

Environmental Factors Affecting Dietary Intake and Mental Health in Children and Adolescents

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Abstract

The review of literature examined how dietary intake and the environment adolescents ages, 2-18 years of age they live associates with mental health. Negative dietary intake among adolescents is more common in today's society than ever before. A fast-paced economy, busy parents, lack of education, parental choices and their socioeconomic status, screen time, reward system, and lack of encouragement all are negative factors in adolescent's dietary intake and mental health behaviors. Adolescents learn directly from their caregivers and these behaviors are instilled for life. Ultimately, adolescents need their parents to be educated about the correlation between negative dietary intake and the effects it plays on their mental health. There are many factors from an adolescent's environment that needs to be considered when outweighing poor dietary intake and mental health behaviors.



Methods

A narrative review of literature was conducted over the topic of poor dietary intake among children and adolescents ages 2-18 years of age. Data was collected from multiple studies in which parents filled out a survey about children's dietary intake, or information was collected while children were at school or from a caregiver at a child-care setting. The studies included a mixture of diet recalls, surveys, articles, and or questionnaires.

Environmental Effects:

- Socioeconomic status of family
- Access to home cooked meals and healthy foods
- Environment in which the school or child-care center the child attends
 - Parental / caregiver control of food intake
 - Lack of information the caregiver / parent contains
- Amount of screen time (TV, cell phone, video games)
- Positive and negative association around food

Interventions:

- Dietary education in schools and at home
 - Positive parental self-efficacy
 - Increasing public health policies and prevention initiatives
- Partnerships in media & promotion of healthier options (is it "cool" to eat healthier)
 - Home visits from the school
 - Limit screen-time caregiver plan
 - Limit high energy foods brought into house
- Building self-regulating behaviors in children and adolescents

References:

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Dietary Intake and Environmental factors affecting Mental Health

Meeting children's nutrient needs early in life can be challenging, and many parents face barriers to securing enough nutritious, safe, affordable, and age-appropriate food for their children (UNICEF, 2021)¹ . Environmental factors and changes are a major contributing barrier to children's daily food intake. Understanding these changes is pivotal if we are to help today's children establish healthy eating patterns, which contribute to the prevention and delay of chronic disease later in life (Crockett & Sims, 1995)². In any given year, approximately 20% of children and adolescents globally have mental health difficulties, including major depressive disorder (Khalid, Williams, Reynolds, 2017)³. Among some of the resources found there was a correlation of increased consumption of unhealthy "junk" food in those that have depression and anxiety. The study conducted by Child and Adolescent Psychiatry stated the poor nutrient content of junk or fast foods may have an effect on normal brain functioning and, thus, have an effect on negative mood via the synthesis of neurotransmitters such as serotonin (Hong & Peltzer, 2017)⁴.

Conclusion

Most studies concluded that environmental factors do contribute to a child having poor dietary intake. Overall, affecting the child's mental health lifelong and contributes to many health concerns later in life. A higher intake of fruit and vegetable consumption showed lower mental distress (depression and anxiety) and increased happiness in most of the children included in this review of literature. Interventions and policies should be in place for positive outcomes of dietary intake and mental health in children. Each contributing factor that affects dietary intake in children are connected in some way and if those factors are not addressed this directly affects the child or adolescent's mental health.