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# Supporting Vermont Families in Packing Healthy Lunches for Children in Childcare

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## Background

Nutrition plays a critical role in the physical growth, cognitive development, and establishment of lifelong eating habits of young children<sup>1</sup>. Good eating habits have been shown to prevent and reduce the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cancer<sup>2</sup>.

In Vermont, over 25,000 children under the age of six are either currently in a child care program or in need of one<sup>3</sup>. Many meals at these programs are packed by parents.

A study in Texas shows that over 70% of meals packed from home for children attending child care programs had less than the recommended amount of fruits, vegetables, and milk products for children of that age<sup>4</sup>. Although most parents understand that good nutrition is important for their child's health, it is less clear why many children still receive packed meals that are nutritionally deficient<sup>4</sup>.

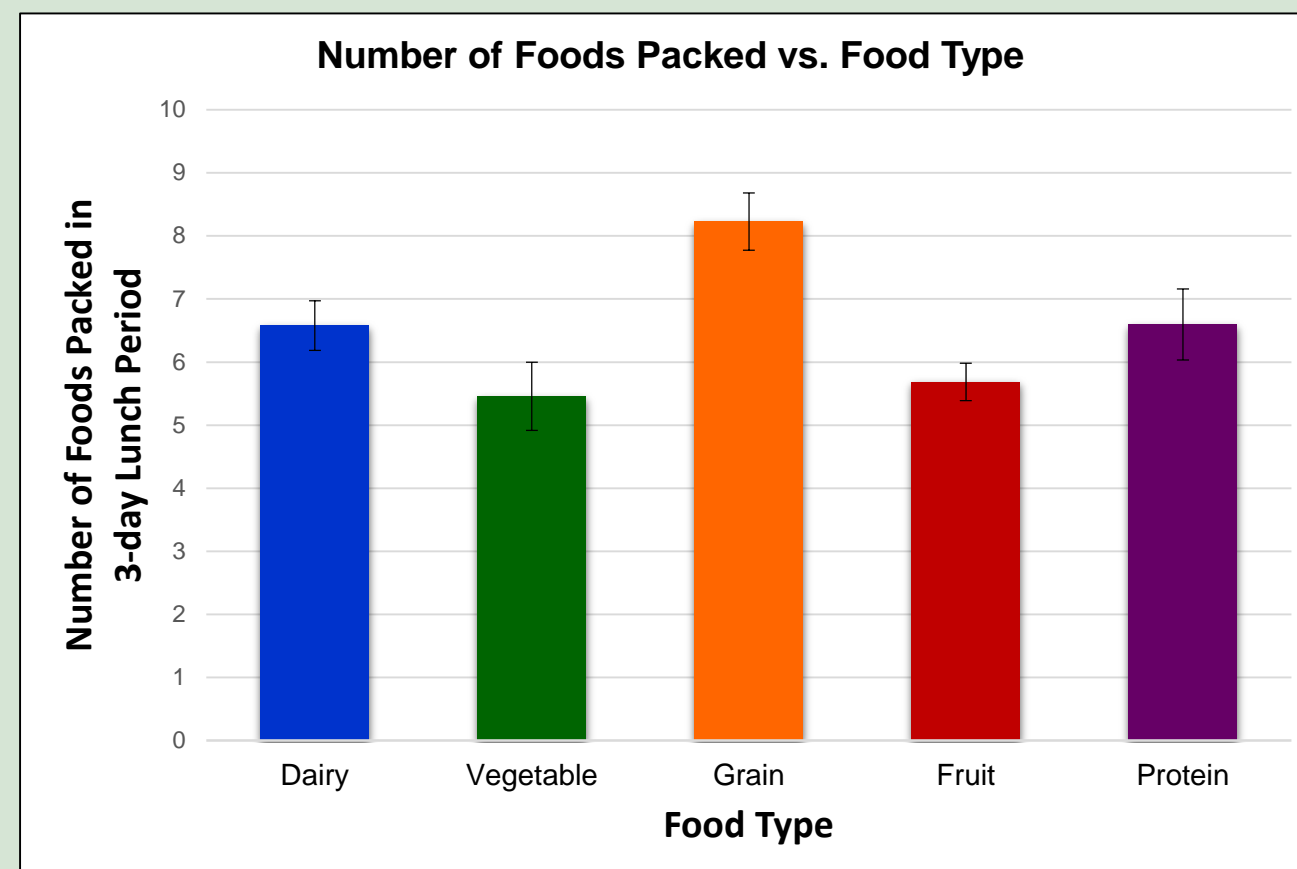
## Research Question

In Vermont, what are parents' perceptions of the nutritional value of the meals they pack for their children in childcare? Additionally, what barriers, if any, do they experience in providing healthy food?

## Methods

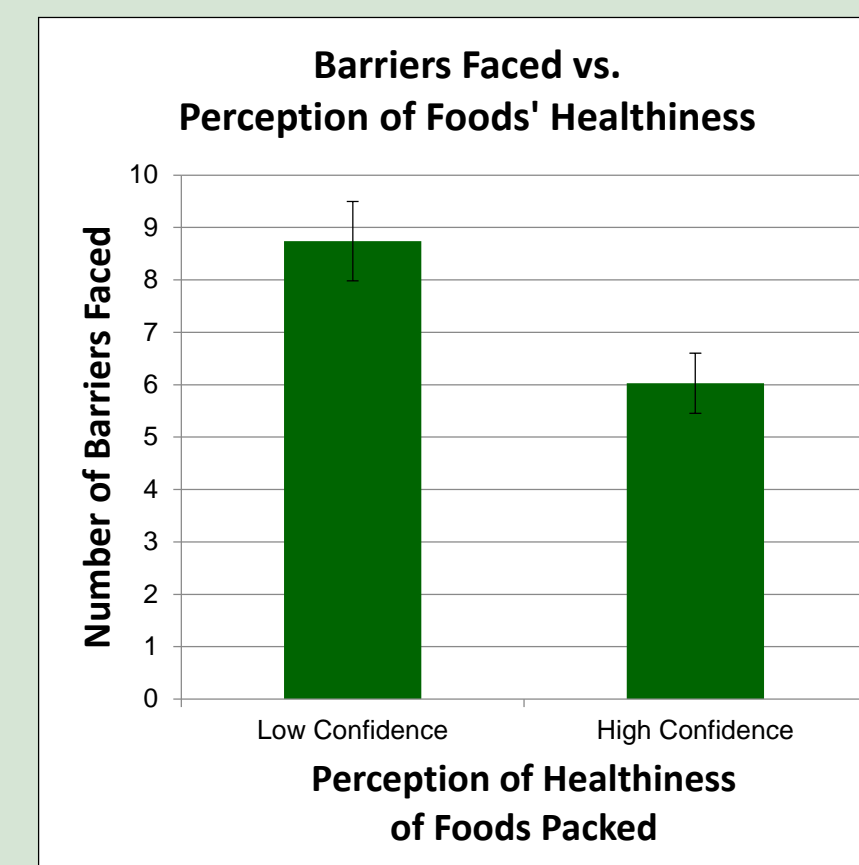
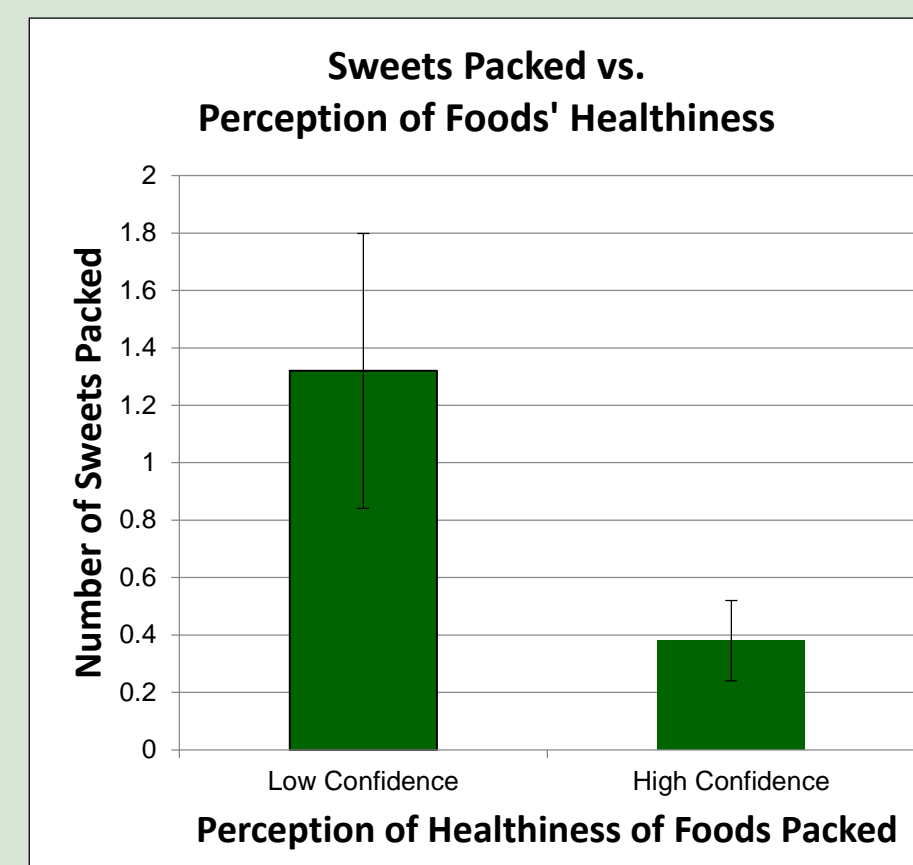
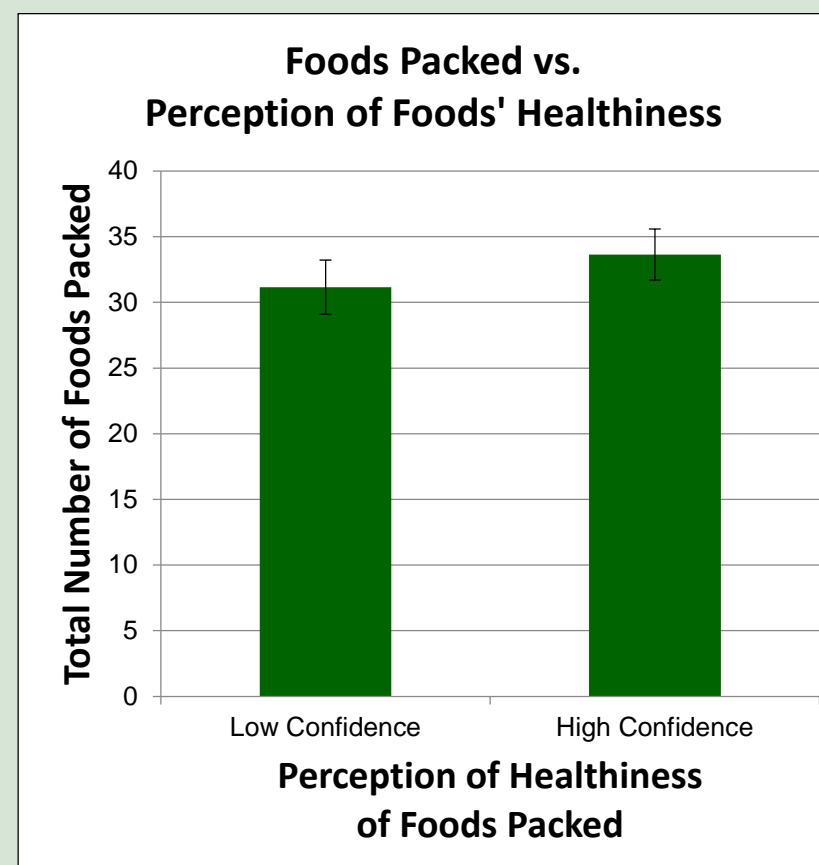
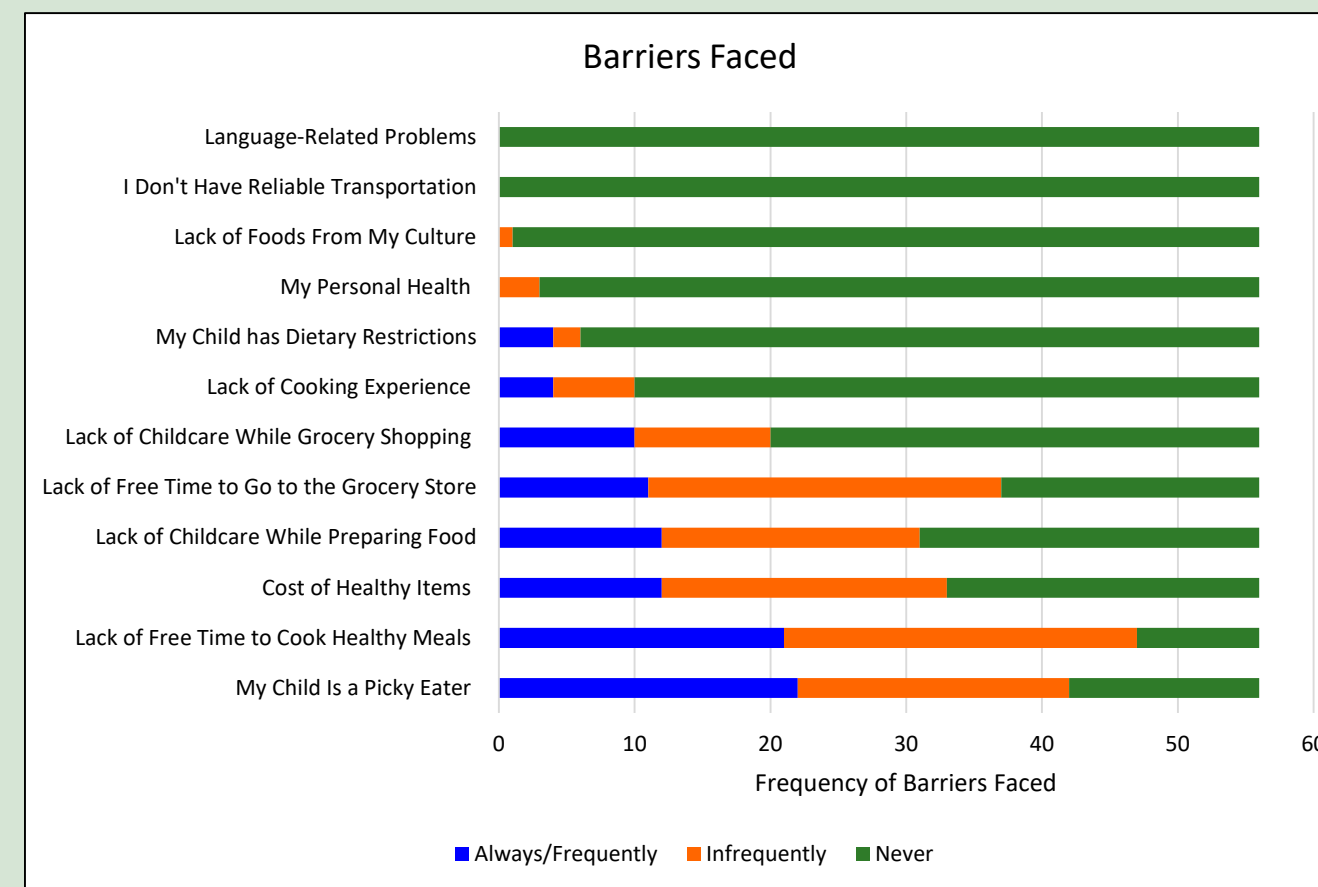
- 29 question electronic surveys were distributed via email to parents with children attending childcare centers in Vermont.
- 108 surveys were received – 61 were completed; 47 were incomplete or were not completed by our target population.
- Three separate independent t-tests were used to compare: the mean number of foods packed, the mean number of sweets packed, and the mean number of barriers of faced by parents who had a low confidence and high confidence in the healthiness of the foods they've packed for their child.

## Results



*My daughter has several food allergies (egg, dairy, peanut, sesame), so we pack non-dairy yogurt (3 times). I also make homemade veggie patties - the ingredients were selected above (spinach, carrots, sweet potatoes, chick peas, black beans, etc). I regularly send fig bars (1 time) or homemade muffins (2 times). – participating parent*

*"I get food stamps so my child eats lots of fresh fruit, veggies towards the beginning of the month. Towards the end it's typically canned corn & beans for lunch with maybe one fruit option" – participating parent*



## Discussion

- Most parents believed their packed food to be healthy, yet parents packed lunches comprised of more grains, dairy, and protein than fruits and vegetables.
- While most parents believed the foods they pack to be healthy, perceptions of the nutritional value of the packed lunches had no statistically significant correlation with the variety of foods packed. However, we did find that the average number of sweets packed by parents who had low confidence in their ability to pack healthy meals was significantly higher than that packed by parents with high confidence in their ability ( $p < 0.05$ ).
- Not surprisingly, the total number of barriers that parents cited as affecting their ability to pack healthy meals was significantly higher in those parents who had low confidence in their ability to pack healthy meals ( $p < 0.01$ ).
- The most common barriers parents face when packing meals are having a child who is a picky eater, lack of free time to cook, lack of childcare while preparing food, cost of healthy items, child preference for unhealthy food.

## Limitations

- Of the 108 responses we received, 47 were incomplete and 61 were fully complete surveys. We recognize that the length of our 29 question survey may have been a contributor to this discrepancy.
- Further, our assessment of the health of packed meals is limited by self-reporting by participants and our selected method of data collection. Without seeing the packed meals or further lengthening our survey, we were unable to determine the portion sizes of the foods packed. Our assessment therefore focused on the variety of foods packed.

## Recommendations

Children's unhealthy food preferences and the unhealthiness of sweets should be topics addressed by the educational materials generated for Vermont families by Hunger Free Vermont. Future studies should expand on the individual barriers faced by parents to better tailor educational resources.

## References

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