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# Children as family participants

## Researchers

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## Summary

This project explored children's participation in the everyday practice of family life. 'Doing' family is considered as the ongoing and dynamic social relationships through which 'being a family' is realised and the project explored children's perspectives on that process. Focusing on food and eating practices in and across different

forms of family and different family styles, the project looked at 11-12 year old children's experiences and perceptions of their contributions to the family through the everyday negotiations that take place with parents and other family members over food.

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## Research questions

The study used food and eating practices as a lens through which to:

- Explore the dynamics of everyday family life as perceived by children and by parents;
- Explore the perceptions of children, and of their parents, of children's contribution to those changing dynamics;
- Explore these issues across a range of different family forms;
- Locate children's everyday experiences of, and participation in, family life within broader social and cultural contexts.

## Research design

This qualitative study employed a range of data collection techniques including: semi-structured interviews; personal and family profiling; scenario writing and observation. 108 11-12 year old children (54 girls and 54 boys) were recruited from Year Seven form groups in four schools in the North Midlands and South Yorkshire (UK). Children completed personal and family profiles and undertook a scenario writing exercise before participating in interviews in small friendship groups during the school day. A sub-sample of children was selected to represent a diversity of (overlapping) family forms: single parent families; families with only one child; families with two or more children; and families following a restricted diet due to health, religious or social reasons. 30 children participated in a second interview (18 girls and 12 boys), which was carried out in the family home of each child. One parent from each family was also interviewed.

## Key findings

- Family form and /or class composition are poor predictors of family food practices around children's eating. Rather, different family food practices reveal different conceptualisations of children's responsibilities and participation within everyday family life. These are grounded in different kinds of child-adult relations ranging from those that are traditionally hierarchical to those in which children's independence and agency are fostered and facilitated.
- Mothers continue to assume primary responsibility for the everyday work of family life organising the provision of meals while fathers and children act in supporting roles only. In this way, fathers and children come to occupy comparable positions with respect to family food practices, as part of the ongoing gendered and generational construction of everyday family life.
- Children do relatively little cooking or household work. Some parents prevented

children from cooking due to concerns about risk. The most frequent cooking that children did was cooking snacks for themselves and treat foods such as cakes, the latter often together with their grandmothers. Some children helped their mothers with food preparation. However, the most frequently noted 'work' expected of children was to clear away their own plates after eating.

- Eating together as a family remains an important aspirational icon of 'proper' family life even though, in practice, differing work and leisure patterns mean that this is not often possible on an everyday basis.
- The high symbolic value placed on eating together 'as a family' means that the content of 'the family meal' is often creatively manipulated by mothers in order to accommodate the varied food preferences of individual family members.
- The family meal should ideally be cooked 'from scratch', symbolising the importance of the time and care invested by mothers in the creation of 'proper' family life for their children. Children readily acknowledge and value this commitment by their mothers.
- Family food practices are firmly embedded in the particularities of family biographies, providing reference points for both continuity and change in styles of food and eating across the generations. In this way, the similarities and differences in food practices between children, parents and grandparents come to be seen as indicative of generational and moral positioning within the family.
- Family food practices project a moral construction of 'our family', which is often contrasted with those of 'other families'. This form of public and private display helps to reinforce the sense of family membership and belonging that parents wish to construct for their children.
- Children and parents are very aware of the dominant narratives around healthy eating although these are not necessarily reflected in the food choices that they make. Children were critical of the standard and cost of school meals, but these were not seen by them as key eating events. This suggests that policies promoting healthy eating for children, which position the school as a critical site for their delivery, may be misguided.

## Publications

Curtis P A, James A and Ellis K. (2009) 'She's got a really good attitude to healthy food... Nannan's drilled it into her': intergenerational relations within families, in P Jackson (ed.) *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.

James A. et al. (eds.) *Children, food and identity*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.