

For those of you that attended last week's webinar about messages for mothers of preschoolers, we used a similar process to develop core nutrition messages for children and mothers of elementary school age children. To ensure that our messages would be compelling relevant and believable-we involved both mothers, and in this case children, in the developmental process.

Involving children in the process helped reveal what themes and approaches would get 8-to-10 year olds excited about fruits, vegetables and milk and spark their interest in additional educational activities designed to motivate them to consume fruits, vegetables and milk.

The feedback we gathered from mothers and children through a series of focus groups forms the heart of the messages we are sharing with you today.

Their input is also reflected in the "real-life" tips and other supporting content that addresses mothers concerns about providing fruits, vegetables and low-fat milk when household resources are limited and schedules are hectic.

Our hope is that understanding the research behind the core messages will help you implement them in your programs and provide you with new insights about how to communicate with mothers and children on these issues.



We conducted 6 focus groups with low-income mothers of Elementary School Age Children. Again, these were mothers of children 6 to 10 years of age. A total of 45 moms participated in the focus groups.

Trained female moderators facilitated 90-minute sessions using a structured discussion guide, with 5-8 moms participating per group.

Overall, half of the focus groups were formative sessions which were designed to identify the emotional rewards mothers associated with helping their children develop healthy eating habits. These groups also told us about mothers' attitudes and behaviors surrounding nutrition and mealtime in the household and perceived barriers to fruit and vegetable consumption. During the formative sessions, we also tested draft concept statements that allowed us to see how mothers would react to different approaches to communicating a concept like making fruits and vegetables more accessible at home.

The other half of the FG were evaluative sessions which primarily focusing on mothers' reactions to actual messages and supporting content.



We conducted focus groups with mothers and children between December 2007 and June 2008.

Groups were held in 6 states; they were New York, Maryland, Texas, California, Illinois and Alabama.

The locations were selected to ensure that we recruited participants that reflected the demographics of FNS programs and to include people from various geographic areas of the country. We held groups in both larger urban cities (e.g., Los Angeles, Dallas) as well as smaller cities (e.g., Rochester NY, Birmingham AL).



All of the women in our focus groups resided with their Elementary School age child;

had gross household incomes at or below 185% of U.S. Poverty Income Guidelines;

were primary food shoppers/preparers in their households;

and could speak and read English.

<b>Demographic Characteristics (N=45)</b>	
	<b># of Moms</b>
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Black or African American	21
White or Caucasian	15
Hispanic	9
Other	--
<b>Level of Formal Education</b>	
High school or less	10
Some college	30
College graduate	5
<b>Employment</b>	
Not employed	19
Employed part time	8
Employed full time	18
<b>Participate in WIC, Free/Reduced Lunch, Food Stamps</b>	
Yes	34
No	11

This slide shows the Demographic Characteristics of the focus group participants. Participants consisted of African American, White and Hispanic mothers.

And we had a mix in terms of marital status, education level, and employment.

Over half of participants were or had children participating in WIC, Food Stamps and/or receiving free/reduced priced lunch.



So what bubbled up to the surface in terms of overall findings.

In our groups--Mothers readily volunteered that good nutrition is needed for children to stay healthy, and specifically talked about the importance of eating fruits and vegetables for good health.

Moms said that getting their children to eat fruits and vegetables made them feel like they were teaching their children life lessons--habits that would help them stay healthy now and in the future. Some went on to add other tangible benefits of having healthy kids, such as their child being sick less often and needing fewer trips to the doctor or dentist.

While some mothers said that their children loved fruit or even a particular vegetable, mothers across groups reported that their children ate a limited variety of fruits and vegetables and preferred other foods.

This is consistent with what we heard in our focus groups with 8-10 year olds. While many children could name a variety of fruits and vegetables, the list of ones they actually reported eating was much shorter and most stated that they preferred other foods like chips, ice cream and cookies at snack time because they tasted better.

Like mothers of preschoolers, mothers of elementary school age children reported having busy hectic schedules. And time appeared to play role in their preferences for messages and the likelihood that they will deem supporting content as realistic, practical, and actionable.

Overall, Moms liked messages that included an active role for their child, related to what they had observed in their own life. They wanted messages that were short, specific and action oriented. I'll give some examples of these later on.

As a final note, mothers in our groups preferred messages that talked about fresh fruits and vegetables in general or that specifically mentioned fresh fruits and vegetables. The disliked and mention of canned, frozen and dried fruits and veggies, which they considered to be less healthful.

Want your kids to reach for a healthy snack?  
Make sure fruits and veggies are in reach.

Core Message

When they come home hungry,  
have fruits and veggies ready to eat.

Here you see the final core messages related to making fruits and vegetables available and accessible.

Let your kids be “produce pickers.”  
Help them pick fruits and veggies at the store.

Core Message

And a third one with a role for children.

**Availability/Accessibility Messages**

- Mothers identified with:
  - Kids come home *hungry* after school
  - Kids are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables when they are “easy to see”
  - When kids pick their own fruits and vegetables at the store, they are more likely to eat them.



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Moms indicated preferring these messages because they had observed them to be true in their own lives. They had all experienced the fact that:

Kids come home *hungry* after school

Kids are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables when they are “easy to see”

When kids pick their own fruits and vegetables at the store, they are more likely to eat them.

**Narrative Supporting Content**

What Moms Liked

"I'm hungry." That's the first thing my kids say when they come through the door. I need something to feed them—fast. Sometimes they go to the kitchen and get their own snacks. I found that when I put fruits and vegetables in a place where my kids can see them—they eat them. Now I keep cut-up veggies on a low shelf in the fridge and a bowl of fresh fruit on the counter. When I don't have fresh fruits and veggies, I use canned or frozen. It takes a little planning, but it's worth it. I know fruits and vegetables help them stay healthy.

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This is an example of one of the pieces of supporting content for moms. The circled parts show wording mothers found to be especially compelling or relatable. The ideas that kids are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables when they see them, reflections on their busy schedules, desire to help their children stay healthy.



While the idea of making fruits and veggies more available and accessible was well-received, the tone of the message was very important in whether mothers liked the message and felt it related to them. They didn't like messages that they considered to be too much like a slogan, too dramatic, or condescending.

For instance, some thought that the phrase "It doesn't take a miracle to get kids to eat fruits and vegetables." overstated the problem. While others found this phrase to be condescending or patronizing. For instance, one mother likened this to saying, "It's not like it's rocket science." Another concept statement we tested which said "Is healthy snacking a stretch? Not when you keep fruits and veggies ready to eat and within easy reach for your kids." was also viewed as condescending by some mothers.

The term "feed them" in the draft message, "When they come home hungry, feed them ready-to-eat fruits and veggies." received some negative reactions from mothers who said that the use of the word "feed" implied that they must make and serve a snack to their child after school and that their schedule did not permit this. Her kids needed to get something to eat on their own. For others, "feed" implied that they force their child to eat fruits and vegetable. As a result we softened this sentence to say "when they come home hungry, have fruits and vegetables ready-to-eat."

In our groups, moms did not like tips in the supporting content that they felt were easy to incorporate into their busy schedules. Anything that moms felt was too time-consuming did not make the cut. For instance the suggestion that moms make frozen banana pops out of bananas, yogurt and crushed cereal with their kids was not well received.

Some moms were also apprehensive about recipe ingredients they felt their child would not like (curry, sour cream, avocado, and others). Providing food tastings or allowing moms to prepare recipes with their children may help overcome ingredient specific issues.



A subset of concept statements and messages we tested looked at ways moms could help increase the likelihood of a child selecting fruits and veggies that were made available in the home. Here, statements that emphasized a “hands on” approach for the children (i.e., let children be produce pickers) garnered more positive reactions than the messages that did not provide an active role for the children (i.e., give them the simple snack).

Some moms found the “taste explorer” concept ambiguous asking “what is a ‘taste explorer?’” and some did not feel that the idea of trying only new foods would be compelling to their children.

In essence, mothers were more comfortable with the idea of their child selecting familiar favorites than choosing new fruits or vegetables. Some noted that bringing home new and different produce that their children probably would not like would just lead to waste.

Across both formative and evaluative groups the “Produce Picker” message was consistently very well received by mothers. They associated this message with involving their children in helping to pick out a fruit or vegetable in the grocery store.

Some mothers did say that it would be hard to get children excited about picking out frozen, canned or dried fruits and vegetables. And again felt like these were less nutritious than fresh fruits and vegetables.

More than likely, when you let kids pick it out, they will eat it, because that's how my youngest does when I take him to the grocery store. If it's something mom picks out, he would be reluctant to eat it.

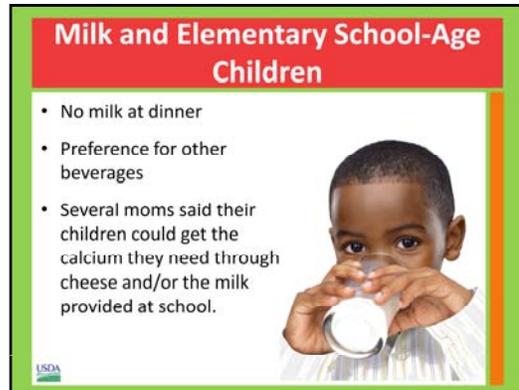
Mother of Elementary School-age Child,  
Los Angeles, CA

Here is a quote from a mother about her preference for the produce pickers message

"It was all over the place for me. Fresh, frozen, canned, dried. Okay, which one do you want me to look at? I need it to be more direct. I don't think they all belong in the same category. Canned isn't as good as fresh."

Mother of an Elementary School-age Child,  
Birmingham, AL

Here is a quote from a mother showcasing some of the sentiments we heard about frozen, canned and dried fruits and vegetables.



We decided to develop a message for moms about milk since our focus groups with 8-10 year old kids indicated that milk was rarely served at dinner and because children perceived that they had little control over the type of milk that was available.

For many of the kids in our groups, the only milk consumed was milk with cereal or at lunch. Milk at dinner was often replaced by other beverages such as soda, juice, and water. Both mothers and the children in our groups reported that they preferred other beverages to milk.

In our focus groups with mothers, several mothers felt that milk was not as critical for their elementary school-aged children as it was when their children were younger.

Some also reported that the milk provided at school as well as through other milk products (i.e., cheese and yogurt) provided enough calcium for their children.

“Now they’re older, they have choices, and they do other things to get their calcium. My kids are big cheese and yogurt eaters. So if they’re not drinking the milk, I really don’t care...”

-Mother of Elementary School-Age Child,  
Chicago, IL

“When they’re a toddler, yeah (it’s important to serve them milk), but when they get older there’s just so much out there, like the juices.”

Mother of Elementary School-age Child,  
Birmingham, AL



This is the final core nutrition message about milk.



Moms connected with the milk message phrase “They’re still growing”.

The idea of providing their children with the nutrients they need to grow and be healthy appealed to the moms.

Moms did not like messaging that implied they should serve milk to everyone in their family. These mothers noted that the phrase “Pour some for everyone” did not work for them because they, personally, did not drink milk or because one or more family members did not drink milk.

Some respondents said that they did not like the specification of low-fat or fat-free in the messages. Stating that for taste or nutritional reasons they would not serve those types of milk.

There was confusion among some mothers as to the fat content and nutritional value of various kinds of milk. Information that fat-free and low-fat milk had the same amounts things like vitamin D and calcium as whole milk was new and interesting to moms.

“The fat-free or 1% milk didn’t  
sound like it would be as nutritious  
as the low-fat milk.”

Mother of Elementary School-age Child,  
Los Angeles, CA

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Mothers in our focus groups

“Low-fat says we reduced the fat a little bit while 1% says it’s only 1% milk.”

Mother of Elementary School-age Child,  
Birmingham, AL

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## Design for Children's Groups

- 12 groups; 73 children total
- 45 minutes; 6-7 children per group
- Half formative (exploratory/concept testing)
- Half evaluative (message testing with images)



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We conducted 12 focus groups with children between 8 and 10 years of age. A total of 73 children participated. The children were not related to the moms participating in the other focus groups.

Each session was 45 minutes in length

Children Participants: Demographic Characteristics (N=73)	
	Total
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Black or African American	34
White or Caucasian	22
Hispanic or	16
Other	1
<b>Gender</b>	
Boys	35
Girls	38
<b>Age</b>	
8-year-olds	18
9-year-olds	30
10-year-olds	25
<b>Participate in WIC, Free/Reduced Lunch, or Food Stamps</b>	
Yes	50
No	23

Children groups contained a mixture of primarily African American, Hispanic and Caucasian children.

All resided in low income households 185% of poverty.

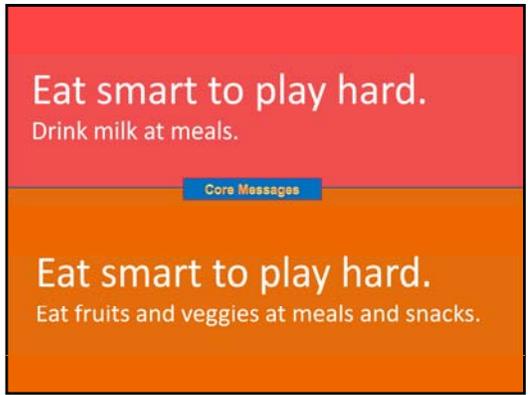
A mix of girls/boys, 8, 9 and 10 year olds.

68 percent were or had a mother that was participating in WIC, food stamps or free/reduced priced lunch.

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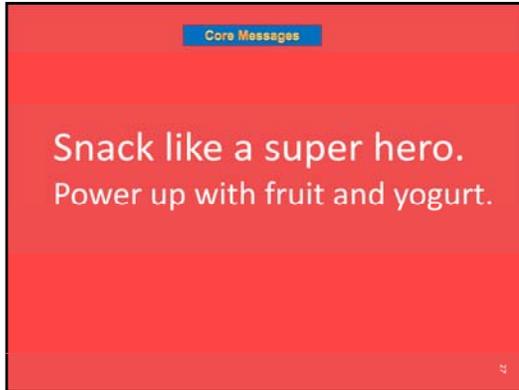
In the evaluative focus groups, messages were first presented alone and then with very rough test graphics to ensure that kids were comprehending the messages as intended and also to give the kids an idea of where they might see such messages-such as on a poster.



These are the final Core Messages related to the Eat smart to play hard theme.



These are the final core messages related to the rocket ship theme



And the core message related to a superhero theme



In our focus groups, children preferred messages that melded fantasy with the reality of “being the best you can be.” Kids liked the idea of having more energy, being strong or fast and maximizing their physical performance at play or sports.

Messages that utilize a rocket ship, super hero and eat smart to play hard them resonated the best with kids.

With the “eat smart to play hard” messages the most popular among those tested. Kids understood these messages to mean that consuming fruits, vegetables or milk would give them strength and energy for sports and play. Many kids that did not play organized sports still understood these messages and found them desirable.

The “super hero” and “rocket ship” messages were the next most well-received. Again kids connected these with the ideas of being faster, having more energy and being strong.

Overall, children found that most of the sample images “fit” their corresponding messages. But most commented that each picture should be more active and exciting. Depicting the super hero flying or eating, and a more “active” representation of the rocket ship would likely garner even more attention than the images presented to participants in these discussion sessions.

**Messages for Children**

- Less popular:
  - Messages where fruits, veggies or low-fat milk were the pay-off
  - Messages /concept statements promoting “asking behaviors”
    - “Remind mom which veggies are your faves, then she will know to offer them at dinner.”
    - “Use your kid power. Help mom choose the fruits and vegetables you like from a rainbow of colors.”
    - “Make mine low-fat milk!”
    - “Ask Mom to make yours low-fat milk, please. Help her by adding low-fat milk, cheese and yogurt to the grocery list.”



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Kids did not like “direct” messages that encourage children to ask their mothers for fruits and vegetables and low-fat milk. This may be because the outcomes presented in these messages were seen as less favorable (i.e., actually getting vegetables and milk) than benefits described in other tested concepts. Kids also wondered how their parents would feel about them asking for these foods.

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A clear positive reinforcement connected to these messages may be more powerful, tapping into desires for positive recognition from parents—a potential benefit to eating healthfully.

"...if I eat healthy food, I could play  
harder and play better in the game."

-Boy, Chicago, IL

"If you eat smart and you drink milk at your dinner, then you can play harder and be more active, and you can do more things, because you'll have more energy."

-Girl, Chicago, IL

"[I like it] because I actually want to soar. And I actually want to go to the moon and stuff like a astronaut."

-Girl, Los Angeles, CA

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“When you try to eat it, it’ll make you stronger, and then you can be like a super hero and have more energy.”

-Girl, Chicago, IL

“Snack like a super hero. Power up with fruit and yogurt.’ ...it’s convincing, and it’s really...it’s really cool.”

-Boy, Chicago, IL

