Whole Grain Messages: What Resonates with Moms?

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Abstract

Objective: To share results of focus groups with low-income mothers regarding whole grain foods, and to describe the results informed development of whole grain messages, tips, and communication tools for use in USDA’s nutrition programs.

Design, Setting and Participants: Eighteen focus groups were conducted in six states in two rounds of qualitative research. Separate discussions were held with mothers of preschool and elementary school-aged children using a structured guide.

Outcome Measures and Analysis: Session leaders used a discussion guide. Sessions were taped and staff noted mothers’ perceptions and behaviors, reactions to message concepts, tips, related photos, and information seeking habits. The data was reviewed for recurring themes and defined as issues staff noted mothers’ perceptions and behaviors, reactions to message concepts, tips, related photos, and information seeking habits. The data was reviewed for recurring themes and defined as issues.

Methods

- Conducted two rounds of focus groups in six diverse geographic locations.
- Segmented moms those with a preschool or elementary school-aged child.
- Excluded those with special diets, working in health/fitness or considered a “nutrition expert”.
- Professional focus group facilitators to recruit/screen participants.

Formative Round

- 12 triads allowed in-depth discussion and probing of beliefs and practices re: foods and beverages that are most important for healthy growth and development.
- Exploration of 11 new message concepts focusing on convincing moms to purchase, prepare, consume and offer whole-grain foods at family meals and snacks.
- Feedback on actionable tips and advice to complement existing messages.
- Exploration of health information seeking behaviors and preferred channels for communication about whole grains.

Evaluation Rounds

- Six focus group sessions across three locations.
- Gathered feedback on four refined whole grain messages and three new messages.
- Obtained responses to complementary supporting tips, advice, guidance and images.
- Feedback from Practitioners and Stakeholders.
- Workgroup members and program nutrition personnel provided periodic feedback.
- Key stakeholders/experts (including those with nutrition and health expertise) provided comments on products tested during evaluative rounds.

Results

Knowledge, Beliefs, Barriers

Moms:

- Knew whole grains were generally healthful foods, but cited whole grains less often as important for their children’s health.
- Had limited knowledge of how to identify “whole grain” foods and often relying on using visual cues.
- Were less familiar with specific health/nutritional benefits; recalled benefits were digestive health/regularity and weight control.
- Identified taste, time, and difficulty identifying whole grains as primary barriers to consuming whole grains.
- Reported a moderate level of consumption for themselves and their children, but expressed and demonstrated confusion about whole grains suggest a discrepancy between reported and actual consumption.
- Positive photos showing loving relationships between mothers and children these were more likely to moms’ attention and inspire them in to read the content.

Message Elements that Resonated

- Evoked feelings of empowerment and spoke to mothers’ ability to influence their children’s long-term health and eating habits.
- Addressed health and nutritional benefits such as “good for your heart and overall health.”
- Communicated quickly and easily ways to choose whole grain foods, such as look for “100% whole wheat” or “100% whole grains” on food labels.
- Contained information they considered practical i.e., unique tips to help them incorporate whole grains into meals and snacks.
- Tips, advice and guidance that offered options from which mothers could choose what work best for them were lauded by moms.
- Included practical examples of ways to get kids to eat whole grains; for example serving whole grain pancakes, something kids already enjoyed making switched to a whole grain version seemed more realistic and attainable.

What Mothers Think and Know about Whole Grains

"Honestly, why is it good? don’t know. I just know that’s how I was brought up." - Birmingham, AL

“I think [whole grain bread] is brown, and it’s kind of thicker, and I think on the crust it has nuts or something.” - Chicago, Illinois

“I think there are [health benefits from eating whole grain], like kind of go with what they hype. I don’t really know what they are.” - Phoenix, AZ

Table 1: Examples of Whole Grain Message Evolution

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<tr>
<th>Formative Round</th>
<th>Evaluative Round</th>
<th>Final Message</th>
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<tr>
<td>All Moms</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What whole grains do for your kids</strong></td>
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<td>Whole grains give your kids more B vitamins, minerals and fiber to help them feel full longer, and have more energy at school to concentrate and learn.</td>
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Conclusion

The findings from this qualitative research indicate that:

- While low-income moms have limited understanding of the benefits and how to identify whole grain foods, they are generally aware that whole grains are healthier than refined grains.
- Moms connect with messages that provide new information such as nutrition and health benefits, and are inspired by messages that tap into their role as moms.

Evaluations and message development can elicit meaningful insights that can help guide and inform future work.

Acknowledgements

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Demographics

- 69 Mothers Participated in 18 Focus Groups
- 70% Age 18-34 yrs; 52% Vocational/Technical
- 66% Employed Full/Part Time; 52% household of 3-4 people
- 87% participated in at least one nutrition program
- 49% African American; 29% Hispanic; 29% White

Evaluative Round

- Start every day the whole grain way. Help your kids get their day off to a healthy start. Serve whole grain cereals, bread, tortillas, or pancakes at breakfast. Whole grains give your kids B vitamins, minerals and fiber to help them feel full longer, and have more energy at school to concentrate and learn.

Final Message

- Start every day the whole grain way. Help your kids get their day off to a healthy start. Serve whole grain versions of cereal, bread, tortillas, or pancakes at breakfast. Whole grains give your kids B vitamins, minerals and fiber to help them feel full longer, and have more energy at school to concentrate and learn.

How to Use Whole Grains

- Give yourself and those you love the goodness of whole grains. Make at least half of your daily bread, tortillas, pasta and cereals whole grains. They may help control weight, and they’re good for your heart and overall health.

- Give yourself and your kids the goodness of whole grains. Make at least half of the grains you eat - such as bread, tortillas, pasta and cereals - whole grains. Whole grains foods have B vitamins, minerals and fiber that are good for your heart, digestion, and healthy weight and overall health.

- Give yourself and your kids the goodness of whole grains. Make at least half of the grains you eat - such as bread, tortillas, pasta and cereals - whole grains. Whole grains foods are good for your heart and digestion, and can help you maintain a healthy weight and good overall health.

- Give yourself and those you love the goodness of whole grains. Make at least half of the grains you eat whole grain foods such as brown, whole-wheat, and oatmeal. Whole grains foods are good for your heart and digestion, and can help you maintain a healthy weight and good overall health.