promotion.** Suggested ways of marketing the product. In this report, the promotion sections include multiple parent suggestions.
1. Reducing Sweetened Beverage Consumption

Product

Many Lexington parents are concerned about their children’s consumption of sweetened beverages such as soft drinks and high-sugar fruit drinks. Further, the Center for Weight and Health considers the reduction of sweetened beverages one of the most promising interventions to prevent childhood obesity (CWH, 2001). Soft drink consumption is a concern because of increasing evidence linking it to obesity and other health problems. Sweetened beverages may contribute to excess total energy intake, possibly because liquid sweets may be regulated more poorly than energy consumed in solid form (Mattes, 1996).

The size of the sweetened beverage problem has grown substantially. Soft drink consumption among youth has increased 500% in the last 30 years (Ludwig, 2001). As tweens are drinking more sweetened beverages, studies show that they are drinking fewer nutritious beverages such as milk, water, and 100% juice. For instance, a recent study of children aged 6-13 years found that children will choose sweetened drinks over milk when given a choice, but will drink milk if not given a choice (Mrdjenovic, 2003).

Further, a link between sweetened beverage consumption and childhood obesity has been established. One study showed that for each additional serving of a sweetened beverage consumed daily over a 1 ½ year period among school aged children, the risk of becoming overweight increased by 60% after controlling for other confounding variables (Ludwig, 2001).

Outside of the wealth of nutritional data, Lexington parents note several other benefits of avoiding sweetened beverages. Weight loss and avoiding sugar highs and tooth decay were commonly mentioned by parents as benefits of reducing soft drink intake.
Weight loss and avoiding sugar highs and tooth decay were commonly mentioned by parents as benefits of reducing soft drink intake.

I just have to cut all the sweets out and have water or juice or something like that, something with not too much sugar in it, because he's already hyper, and he gets that pop, he's just bouncing off the walls.

I lost 20 pounds last year just by changing from regular, and I really don't like diet, so it was really a very good change for me, because I started drinking a lot of water because I really, really loved the regular, sugared cola. I probably drank 32 ounces a day, at least, sometimes two ... And somebody said, "You know, you would lose 20 pounds," and I did, from June till...not even six months. And that was the only change.

And I think that's what's happened to us with water: ...or all three of our kids are very active, and even...my youngest one just said, he's in the middle of playing baseball and he said, "I feel better when I drink water instead of that Gatorade."

Lexington parents also note that drinking soft drinks can be an expensive habit compared to drinking water, particularly in restaurants.

You can kill yourself buying pop... it's just expensive and they drink it like it's nothing... and it's calories that they don't need.

Yeah, I'm not going to pay $10.00...add $10.00 to the bill, and they like water fine, so they know they get water when we eat out.

Importantly, Lexington tweens are open to trying healthier beverages such as water and 100% juice. This notion is supported by focus group data and increased sales of healthier drinks in school vending.
machines. Tweens note that healthier drinks allow them to perform better athletically and to avoid the energy drop that soft drinks cause. Tweens also mention the following benefits of drinking healthier beverages: quenching thirst, superior nutritional value and better for their complexions. In addition, some complained about the acidity of soft drinks.

_Soda has all that sugar in it and it keeps you going for a while, but then it wears off and then you're just tired._

(Lexington tween)

_Especially when you do sports or you run track or whatever; … You can run a lot faster and you don't get dehydrated as much as if you were drinking soft drinks._ (Lexington tween)

**Marketing Questions**

*Which benefits of reducing sweetened beverage consumption do parents and tweens value most?*
**Price**

Even given the benefits of switching to healthier drinks listed above, many Lexington parents allow consumption of sweetened drinks at home and elsewhere. The following are the most commonly mentioned barriers to reducing sweetened beverage intake:

*Cost.* Just as with food, healthier beverages (other than water) are typically more expensive than sweetened drinks. Parents are most likely to be turned off by the cost of healthier drinks, though tweens also mention this fact.

Oh, this is one that I just went through with my daughter. Every time she goes to the dentist, she has a cavity … at least one. Sometimes it’s more than one. And she just went about a month ago and she has two small cavities, and they gave us the list again of all these beverages that I thought were okay. Like I pretty much raised them on CapriSun, and on the sheet it said … CapriSun is not juice, even though they market it like it is. And so I had just started going to the store and going, well, looking at the container, well, what is real juice here? And the choices are real, real limited that you can afford—well, that I can afford—on a regular basis. … Like CapriSun, for example, is on sale this week at Meijer’s for basically $1.00 a box, and you can’t get real juice for $1.00 a box.

**Trouble setting limits**

Many Lexington parents report having trouble limiting their tweens’ consumption of sweetened drinks, and most of these feel unwilling to take on this battle with their children given other priorities and barriers to healthy drink consumption. Data obtained from the 2004 Fayette County Youth Risk Behavior Survey (administered at eight county middle schools) shows that 52% of Fayette County respondents are not limited in their soft drink consumption by their parents.

I can’t get mine to drink water. It’s a big challenge.
Still, some parents report success in limiting soft drinks.

*And each child got one bottle of soda a week, and it was like, okay, if you want to drink it on Monday, you’re going until Saturday without another soda.*

*Mine knows he’s limited. He’s allowed one glass of soda a day and not any more. We do the juices, the 100 percent juice.*

Further, focus groups reveal that Lexington tweens are more willing to discuss limits their parents have placed on their soft drink consumption in front of their peers than limits placed on food intake. This suggests that tweens may see soft drink limitations as less intrusive than food limitations. It is possible that anti-soft drink messages from trusted role models (e.g. coaches and teachers) may explain this difference in perception. Regardless, a few tweens in the focus groups were able to convince other focus group participants to view them as “cool” because they don’t drink soft drinks.

**Peer Power**

Given the millions of dollars spent on advertising sweetened beverages, a switch to healthier drinks is an uphill battle for parents. While tweens say they are willing to drink healthier beverages, many express a preference for soft drinks over water and 100% fruit juices, particularly when their peers are involved. Some parents note that the influence of their tweens’ peers influences them, as well.

*You want to be cool. You want your kids to want to invite their friends to your house.* (Lexington parent describing a reason to keep soft drinks at home)

**Less Availability of Healthy Drinks**

Tweens, especially, feel as though healthier drink options are less accessible than they should be (i.e. at restaurants, movie theatres, and the mall). Tweens also point out that sweetened drinks are advertised much more heavily, and tend to offer more variety and better packaging than do healthier drinks.
Defining healthy drinks

As evidenced above by the parent who perceived Capri-Sun to be a healthy drink, many Lexington parents and tweens have a difficult time determining which drinks are actually “healthy”. For most Lexington tweens, healthy drinks are defined as anything but regular sodas (e.g., diet sodas, lemon-lime sodas, sports drinks, Kool-aid, and drinks containing any amount of juice are all considered by some Lexington tweens to be healthy beverages). Some Lexington parents also rationalize consumption of sweetened drinks by prioritizing hydration over avoiding sugar.

*We go straight Kool-Aid, no two ways about it. We know it’s sugary, but it’s the water content: I like my kids to drink a lot of water because they do play so hard, and I like them to stay hydrated.*

Finally, the Coalition’s Youth Board was asked to reflect upon their youthful experience in considering the appeal of sweetened beverages to tweens. According to the Youth Board, the following product attributes are essential for healthier drinks to compete successfully with sweetened beverages:

- Convenient
  - Available everywhere – school, restaurants, home, friends’ homes (easier to get than healthier alternatives)
  - Can purchase bottles that allow you to recap drink – grab and go
- Contains caffeine so it helps you stay awake in class
- Has a flavor unlike plain water
- Is carbonated adds texture
- Provides a choice - tweens want to make their own choice
- Imbues adult status – feels more “grown up” to drink soft drink than juice.

Marketing Questions

*How can we reduce the costs of reducing sweetened beverage consumption for tweens and their parents?*
Place

Lexington focus group results suggest that most tween soft drink consumption occurs at home. Attempts at reducing consumption of sweetened drinks may be most effective if the home is the targeted location.

The focus groups revealed two clear beliefs regarding consumption of soft drinks at restaurants. One belief, as presented above, is that restaurant drinks other than water are priced too high, and thus are avoided. A more commonly mentioned belief, however, is that visits to restaurants are special events, and thus are appropriate opportunities to have soda with a meal. Lexington tweens vary widely in the size of soft drinks they report ordering at restaurants, as well as in the number of refills they typically consume.

Marketing Questions

What location(s) should the coalition focus on in efforts to reduce consumption of sweetened beverages? What potential partners should be recruited to assist?
Promotion

Parent-mentioned ideas for increasing consumption of healthy drinks include:

- Make water “cool” by providing it in bottles or a water cooler.
- Make water less expensive by refilling used water bottles.
- Set a house rule that guests can only have one serving of juice, followed by as much water as they’d like.
- Limit the amount of sweetened drinks purchased in a given time period (e.g. one two-liter bottle per week).

Marketing Questions

What action steps does the coalition want to take to reduce consumption of sweetened beverages?
2. Encouraging Healthier Snacks

Product
Between-meal or meal-replacing snacks are a routine part of life for Lexington tweens. Parent concerns about tween hunger, particularly given school meal schedules and perceptions of tween nutritional growth requirements (i.e. eating more to accommodate growth spurts), prevent many parents from limiting snacks. Many Lexington parents seem willing to encourage healthier snacks for their tweens, though several report a need for additional education in providing alternatives.

Parental monitoring has been shown to influence many risk behaviors, but how parents monitor and set limits for children’s dietary practices is complicated. On one hand, overly restrictive feeding practices have been shown to produce unhealthy eating behaviors (Lee and Birch, 2002). For example, using food as a reward tends to increase a child’s preference for that food (Birch and Fischer, 1995) and forcing a child to eat in order to obtain a reward leads children to have a preference for the food used as the reward (Birch and Fischer 1996, Birch 1999). Also, excessively permissive child-feeding practices (e.g., snacking at will) appear to result in overeating (CWH, 2001), while parental teasing or scolding about weight can also lead to eating disorders (Rorty, Yager, Rossotto et al., 2000).

For these reasons, it is recommended that parents let their children select from a variety of healthy food choices, while the parents model positive behaviors (CWH, 2001).

Lexington parents who routinely make healthy snacks available for their children say that their motivation is to have better control over their children’s nutritional intake. Snacks, according to the parents and tweens, are typically consumed by tweens outside of their parents’ supervision. Controlling the types of snacks available serves as a form of parenting even when the parents are not around.
You really have to keep healthier stuff around the house ... because they're going to eat when you're not there; they're going to eat when you are there.

As with soft drinks, tweens note that they like variety in their snack choices. Some parents have been successful in introducing this variety in the form of healthier snacks such as fruit, and note that their children have readily accepted the change. Lexington tweens confirm that they would be willing to eat healthier snacks, particularly if these snacks were presented in a way that required little or no preparation on their part. Tweens are attracted to the fresh taste and some of the health benefits of healthier snacks, but emphasize convenience and need to be convinced that healthier snacks will satisfy their hunger.

But I think if you have the fruits and the vegetables and the healthy stuff to snack on, I think even if you have the junk food, a lot of kids, I think, are more apt to take that healthy stuff.

For example, we buy a melon and they don't eat it. But if my wife gets it and cuts it up and puts it in the refrigerator and they get home from the street, they will eat it. Or they open the fridge and the first thing they see they will eat... You have to prepare it for them, make it easy. (Lexington Hispanic parent)

An additional benefit of healthy snacks, as seen by parents, is that they tend to minimize the major parent problem of tweens being too full to eat an appropriate portion of more nutritious food at mealtimes. They're not really hungry when they're sitting down to eat because I think of all the snacking that's going on, and so they're not eating.

**Marketing Questions**

Which benefits of encouraging healthier snacks do parents and tweens value most?
Price

Supervision

The largest barrier to changing tween snack consumption, according to parents, is supervision. Lexington tweens are typically alone or with friends when snacking – not with their parents. Parents are concerned about what their tweens eat during these times, but many feel as though their influence over their tweens is lessening with the growing tween desire for independence, and thus perceive that they have little influence over snacking choices. Further, some parents note that even were they to control snack intake at home, they would be unable to prevent consumption of unhealthy snacks outside the home.

*It is hard, especially with school being out, because you don’t know how much they’re taking in, you just know it’s there.*

*Well, they start looking to their peers and… you lose them, you just don’t have them as much during the day. I don’t get a middle schooler back till 5 o’clock, so I’ve not had them for the longest part of the day.*

*I think the unhealthy food is going to be an issue regardless of whether you have it at home or not, because they’re always going to get it somewhere else.*

Cost and preparation

Lexington parents point out that healthy snacks tend to cost more than a “99-cent bag of cheese puffs”, and that their tweens typically eat snacks in large amounts. Further, the parents note that the best way to convince their tweens to eat healthier snacks is to provide prepackaged single-serve options that have been specifically marketed to tweens. These snack foods are typically expensive. Tweens seem unlikely to cut up their own fruits and vegetables, particularly when there are other options available. Parents who are at home during tween snack times have reported success with creating attractive displays of fresh fruits and vegetables.
Other barriers

Other barriers to encouraging children to eat healthy snacks mentioned by parents in the Lexington focus groups include constant tween hunger and lack of support from other adults (e.g. the other parent). Finally, some parents feel as though controlling snacks is not a priority as long as their children receive adequate nutrition at mealtimes.

My kids tend to want to eat when they get off the bus, and they start, and then we'll eat dinner, and then, particularly my boys, are in the kitchen five minutes, the dishes aren't even cleared and they're in the fridge. They want to eat. And then they'll snack. The clock is going on 9, 10 o'clock at night, they're still looking for something to eat ... That's probably our biggest challenge is just saying, “Kitchen's closed.”

If they get [an unhealthy snack], they either get it from their grandmother or their dad, and it's his mother. We're going to blame it all on them.

I guess my main feeling is, is if they eat the meals, then I don't worry about the snacks.

Marketing Questions

How can we reduce the costs of encouraging healthier snacks for tweens and their parents?
Place

As noted above, many Lexington parents feel as though they are unlikely to influence their tweens’ snack consumption anywhere outside of the home. Still, we know from tweens that they commonly snack at school, at friends’ houses, and at attractions such as movie theatres and the mall. With the exception of school vending machines, tweens note that these places typically do not provide healthy snack options.

Marketing Questions

What location(s) should the coalition focus on in efforts to encourage healthier snacks? What potential partners should be recruited to assist?
Promotion
Parents have several ideas for encouraging healthier snacks. These ideas include:

- Limit snack times

  Well, mine get out of school at 2:20, so if they don’t eat something by 3:30, I don’t let them eat any later because they won’t eat dinner. If they start snacking at 4:00, they won’t eat dinner.

- Adjust meal sizes

  I usually fix smaller portions because they always want a snack before bed. So, I figure if we don’t have enough at dinner, you can always have a snack.

- Limit portion sizes

  Well, even for my husband and myself, when we’ve tried to lose weight, we know we’re bad snackers at night, and we would get…a box of Munch’ems or the reduced fat Wheat Thins or whatever. And here…would be our Monday night thing: we’d pour them out on the counter and count out portion size. Put it in a Baggie, put the Baggie back in the box so that we don’t…when we go and grab and handful, we’ve got a Baggie…Because, you know, after a couple of handfuls, you’re probably had three portions.

- Control available snack options

  We have a snack drawer, and it’s one drawer that they can get in, and anything in there they can have. But it is raisins or trail mix or granola bars.

  Or like when my sister has softball games and it’s my mom’s or anybody’s snack night, instead of bringing chips or something, they could bring fruit or apple juice or something. (Lexington tween)

- Enhance healthy snack presentation

  After school, my mom cuts up all the display of vegetables and some fruits, and they look all pretty on this little plate. And it’s like, “Wow!” So I do, I put celery and then the carrots so it looks like it’s a pyramid. So it looks really good, and you’re like, “Oooh! What is this?” (Lexington tween)
Freeze green grapes in the summertime, now that they're cheap, and they go down like candy. . . . It's like a popsicle. They're really good.

- Encouraging creativity/variety with healthy foods

You could do what my grandpa does: he invents all kinds of new foods that are healthy. Like get potato pancakes and put some seasoning on them and some potatoes on, stuff like that. Or a roasted potato, pour some chili in it. I tried it before, it's good. He puts … apples and pears in a bowl and he puts cinnamon on it. It's really good. (Lexington tween)

Many Lexington parents report being unsure about which snacks are best for their children and good ways to convince their children to eat healthy snacks. Many of these parents suggest attempts at education.

If I saw something laying that said “Healthy Snacks for Kids,” I would pick it up.

Like the Girl Scouts sell cookies outside the grocery store, what if you set up a booth or you had, at the Fourth of July fair the Health Department could have a thing where they would hand out, or the different arts fairs and things around town. You could set up a thing and you could have a healthy snack and then recipe things that you could give out. Just those kinds of activities that are sponsored around town.

**Marketing Questions**

What action steps does the coalition want to take to increase consumption of healthy snacks?
3. Encouraging Healthy Meals at Home

Product

Many Lexington parents speak of family meals – occasions when the entire family sits down at the same time to eat a home-cooked meal – with a type of reverent nostalgia. Lexington parents are aware of many benefits of serving family meals, but are simply overwhelmed by barriers of time and knowledge.

According to published research, the frequency with which parents eat meals with their children is associated with positive dietary behaviors. Greater meal frequency is associated with increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, grains, and calcium-rich foods, as well as dietary intakes of energy, protein, calcium, iron, folate, fiber, and vitamins A, C, E, and B-6. Greater meal frequency is also associated with decreased soft drink consumption (Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, et al., 2003).

The most important benefit of family meals, though, according to Lexington parents, is the opportunity to communicate with their children. This is especially important for parents of tweens, as many feel as though their connection to their children is lessening as tweens seek independence. Some parents note that cooking with children allows for even more communication time.

*During the day when you actually get to sit down and actually talk to them, and we always go ... How was your day? What did you do today?* Because, otherwise, you'll never know.

*And then if I get my daughter to get excited or help me cook or when I'm making food, maybe set the table or do something along the lines with me, and then maybe we would be able to eat about the same time, if she's in there helping. “Well, you make that macaroni and cheese while I bake the chicken,” and get her involved with what you're doing, would help sit down and eat together.*
Another key benefit of the family meal is that it can serve as family relaxation time, avoiding the stress and nutritional consequences of a fast-food lifestyle. Lexington parents are aware that the home-cooked meal is nutritionally preferable to most fast food and restaurant food.

*I think when you have family meals, the TV’s off—not family meal with the TV rolling, but family night with the TV off—it's a more relaxed atmosphere, you're not as rushed, you tend not to eat as much because you're busy gabbing and talking, because when you're rushed, you just start shoveling in, you tend to shovel more and more.*

While many Lexington parents lament their lack of cooking skills compared to their parents’ generation, some parents said that they find enjoyment in preparing new dishes for the family. Some parents note success in involving their tweens in planning new meals, thus catering to the tween desire for variety and choice while minimizing the possibility that the tween will reject the new meal.

In many cases, Lexington parents are also convinced that cooking at home is cheaper than eating outside the home. This benefit of home cooking tends to be most important to some parents, who note that price alone is what prevents their families from eating out daily.

Lexington parents also note that dinner is not the only possible family mealtime:

*My mornings tend to be the best part of the day because that’s when you actually have everybody at home. And you find in the afternoon, that’s when they’re going to sports and they’re still at work and they’re everywhere. So, I get up every morning about 6:30 and I make oatmeal, cream of wheat, eggs, toast. That’s kind of our better meal of the day. It makes everybody, I think, have a good day when you have a good morning.*

Importantly, Lexington tweens remain open to the concept of family mealtime, though they are perhaps just as easily distracted by time commitments as their parents. It is clear from the focus group data that many tweens see family mealtimes as the exception, not the rule. As noted in the *Understanding Tweens* section of this report, tweens do maintain a need for parental guidance and support.

*And I think it’s something that everybody looks forward to, because my little boy calls it “family night.” It’s something that we try, even after dinner, we try to do something that’s family-oriented, whether it’s sit and watch a movie together or… he loves to play board games.*
Prior to the focus group research, the Coalition’s Youth Board was asked to reflect upon their own youthful experience in considering potential benefits to parents in having family meals at home. The Youth Board came up with the following list of benefits:

- Time to be with children and get to know them better
- Way to keep up with children and monitor behavior
- Way to have more control over what children eat
- Way to see if they have an eating disorder
- Can feel like a good parent
- Opportunity to teach table manners
- Cheaper than going out

Marketing Questions

*Which benefits of encouraging healthy meals at home do parents and tweens value most?*
Price

Most Lexington parents tell of profound barriers to their attempts at creating a family mealtime. The most pressing of these barriers is time. Parents constantly refer to being overwhelmed by the number of evening commitments they and their tweens take on.

Well, what I do is, I’m out the door with my daughter; he goes, “What’s for dinner?” “Son, you’re a big boy, you fix it.” What can I do? …I’m a single parent …and between all of his stuff: he coaches the 12-year-old boys’ soccer, he plays soccer …he’s on the track team; he’s on the tennis team. He just started working this week as a lifeguard, and then my daughter plays select soccer; and … it seems like every night, it’s just constant. So we don’t sit down for dinner.

Importantly, these parents point out that sitting down for a meal is not the only time-consuming part of family meals. Meal planning, shopping, preparation, and clean-up all take time out of busy schedules, and take energy that harried parents seem to carry in short supply. Many Lexington parents blame this reality on societal change.

And in order for that [family meals] to happen, though, see, somebody has got to plan it, and that’s where our society has changed, because…there’s not somebody in the home any more, the women are moving more out of the home.

Another barrier to family mealtime includes the emotional stress that comes from a parent’s attempts at pleasing all family members with a single meal. As noted previously, different siblings in a family may have different food preferences; leaving many Lexington parents to conclude that no one meal can satisfy the entire family. Lexington parents consistently point out that restaurants – the primary source of competition for family meals – allow each member of the family to be satisfied with their menu choice while requiring less time and energy.

Marketing Questions

How can we reduce the costs of encouraging healthy meals at home for tweens and their parents?
Place

Clearly this topic is primarily concerned with meals in the home, though parents point out that they would appreciate assistance from grocery stores and other places they routinely visit in reducing the amount of time spent in meal planning and shopping. Parents would like information such as recipes for quick, nutritious meals. This information could be distributed through multiple venues.

**Marketing Questions**

*What location(s) should the coalition focus on in efforts to encourage healthy meals at home?*

*What potential partners should be recruited to assist?*
Lexington parents have several suggestions for making healthy meals at home easier to accomplish:

- Involve children in menu planning, shopping, and cooking

One thing that I think would be helpful—and I know this has worked with my son, who is really a fried person, really—is to get him involved in cooking. And he now makes grilled chicken, and he makes a great grilled chicken, he really does.

How about take them to the grocery with you, take them to Farmer’s Market, show them the textures and how to smell for ripeness and…Educate them.

They have some really good children’s cookbooks, too, and I have purchased a couple of those…the recipes include a lot of stuff that they’re familiar with.

- Distribute information/recipes/cooking tips/brief demonstrations that do not require parents to go out of their way

Newsletters, things like that, from different…like the Health Department or the Agriculture Department. The Extension Service has a lot of good resources.

A lot of times you go in and they have recipe cards. If they’ve got artichokes out, they may have recipe cards. Kroger, for a long time, had a kiosk that had all kinds of recipes …gave the nutritional information, how to prepare.

You could have the Health Department go into your Kroger and have it publicized that, on Saturday morning at 10 o’clock, we’ll be doing a demonstration on how to cook without oil or how to…Just like Home Depot does. “Learn to Tile Your Floor,”… Just schedule it; they’re going to be doing these things. “How to Make a Trail Mix” on Tuesday at 5:00 or something.
You need to have class at the store … And that's going to be a key element in that being successful is the time issue, is that we don't need to be adding something else to our schedules.

Well, in the schools, they send some newsletters on a monthly basis to the families. Why not have like a Cooking Corner? Have a recipe that the children could bring home and… the family could work together preparing that as part of the meal.

It'd be good if they had food classes where kids would go participate and prepare food. Like a Little Chef thing.

It is that sometimes we as parents do not have the capacity to speak with our kids … We never stop to think in what we are giving them or what we are teaching them or sometimes we do think about it, but we are not prepared due to lack of a lot of things, lack of schooling, lack of time. (Lexington Hispanic parent)

• Encourage parents to share information with one another

I have a friend that does a recipe group. She has a bunch, six or seven of them, and they all bring a new recipe and they get together once a month and they eat things and trade the recipe. I thought that was always a cool way to get new recipes.

• Use cooking equipment that reduces preparation time, such as slow cookers and steamers.

Marketing Questions

What action steps does the coalition want to take to encourage healthy meals at home?
4. Reducing Restaurant Visits/Promoting Healthier Restaurant Menu Choices

Product
According to Lexington focus group data, the coalition is faced with an important choice in actions associated with eating out. On one hand, the Coalition could decide to encourage families to simply eat out less and cook at home more often. Another option would be to concede the realities of time that cause Lexington families to eat out and to attempt to change their meal choices in the restaurants themselves. In other words, here the coalition’s choice of product is less clear than in previous topics.

The following factors are key in causing Lexington parents to reduce consumption of restaurant food or make healthier restaurant food choices:

Cost
Many, but not all, Lexington parents believe eating out to be costlier than preparing food at home. Not all parents are convinced of this, however, as Lexington restaurants have devoted considerable energy to overcoming this barrier with special “kids eat free” offers and other low-cost promotions.

It’s hard to go to Subway and spend four bucks on a sandwich, when for 99 cents you can go get the double cheaper.

I can eat out for cheaper than I can buy the fancy meal. I can stop by and get the $5.00 pizza on Mondays. I couldn’t feed my family for $5.00 going to the grocery store.
Availability of Nutritional Information

Some Lexington restaurants have begun to prominently display nutritional information on their menus, while others make the information available via pamphlets and websites. Lexington parents appear to appreciate having access to this information. They also note that this information has caused them to alter their menu selections. Tweens appear less receptive to this data than do their parents.

Well, and Ruby Tuesday’s just put calories on their menu, which has severely depressed me. But I did order the Petite Sirloin twice because the Buffalo Chicken Sandwich that I really want is like 800 calories more.

Well, we were going to Starbucks a lot as kind of an after-school thing to do, and we were both ordering this fruit thing, and we got the little pamphlet. Oh, my gosh! It’s like 20-some grams of fat and… I don’t know how many calories, and we thought we were getting something healthy.

Availability of more nutritious menu items

Lexington parents also note that several Lexington restaurants are increasing the availability of healthy foods on their menus.

And it used to be that restaurants maybe thought it was all higher-fat choices, but I think that’s changed, where almost any restaurant you go to is going to have something that you can choose for your picky eater and something for the person that’s watching calories.

Lexington tweens are generally pleased with these healthier options, as well. Particularly popular with tweens are salads, apple dippers, mandarin oranges, and smoothies.

Of course, the availability of healthier menu options at restaurants may or may not be good news for all tweens. It seems possible that parents may choose to eat out more, rationalizing that healthier options will replace home-cooked meals. Many so-called healthier restaurant options are still high in calories and/or fat, with large portion sizes. Also, the parent’s selection of a salad does not necessarily prevent the tween from ordering less healthy foods, as the focus groups show.
Restaurant Burn-out

Some parents point out that they are tired of restaurants, thus seeing the home-cooked meal as ideal. These are typically among the busiest parents, for whom cooking at home seems farthest from their daily realities.

When I don’t do the double shifts, I can cook, or I’ll throw something in the crock pot, because I would rather, honestly, I’m tired of eating out… I’m so tired of fast food. I’d rather come home and fix a sandwich or eat crackers and something than eat out.

Guilt/nostalgia

Many Lexington parents explain feelings of guilt associated with eating out too often. Parents note that their parents (particularly their mothers) were able to juggle their own responsibilities and still cook meals at home. Some Lexington parents also express concern that their children are learning poor eating habits (particularly with fast food) and are themselves not learning how to cook.

Marketing Questions

What specific product (eating out less or choosing healthier menu items) does the coalition wish to market? Which benefits of the chosen product do parents and tweens value most?
**Price**

There are several reasons why Lexington families eat out as often as they do. Each of these reasons can be seen as a barrier to the coalition’s chosen product.

**Time/Convenience**

Lexington parents frequently use the term “overwhelmed” to describe their hectic lives. The fact that the restaurant meal minimizes the need to plan, shop for, prepare, serve, eat, and clean up a meal is by far the most common reason cited for restaurant patronage among Lexington parents.

> Now, when I want to sit down and talk with my kids in the evening after I’ve worked eight hours...if I spend an hour and a half cooking and 30 minutes cleaning it up, I’m not as fun and relaxed at the meal as if I’m at a restaurant and somebody else is cleaning it up and fixing it up.

> It’s not just the not having to cook; it’s the planning of the meal. Just, after 20 years, I’m kind of tired of it.

> Sports, the number one fast-food stop for us.

> We go out to eat every day, seven days a week ... I just don’t have the time. My job doesn’t allow me to be at home where I’m able to cook, and the girls are usually with me, picking them up from school and so forth, so we do fast food ... we actually go to a restaurant seven days a week, literally.

**Choice/Variety**

Lexington parents point out that restaurants allow each member of the family to choose exactly what they’d like to eat, in contrast to the parent preparing one meal that may not be enjoyed by all family members. Some parents also voice a perception that even healthier food is prepared in a more appetizing manner at restaurants.

> You sort of get tired of making four different foods for picky eaters, so you go out and everyone can figure out what they want.

> Sometimes you can’t reproduce the foods at home as well as at a restaurant ... some of the healthier food choices are really hard to get that healthy at home.
Rewards/Social Gathering

Many Lexington parents look to restaurants as rewards (either for children's achievements, family milestones, or simply surviving the week), while others explain how restaurants are nice for “date night” or gatherings of friends.

Right, because I worked all week and then I went Friday and Saturday, then I don’t have to cook. That’s my reward.

My son plays the violin, so sometimes after a violin lesson it’s late, and we’ll do this [eating out] as sort of a reward for doing something and pick someplace to go.

We do it to meet with friends or former neighbors. It’s a way of keeping up with people.

Other barriers

The barriers associated with choosing healthier restaurant food options are more difficult to identify in focus groups. Some parents mentioned a desire to “get their money’s worth” as an explanation for choosing larger portion sizes. Certainly the sense of “restaurant as reward” also contributes to less healthy menu choices. Perceptions of taste and desire for foods that are less readily prepared at home (most homes, for instance, do not have an industrial fryer) probably explain much of the tendency toward less healthy menu choices.

Marketing Questions

How can we reduce the costs of the coalition’s target behavior for tweens and their parents?
Place

Besides restaurants (which could, for marketing purposes, be divided into sit-down and fast food establishments, though our research shows that the primary motivations for and barriers to each are the same), the Lexington focus group respondents note that they are making food choices at other places outside of the home, as well. Movie theatres are a common tween food source, where tweens note that healthy food is minimally available. Ballpark concessions are also a common tween meal replacement.

Partnership is an important consideration here, as well. The coalition should decide whether there is any benefit in working with restaurants themselves in developing and carrying out the marketing plan.

Marketing Questions

What location(s) should the coalition focus on in efforts to encourage the target behavior? What potential partners should be recruited to assist?
Promotion

The following ideas are derived from the focus group research:

Ideas for minimizing restaurant visits.

- Encourage food preparation and planning ahead of time
  - Plan weekly menus in advance
  - Prepare some of the next night's meal the night before
  - Use slow cookers
- Stock quick-to-prepare frozen foods to avoid the need/desire to eat out in a time crunch
- Learn to emulate restaurants in home recipes

That's one of the things that I have done, because my husband works evenings, is, I cook a lot of the foods that they like at restaurants, like an Applebee's kind of thing. I do Applebee's kind of salads a lot because they like them.

Ideas for improving restaurant menu choices.

- Increase promotion of healthier foods.
- Involve restaurants in teaching children how to choose and prepare healthy foods.
- Encourage splitting meals to achieve better portion size

Well, now, my daughter and I do split meals when we go out because a lot of times we like the same things, but they're not always healthy

- Encourage restaurants to serve smaller portions
- Many tweens are too old for kids' menus and not old enough to need a full meal.
  - Provide the option to order smaller portions (e.g. half- or light portions)
  - Promote smaller portion options in a way that's more appealing to tweens.

If they could do just, like for the kids' menus, have... Like Fazoli's, there's certain things... on their main menu that you can either get a small or a regular. If a lot of these restaurants would say, “Okay, you can get … this size or the child's portion” then there would be a whole lot more variety.
If it wasn’t called “kid’s meal,” my daughter would order it, but ... she gets offended when they bring her a ... plastic cup with a lid...But it’s the “kids’” thing. She thinks she’s older than that.

Marketing Questions

What action steps does the coalition want to take to encourage the target behavior?
References


