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Aim
To investigate the factors that influence the food
choices made by mothers of young children who live
in areas of high deprivation

Project Outline/Methodology
Three hundred mothers of two year old children living
in areas of high deprivation in Dundee city and Fife
were interviewed in their own homes. The study
investigated the role of family characteristics; health
knowledge and beliefs; and patterns of food
purchasing, cooking and serving, in determining poor
diet among disadvantaged children. Children were
allocated a composite dietary score based on the
foods they ate regularly. This was used in the
analysis to identify the factors which predict a poor
quality diet. The study also investigated what
predicted mothers’ intentions and behaviour in:
providing breakfast, cooking with raw ingredients,
and eating a meal together as a family.

Key Results
Most (85%) of the children were classified as having
a poor quality diet, based on current guidelines.
Mothers’ general knowledge about healthy eating was
high, and did not predict the quality of the children’s
diet. Low levels of knowledge of specific dietary
recommendations, and lack of confidence in their
knowledge, were associated with a poorer diet. Lower
frequencies of cooking with raw ingredients,
providing breakfast and the family eating together,
were also associated with a poorer diet.

Mothers identified many barriers to providing a
healthy diet including a busy lifestyle and reluctance
to change current diet. Concern that the child does
not eat enough increased the risk of a poor diet.
Mothers reporting that they were unlikely to restrict
sweets, or that they found it difficult to provide 2-3
portions of fruit, were associated with an increased
risk of a poor diet. Believing that a healthy diet
would help the child to eat more decreased the risk
of having a poor diet.

Conclusions
This study has successfully conducted detailed
interviews with a representative sample of mothers
from disadvantaged areas. Many of the children had
a poor diet and specific areas of concern were
highlighted. The study has identified factors which
predict the quality of children’s diet, from which
strategies can be developed to improve mothers’
ability to plan and prepare healthy meals.

What does this study add to the field?
This study has shown that mothers’ intentions and
perceived control are the most powerful predictors of
the diet of their young children. It has identified that
general knowledge about a healthy diet was very
high, but knowledge on specific dietary guidance was
lower. It has also shown that lack of knowledge on
the specific guidance, predicts poor quality diet.

Implications for Practice or Policy
Efforts should be made to promote more positive
intentions to the preparation and serving of food
(breakfast every day, cooking from raw ingredients,
eating together). The benefits of these behaviours to
the mother (enjoyment) and the child (improved diet,
weight control) should be emphasised. Mothers could
be encouraged to plan specific meals at which the
family eats together. The impact on a child’s weight
from the regular consumption of high fat/ high sugar
snacks and take-away meals could also be stressed.
Health visitors could have an important role in
helping change dietary behaviours.

Where to next?
The effectiveness of the potential strategies to
improve diet should be tested in a randomised
controlled trial. The main question is whether a brief
intervention delivered by health visitors can enhance
mothers’ confidence and improve their ability to plan,
cook and serve healthier meals.

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