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Recommendations to Increase Children's Dietary Diversity and Decrease Sugary Snacks were Acceptable and Feasible for Mothers and Fathers in Tanzania

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Objectives: Rural communities in low-income countries are increasingly exposed to cheap, unhealthy processed foods while experiencing food insecurity. Effective family-based complementary feeding interventions are needed to promote healthy growth. The objective of this research was to examine the acceptability, adoption, and feasibility of tailored complementary feeding recommendations among parents in the Lake Zone, Tanzania, and to explore fathers' willingness to participate in and support complementary feeding.

Methods: We conducted household behavioral trials with 50 pairs of mothers and fathers with children 6-18 months old using in-depth interviews. At the first interview, mothers reported current practices. The next day, mothers and fathers received individual counseling to improve complementary feeding. Recommendations were informed by 6 recipe trials and 6 focus group discussions with mothers and fathers, respectively. After 2 weeks, parents were interviewed individually about their experiences trying recommended practices. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify facilitators and barriers to feeding recommendations, and promising strategies for engaging fathers.

Results: The most frequent feeding issues were the need to thicken porridge, increase dietary diversity, replace sugary snacks and drinks, and feed responsively. After counseling, mothers tried practices related to improving diet, but not responsive feeding. Fathers purchased healthier snacks, helped with chores, and some fed their children. Couples discussed ways to improve their child's diet and were motivated by perceived improvements in their child's health, appearance, and mood. Fathers valued being counseled and felt more connected to their child after trying recommended practices. Dietary diversity also improved. Key barriers to recommended practices included high food costs, seasonal unavailability, and insufficient time.

Conclusions: Tailored recommendations to improve diets were acceptable and feasible for parents of young children. More focused efforts may be needed for responsive feeding. This study identified specific ways to engage fathers to improve complementary feeding practices and strengthen the impact of child nutrition programs.

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