

# **INFLUENCE OF MATERNAL OCCUPATION ON FAMILY FOOD PATTERN & EATING HABITS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

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### *Abstract*

*Family eating pattern is linked with eating habits and nutritional status of children. The working status of mothers may influence family food choices and consequently eating habits of children. The present research was undertaken to study the effects of maternal occupation on family food pattern and eating habits of preschool children. Three aspects were examined –food buying habits of mothers, food preferences of children, and food parenting methods. 56 working mothers who were working as professionals to skilled & unskilled workers were selected.*

*The findings regarding food buying habits of mothers revealed that mothers are buying healthy foods like fruits, cereals, dairy products etc but they are also buying high calorie rich processed food. Most preschool children like eating fried, starchy, fatty and sugary food more consistently than healthy food.*

*Significant differences were observed in buying habits of mothers, food preferences of children & food parenting methods. Educated and highly educated, full time working mothers belonging to high income group are found buying a range of unhealthy food than less educated, low income group mothers. Children of full time working mothers, belonging to high income level eat more unhealthy food than children of part timers and low income group mothers.*

*Positive food parenting methods are used by moderately educated, part timers, and middle income group mothers. Professionals, skilled & unskilled workers, high income as well as low income level mothers use more of negative food parenting methods.*

*The present paper highlights the need & concern to encourage mothers to provide more healthful food and to develop liking in preschool children to consume a healthy diet that help them grow appropriately and prevent them from the early onset of lifestyle diseases*

*Key words; Maternal Occupation, Food pattern, Preschool Children, Eating habits*

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The working status of mothers in middle income group affects family food choices. Family eating pattern is linked with eating habits and nutritional status of children. The present time mothers are working mothers and mostly are employed full time or part time. Due to irregular work hours, overtime or working in more than one job, travelling time etc mothers are struggling with the time and find it difficult to maintain a regular healthy family meal patterns. People are too busy to prepare healthful foods or cook at all. Surveys & time use diaries show that the amount of time people spend on food related activity in the home depends on many factors, including whether men & women are employed outside the home (Robinson & Godbey, 1997; Cutler & Glaeser, 2003) Between 1965 to 1985, the time spent preparing food & cleaning up after meals averaged about 40 minutes per day and then declined to 30 minutes in 1995. People seem to be replacing time spent on food related tasks with more time spent watching television. Thus with the mass production of food, the time cost for obtaining food has declined (Cutler & Glaeser, 2003).

Time is scarce for all households regardless of Income. For some households, time constraints may limit personal investments in healthier behaviors. The modern day's working mothers due to time constraint may use different ways of providing meals to children like bringing takeaway meals, ordering food from outside joint, using ready to cook food, frozen food, snacking as replacement of proper food at meal time, and serving prepared market food. Researchers have shown that food prepared outside the home is lower in nutritional quality than food prepared at home. These meals are disproportionately high in calories, fat, salt, and sugar, and lower in nutrients. Diets composed of meals prepared outside the home may lead to weight gain, obesity and others lifestyle disease in children. Parents mostly mothers play a critical role in shaping the dietary habits of their children, the parents' food choices have great impact on the nutrition and health status of their children.

Jenny Hope says that, Children of working mothers tend to have a less healthy lifestyle than those whose mothers stay at home; they snack on more junk food, spend more time in front of the TV and do less exercise. Those whose mothers work part-time follow a slightly healthier regime, while the children of stay-at-home mothers have the most nutritious diets and enjoy more exercise. However, researchers insist the results 'do not imply that mothers should not work'. But they say there is a definite link between paid employment and a lifestyle that leaves children more at risk from obesity and disease. Researchers suggest lack of time is the biggest factor keeping the healthiest lifestyles out of reach of many working families. (Daily Mail, September 29, 2009).

Devine Carol and colleagues studied how time pressures on employed parents affect families' diets, how work conditions affect what and how low- and moderate-income parents feed their families, and how mothers and fathers differ in their family food choices and their feelings about them. Work Conditions Impact Food Choices, researchers conducted a telephone survey of a random group of 25 mothers and 25 fathers in an upstate New York city who had low to moderate incomes, worked 20 or more hours a week, and had one or more children age 16 or younger at home. These conditions prompt many parents to use such coping strategies as eating takeout meals, skipping meals and serving prepared entrees. Employed mothers with similar working conditions were more likely to purchase restaurant meals or prepared entrées and miss breakfast. About a quarter of the mothers and fathers said they did not have access to healthful, reasonably priced, and/or good-tasting food at or near work.

Johnson Susan and colleagues observed normal, everyday mealtimes of 145 parents and their preschoolers, researchers found that parents served their kids food portions very close to amount they gave themselves—and not the child-size portions their kids are supposed to have, they ended up eating adult-size portions. The study's findings highlight the power parents have on their kids' eating habits.

Brown, Judith conducted a research on Maternal occupation & children's lifestyle behavior & weight in early childhood. The research used two waves of data from the longitudinal study of Australian children whether mother's hours in paid work shape young children's television viewing, snacking, physical activity and children's weight at ages 4-5 and 6- 7 years. At both ages children's lifestyle behaviors were interrelated and associated with weight status. Cross –sectional analysis confirmed small, direct associations between longer hours of maternal employment and child weight at ages 4-5 years, but not with child's weight measured two years later. The children of mothers who worked part- time watched less television and were less likely to be overweight than children of mothers who were not employed or who worked full –time.

### Methodology:

A study was conducted suburbs of Mumbai city to determine the influence of maternal occupation on family eating pattern and eating habits of preschool children. The objectives of the study were:

- To find out the relation between maternal occupation and family food pattern and eating habits of preschool children.
- To study the food buying habits of mothers, food preferences of children & food parenting methods used by parents.
- To find out the differences in food buying habits of mothers, food preferences of children & food parenting in relation to maternal educational status, income level, occupation & nature of work.

### Research Design:

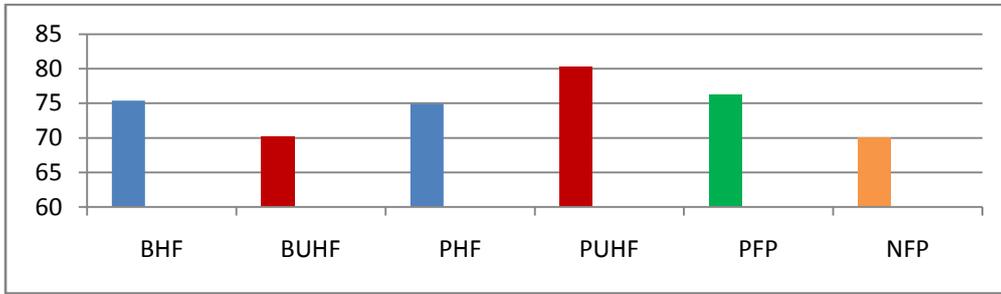
- Population: The Population of the present study comprised of mothers of preschool children.
- Selection of the sample: The sample of the present study is comprised of 56 working mothers of preschool children from central suburbs of Mumbai city. Purposive sampling method was used.
- Research Tools for Data collection: Survey method was adopted and a questionnaire was used for data collection.

### Results & Discussion:

**Table 1. Percentages Distribution Of Maternal Background Information**

	Levels	Percentages
Education	Up to HSC	41.1
	Graduate	17.9
	Postgraduate & Above	41.1
Occupation	Full Timer	64.3
	Part Timer	35.7
Nature of Job	Professional	39.3
	Service	23.2
	Managers	3.6
	Business/self employed	12.5
	Skilled worker	8.9
	Unskilled worker	12.5
Income level	low	25
	Middle	48.2
	High	26.8

**Fig.1 Mean Values For Maternal Food Buying Habits, Food Preferences Of Children & Food Parenting**



BHF: buying healthy food; BUHF: buying unhealthy food; PHF: preference of healthy food; PUHF: preference of unhealthy food; PFP: positive food parenting; NFP: negative food parenting

Fig .1 reveals the mean scores for food buying habits of mothers, the healthy trend is seen in mothers that they are buying more healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, eggs, cereals and poultry and are using more positive food parenting methods to discipline children in eating meals which includes taking children’s help in food buying & preparation to make them understand about value of food, appreciating them when they eat without fuss, eating together at family meal time etc. The unhealthiest tendency is seen in young children’s food preferences that they like eating fried, fatty, starchy, sugary calorie rich food compared to healthy meal.

**Fig 2. Mean Scores Of Food Buying Habits And Food Preferences Of Children According To Education Level Of Mothers**

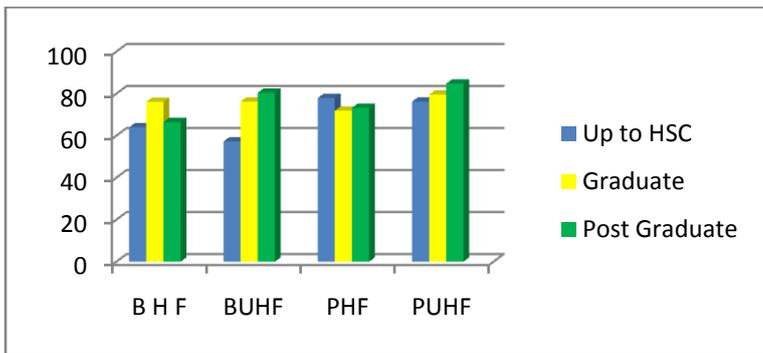


Figure 2 reveals that the educated & highly educated mothers are found buying more unhealthy food than less educated mothers and consequently the children of highly educated mothers like eating more unhealthy food. The children of less educated mothers like eating more healthy food as less educated mothers are buying less unhealthy food.

**Fig. 3 Mean Scores Of Maternal Food Buying And Food Preferences Of Children According To Occupation Of Mothers**

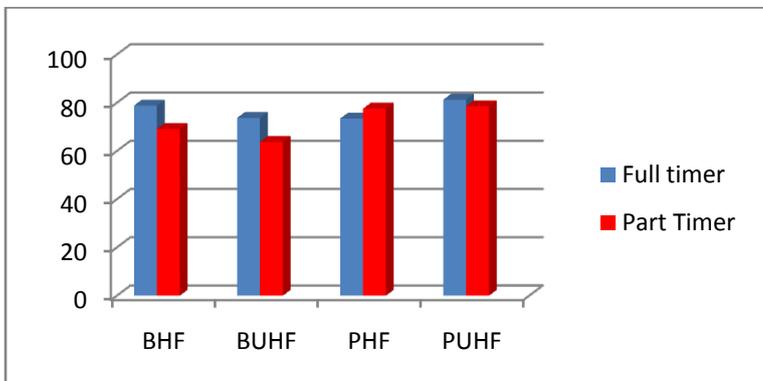


Figure 3 reveals that full time working mothers are buying both healthy & unhealthy food and part time mothers are buying more healthy food than unhealthy food; this can be seen in children’s preferences of

food also where full timer’s children like to eat more unhealthy food compared to children of part timer working mothers.

**Fig. 4 Mean Scores Of Maternal Food Buying And Food Preferences Of Children According To Nature Of Job Of Mothers**

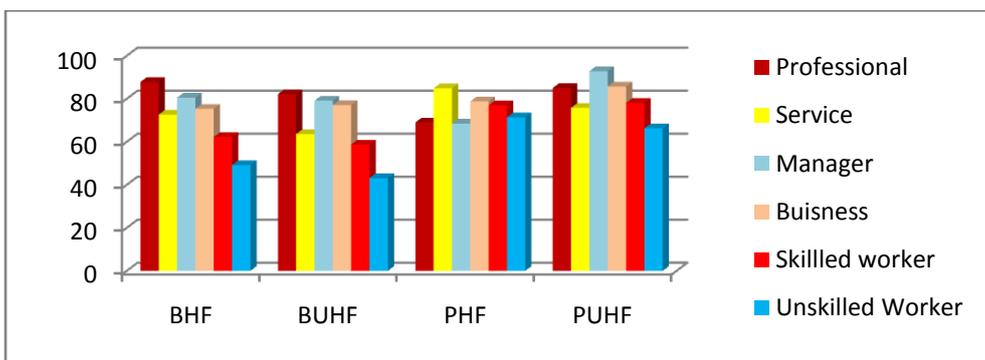


Figure 4 reveals that mothers working at higher levels like professionals are buying both healthy and unhealthy food stuffs compared to mothers working at low levels, might be women working at in higher levels have more knowledge about nutritive value of food, have more affordability to buy processed food but simultaneously less time for family cooking and so they are buying both types of food stuff.

Regarding food preferences of children, the children of mothers working on high levels are eating less healthy food compared to children of mothers who work at low level. Children of all categories prefer eating unhealthy food in that also children of professionals are eating more unhealthy food than children of skilled & unskilled mothers.

**Fig. 5 Mean Scores Of Maternal Food Buying And Food Preferences Of Children According To Income Of Mothers**

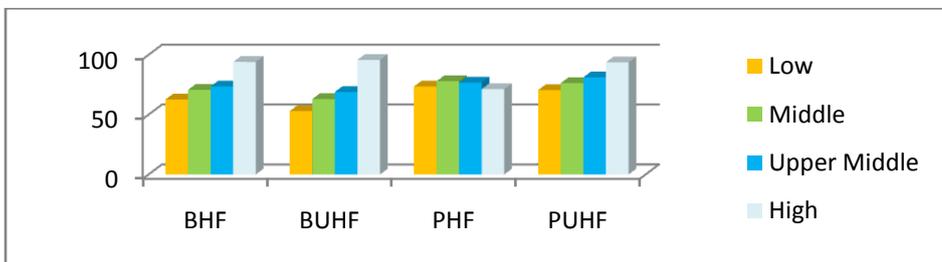


Figure 5 reveals that high income level mothers are buying more both healthy & unhealthy food stuffs compared to mothers of middle & low income groups. Regarding food preferences of children, the high income level children like eating more unhealthy food than children belonging to lower income level.

**Table 2. ANOVA Showing The Differences In Maternal Food Buying Habits And Food Preferences Of Children In Relation To The Selected Variables**

Variables	Components	F	p value
Education	Buying healthy food	12.241	.000*
	Buying unhealthy food	7.592	.001*
	Children's preferences of healthy food	.593	.556
	Children's preferences of unhealthy food	1.907	.159
Nature of Job	Buying healthy food	3.795	.057
	Buying unhealthy food	2.424	.125
	Children's preferences of healthy food	.719	.400
	Children's preferences of unhealthy food	.403	.528
Occupation ( Full time & Part time )	Buying healthy food	10.12	.000*
	Buying unhealthy food	5.05	.001*
	Children's preferences of healthy food	1.63	.167
	Children's preferences of unhealthy food	2.64	.034*
Income	Buying healthy food	13.12	.000*
	Buying unhealthy food	17.55	.000*
	Children's preferences of healthy food	.450	.718
	Children's preferences of unhealthy food	8.96	.000*

P < 0.05

Table 2 reveals ANOVA reflecting the differences in maternal food buying habits & food preferences of children in relation to selected variables. The variables education of mothers, occupation & income are significantly related with maternal buying habits for healthy food & unhealthy food. Highly educated, full time working, high income level mothers buy more healthy foods. However, they also buy unhealthy food for their families, probably because of time constraint & more disposable income they prefer buying processed ready to cook food, sugary juices, confectionary, bakery items more but may be due to their knowledge about nutritious food they are at the same time buying healthy stuff like vegetables, fruits, and poultry as well. The low income group mothers are buying less processed food stuff may be due to cost factor as all processed food are comparatively costly to natural food.

Regarding food preferences of children, maternal occupation and income are significantly related with food preferences of children concerning unhealthy food items as children of full timer, high income level mothers are eating more unhealthy food compared to other group children. The food affordability and less time availability on part of the mothers play an important role in this and mothers give more processed, high

calorie rich, instant food to children than home cooked healthy food which as a result develop unhealthy eating habits in preschool children, which is a worrying trend in developing children.

**Table 3. ANOVA Showing The Difference In Food Parenting Methods In Relation To Selected Variables**

Variable	Food Parenting	F	p value
Education	Positive	4.086	.002*
	Negative	.500	.510
Occupation	Positive	12.08	.001*
	Negative	4.812	.033*
Nature of Job	Positive	.555	.733
	Negative	2.86	.024*
Income	Positive	6.206	.001*
	Negative	5.48	.002*

P<0.05

Table 3 shows differences in food parenting methods used by mothers for meal time. Maternal education, occupation, income are significantly related with positive parenting methods as educated, part timers, and middle income level mothers are using more positive food parenting methods like appreciating children to eat well, eating together, marketing together for food items, guiding children and taking children's help in kitchen. This may be because of availability of time, they can spend more time with their children & in kitchen, can do food marketing with children, and thus they use positive food parenting methods more than their counterparts.

The table further shows that occupation, income, nature of job is significantly related with negative food parenting as professionals, full timer, high income level mothers as well as mothers working as skilled & unskilled workers prefer using negative methods more often like scolding & punishing, forcing children to eat meal, offering TV viewing, ice creams, toys in return. This is probably because of time constraint, heavy pressure of job, irregular working hours the mothers may find the negative ways easier to discipline children for meal time.

### Conclusion:

The present study reflected the inclination of working mothers for giving high calorie less nutritious food items to their young children. The trend is more common among educated & highly educated mothers who are professionals and working in full time jobs. Consequently, children of such mothers prefer eating more of starchy, fried, sugary food. The busy working schedule, high affordability for processed food items, time constraint etc plays a significant role in buying habits of mothers & food pattern of family and thus influences the eating habits of preschool children. Regarding food parenting methods used by mothers the trend observed is not convivial as professionals as well as mothers who are less educated & working in low level jobs are using negative food parenting. There is a need to develop awareness in modern day's working mothers who provide healthy nutritious foods but at the same time provide processed food regularly to children may be because of easy availability, less cooking time, busy schedule but the consequences of eating such food may develop unhealthy eating habits among preschool children. The need is to conduct more and more awareness workshops, informative seminars at preschools to bring awareness in preschooler's mothers regarding hazards of giving processed false calorie food. The young children who are in formative years of life must learn to eat more of healthy food than processed food so that they can be protected from various nutrition related disorders and health problems in future.

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