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FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PARENTS' CHOICE OF MEAL FOR THEIR CHILDREN, STUDYING IN THE PRIMARY SECTION OF SCHOOLS IN THE GALLE SUB-EDUCATIONAL REGION

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Primary school children are at the onset of their school education. Their physical and intellectual performance during schooling depends on their nutritional status, which is influenced by the food intake. Parents decide on the food for children. Therefore parents choice of meal for their children (PCMC) is a critical factor in a child's education. The aim of the study was to investigate factors that affect the PCMC in the Galle sub-educational region.

The meals evaluated were those given during five days of schooling. A total of 411 questionnaires were filled using parents responses of 411 randomly selected students, from selected schools in the Galle sub educational region. Parents responses were analyzed using IBM SPSS V16.

Parents giving priority to "Food being made at home" tended to decrease when the level of education of parents increased from GCE O/L to higher educational levels. Parents whose level of education increased from GCE ordinary level to higher education levels, often chose food made at home containing higher amounts of animal proteins, cereals and vegetables for their children. Mothers gave their children three times more food made at home compared to fathers. Fathers tended to give children six times more food purchased from shops compared to that given by mothers which was further confirmed by the fact that, fathers gave a high priority to the ease of preparation of food. Grandparents cooking at home decreased the mean number of days that children were given animal protein for lunch by 50%. Seventy seven percent of the parents considered the information from school when deciding the meal for their child. Information from either "mass media" or school has not made any significant ($P>0.15$) influence towards PCMC.

These results suggest that four factors, namely the level of education of parents, the decision maker of food for the child, the person doing the cooking at home and the level of income of parents, have an influence on PCMC ($P<0.15\%$). Higher levels of education of parents influenced parents to make better decisions on the child's meals. Mothers gave more food made at home compared to fathers. Grandparents influenced the PCMC by minimizing the quantity of animal protein given to the child. Measures to influence the PCMC by altering the factors that affect the PCMC can make a positive impact on a child's level of nutrition.