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Early Childhood Educators' Self-Reported Food Insecurity Impact on Observed Classroom Food Environment

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There has been an increased interest in research focusing on the impact early childhood educators (ECEs) have on children's health outcomes. Current research indicates that a large number of ECEs "come from low-income families and work in a field that receives ... a salary only slightly higher than the federal poverty guideline" (Whitebook, Phillips, Howes, 2014). ECEs' behaviors during mealtimes may be negatively influenced by their past or present food insecurity (FI) status. Mealtime is a vital part of children learning communication skills and healthy eating habits. Children from low socioeconomic status families generally spend the majority of their meals with ECEs, increasing the importance of the school food environment for children's health outcomes. Data regarding ECEs' food insecurity (FI) were collected from a two-item screen for food insecurity based on the USDA's Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). Observations of classroom food environment were completed at a local Head Start. Teacher fidelity to evidence-based practices and interventions was observed during weekly food experiences as part of a classroom-based nutrition curriculum, We Inspire Smart Eating, and were completed once per month, for 8 months using a 24-item tool. Mealtime observations occurred three times throughout the school year in each classroom using TABLE Talk (Swindle, Rutledge, Dix, & Whiteside-Mansell, 2017). In total, 58.3% of educators indicated current FI. An ANOVA was run to compare the change in supportive and unsupportive comments by ECEs at mealtime from baseline to 5 months after intervention training (controlling for experience, education, and age). There was a significant difference for change in unsupportive comments based on FI Status but not for change in supportive comments. FI and Food Secure (FS) ECEs exhibited similar use of positive, supportive practices at mealtimes. FI ECEs were twice as likely to exhibit negative, unsupportive practices at meals (e.g., pressuring children to eat, discouraging food manipulation) than FS ECEs. Importantly, chi-square analyses indicated no differences in comments between FI and FS ECEs during fidelity observations. The rates of FI for these ECEs is 20% higher than the national average of FI among families in poverty. FI among ECEs may be an important barrier in effectively implementing nutrition interventions. This is important given the increasing focus of Head Start and other childcare programs for obesity prevention and nutrition promotion as shown in the recent (2017) nutrition updates in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and National Association for the Education of Young Children standards.