

# Whole Grain Messages: What Resonates with Moms?



## Authors

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To share results of focus groups with low-income mothers regarding whole grain foods, and describe how the results informed development of whole grain messages, tips, and communication tools for use in USDA's nutrition programs.

**Design, Setting and Participants:** Eighteen focus groups were conducted in six states in two rounds of qualitative research. Separate discussions were held with mothers of preschool and elementary school-aged children using a structured guide.

**Outcome Measures and Analysis:** Session leaders used a discussion guide. Sessions were taped and staff noted mothers' perceptions and behaviors, reactions to message concepts, tips, related photos, and information seeking habits. The data was reviewed for recurring themes and defined as issues raised or agreed on by multiple participants across groups. Messages and related content were ranked using a card sorting methodology.

**Results:** Mothers knew whole grains are "healthy" foods but few knew about specific benefits. Barriers to eating whole grains included taste, time and difficulty identifying whole grains. Message themes that evoked feelings of empowerment and tapped into mothers' abilities to influence their children's long-term health and eating behaviors resonated most strongly. Mothers responded most positively to tips and advice they considered practical, underscored why they should adopt specific behaviors, and were flexible with different choices. Most had access to the internet and used social media, but few used those to find nutrition information. Mothers sought information, like tips and advice through tested online sources.

## Methods

- Conducted two rounds of focus groups in six diverse geographic locations.
- Segmented moms those with a preschool or elementary school-aged child.
- Excluded those with special diets, working in health/fitness or considered a "nutrition experts".
- Professional focus group facilities to recruit/screen participants.

### Formative Round

- 12 triads allowed in-depth discussion and probing of beliefs and practices re: foods and beverages that are most important for healthy growth and development.
- Exploration of 11 new message concepts focusing on convincing moms to purchase, prepare, consume and offer whole-grain foods at family meals and snacks.
- Feedback on actionable tips and advice to complement existing messages.
- Exploration of health information seeking behaviors and preferred channels for communication about nutrition.

### Evaluative Rounds

- Six focus group sessions across three locations.
- Gathered feedback on four refined whole grain messages and three new messages.
- Obtained responses to complementary supporting tips, advices, guidance and images.
- Feedback from Practitioners and Stakeholders.
- Workgroup members and program nutrition personnel provided periodic feedback.
- Key stakeholders/experts (including those with nutrition and health expertise) provided comments on products tested during evaluative rounds.

### Demographics

69 Mothers Participated in 18 Focus Groups  
 70% Age 18-34 yrs; 52% Vocational/Technical  
 60% Employed Full/Part Time; 52% household of 3- 4people  
 87% participated in at least one nutrition program



## Results

### Knowledge, Beliefs, Barriers

Mothers:

- Knew whole grains were generally healthful foods, but cited whole grains less often as important for their children's health.
- Had limited knowledge of how to identify "whole grain" foods and often relying on used visual cues .
- Were less familiar with specific health/nutritional benefits; recalled benefits were digestive health/regularity and weight control.
- Identified taste, time, and difficulty identifying whole grains as primary barriers to consuming whole grains.
- Reported a moderate level of consumption for themselves and their children, but expressed and demonstrated confusion about whole grains suggest a discrepancy between reported and actual consumption.
- Positive photos showing loving relationships between mothers and children these were more likely to moms' attention and inspire them in to read the content.

### Message Elements that Resonated

- Evoked feelings of empowerment and spoke to mothers' ability to influence their children's long-term health and eating habits.
- Addressed health and nutritional benefits such as "...good for your heart and overall health.
- Communicated quickly and easily ways to choose whole grain foods, such as look for "100% whole wheat" or "100% whole grains" on food labels.
- Contained information they considered practical i.e., unique tips to help them incorporate whole grains into meals and snacks.
- Tips, advice and guidance that offered options from which mothers could choose what work best for them were lauded by moms.
- Included practical examples of ways to get kids to eat whole grains; for example serving whole grain pancakes, something kids already enjoyed made switching to a whole-grain version seemed more realistic and attainable.

## What Mothers Think and Know about Whole Grains

"Honestly, why is it good? I don't know. I just know that's how I was brought up."  
 -Birmingham, AL

"I think [whole grain bread] is brown, and it's kind of thicker and I think on the crust it has nuts or something."  
 -Chicago, Illinois

"I think there are [health benefits from eating whole grains]. I just kind of go with they hype. I don't really know what they are."  
 -Phoenix, AZ

## EXAMPLE OF SUPPORTING CONTENT

### Whole Grains and Your Family's Health

Whole grains are rich sources of vitamins, minerals, fiber and other nutrients that help keep your kids healthy and strong. Make sure your kids get the goodness of this "whole" nutrition every day. Here is just some of what whole grains can do for your kids:

Adults benefit from whole grains, too. Eating whole-grain foods that are high in fiber can help protect against heart disease, reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes, support a healthy body weight, and is good for overall health. That's the goodness of whole grains.

Whole grains help fuel kids' days by providing and helping them maintain energy.

The fiber in whole-grain foods keeps your kids feeling full longer, and that can help with a healthy body weight.

The minerals in whole grains help maintain normal muscles, nerves and a healthy immune system.

Whole grains have B vitamins for healthy red blood cells. They also help manage healthy blood glucose (sugar).

Whole grains are good for digestion and general health.

Table 1: Examples of Whole Grain Message Evolution

Formative Round	Evaluative Round	Final Message
	All Moms	
Give yourself and those you love the goodness of whole grains. Make at least half of your daily bread, tortillas, pasta and cereals whole grains. They may help control weight, and they're good for your heart and overall health.	Give yourself and those you love the goodness of whole grains. Make at least half the grains you eat - such as bread, tortillas, pasta and cereals - whole grains. Fiber rich whole grains are good for your heart, digestion, and healthy weight and overall health.	Give yourself and those you love the goodness of whole grains. Make at least half of the grains you eat whole grains- such as bread, tortillas, pasta and cereals. Whole grains are good for your heart and digestion, and can help you maintain a healthy weight and good overall health.
	Mothers of Preschool Aged Children	
Start them early with whole grains. It's easier to get your kids in the habit of eating and enjoying whole grains if you start when they are young. Whole grains give your kids more nutrition to help them grow strong and have healthy hearts.	Start them early with whole grains. It's easy to get your kids in the habit of eating and enjoying whole grains if you start when they are young. Whole grains give your kids more B vitamins, minerals and fiber to help them be strong and healthy.	Start them early with whole grains. It's easy to get your kids in the habit of eating and enjoying whole grains if you start when they are young. Whole grains give your kids B vitamins, minerals and fiber to help them be strong and healthy.
	Mothers Elementary Aged Children	
Start every day the whole grain way. Help your kids get their day off to a healthy start. Serve whole grain cereal, bread, tortillas, or waffles at breakfast. They'll feel full for longer and have more energy.	Start every day the whole grain way. Help your kids get their day off to a healthy start. Serve whole grain versions of cereal, bread, tortillas, or pancakes at breakfast. Whole grains give your kids B vitamins, minerals and fiber to help them feel full longer, and have more energy at school to concentrate and learn.	Start every day the whole grain way. Help your kids get their day off to a healthy start. Serve whole grain versions of cereal, bread, tortillas, or pancakes at breakfast. Whole grains give your kids B vitamins, minerals and fiber to help them feel full longer so they stay alert to concentrate at school.

## Conclusion

The findings from this qualitative research indicate that:

- While low-income moms have limited understanding of the benefits and how to identify whole grain foods, they are generally aware that whole grains are healthier than refined grain foods.
- Moms connect with messages that provide new information such as nutrition and health benefits, and are inspired by messages that tap into their role as moms.

This research provided valuable insights that aided in identifying message concepts that resonate with moms. The audience feedback gathered informed the development of five whole grain messages, supporting tips, advice and tools that communicate with moms in ways that inspire them to take action. As showed in the Table1- Messages Evolution, audience feedback resulted in the elimination of some concepts and refinement of others.

Nutritionists and other professionals can use the whole grain messages, supporting content, photos and related communication tools in a variety of ways. For example: 1) in ongoing counseling and education programs; 2) to develop educational materials and tools that capture the mothers' attention ; and 3) to inspire moms prepare/offer whole grains to their children and family via meals and snacks.

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<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/corenutritionmessages/default.htm>