The Relationship between Social Networks, Exchange and Kids’ Food in Children’s Peer Culture

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The Relationship between Social Networks, Exchange and Kids’ Food in Children’s Peer Culture

by

Stephanie Tillman Melton

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Applied Anthropology
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends who have believed in me.

To Josh, for all of your support and patience. Thank you for not giving up on me.

To Vivienne, my daily inspiration to be better and make you proud.

To Lance, for telling me that I could do and be anything, and for showing me wonderlust in life.

To June, for teaching me by example what hard work and determination can accomplish.

To Maxine, for sharing your spirit with me and for being an anthropologist at heart.
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates children’s peer culture, social networks and the role that kids’ food plays in peer exchanges during middle childhood. During this stage children develop social competencies as they join peer groups with other children and become socialized into children’s peer culture. In order to immerse myself within children’s culture, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at two afterschool programs providing care for elementary school children. I investigated friendships, social networks and exchanges among third through fifth grade children at the programs. The study included participant observation and participatory group interviews with a sample of the children at both sites. The findings reveal how children use exchange of snack foods, candy and toys to build social connections among peers. The results indicate that children are active participants and creators in their peer cultures. They manipulated adult norms to structure oppositional identities as children. One tool for identifying with peers and gaining social acceptance are kids’ foods, which are processed food items marketed for children. Kids’ food served as a form of social currency in expressing friendship and connection. For the children in this study, food provided for edible consumption, entertainment and symbolic connection to peers. The results of this research demonstrate the need to approach child nutrition promotion from a cultural and social view point of children, not only based on physical and health motivation.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

While sitting at a school cafeteria table during homework time, attention strayed from the math homework in front of Caleb. He began to tell me about his day at school. It had not been a good day. During class his teacher had reprimanded him for an offense he did not commit. In fact another boy had called him the pejorative, “fat Puerto Rican.” His frustration had erupted in class and he whispered a Spanish cuss word under his breath. In retelling the story to me during the Afterschool program, he asked if I wanted to know what word he had said. Before I could respond, he whispered it to me and laughed quietly. I asked if it was a really bad word and he said yes. If anyone had heard him say it he would get in “big trouble.” I nodded my head in agreement, though I did not reprimand him for using foul language. Our attention drifted back to the math problem. Then Caleb said, “I have candy in my bag, want some?” I ate the proffered candy. It was a Starburst candy and I smiled indicating my enjoyment of the sweet, tangy flavor. At seeing this exchange, a kindergarten boy, Jamie, who was sitting across from us at another table, exclaimed, “You eat candy? Adults eat candy? I thought only kids eat candy!”

The scenario taken from fieldwork performed at an afterschool program exemplifies the exchanges children make to express friendship, as well as, the assumptions they hold about children. This research delves into the complex world of children’s peer culture and in particular how children navigate social interactions and create and maintain social bonds. The world of children is one in which adults have a fleeting connection. As Jenkns states, “The child is familiar to us and yet strange, she/he inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another, she/he is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a different order of being” (1996:9). Adults were all once children; however, as time and generations pass the adult connection to childhood becomes distant. Adults become distanced from the nuances of
children’s culture. This study is an attempt to revisit the social world of children and contextualize the customs of children within the context of peer interactions and food. It is also an attempt to “capture the voices, emotions and actions of [children], so that the seemingly taken-for-granted and invisible features of daily life are captured and made visible” (Denzin 1990:231).

This study contributes to the anthropological knowledge of U.S. children’s culture and foodways. It is based on fieldwork conducted at afterschool programs with elementary school children ages eight to twelve in Tampa, Florida. The research contributes to anthropological knowledge in three areas that merit additional empirical attention: the afterschool space as an ethnographic research site, children’s peer group interactions and social norms, and children’s perceptions of healthy foods and consumption of kids’ foods.

From a practical standpoint, afterschool serves as a space to investigate children outside of the home, and given the increasing restrictions placed on access to children in formal school settings due to rising expectations for academic performance, standardized testing preparation and security concerns (Mahoney, Parente and Zigler 2009), the afterschool setting offers an alternative. It is a space that increasing numbers of children in the United States experience. Over ten million children attend afterschool programs (Afterschool Alliance 2014)¹, yet the afterschool setting is a neglected focus for child-centered, long-term qualitative research. Despite research interest in afterschool programs as a mechanism to improve literacy and academic achievement (Mahoney, Parente and Zigler 2009), and the sizeable population of children attending out-of-school programs, more research is needed on children’s peer culture, peer interactions of school aged children (Corsaro 2003), or nutrition practices (Story et al. 2008) within these child care settings.

Recently increasing attention to the nutritional quality of children’s diets in the United States due to rising childhood obesity rates has given rise to critiques the high consumption rates of nutritionally low quality foods. Health risks associated with obesity is a valid concern. Much of the attention in academia

and the popular press in recent years has focused on the health and academic outcomes associated with poor quality of children’s diets. An additional concern is the socialization that occurs during childhood around food and eating. During childhood preferences and habits form that can linger into adulthood and have lasting impacts on health and wellbeing. For millions of children, afterschool programs are a place of socialization, peer interaction and eating, especially snack foods or kids’ foods. For this reason, afterschool programs could be a key player in assessing children’s diets outside of the home and for intervening to improve dietary practices and health (Story et al. 2008).

Advocates state that more could be done for programs to provide healthful snacks to children and encourage parents to provide healthier snacks as well (Nestle 2012). Despite these findings afterschool programs are often missing from discussions of environmental and social impacts on children’s diet and health, yet present a valuable component of comprehensive solutions that include families, schools and communities (Little, Wimer and Weiss 2007).

This research attempts to address this concern by exploring children’s peer interactions and how snack food consumption fits into children’s peer culture. Within the afterschool space, I investigate how daily experiences of shape their shared peer culture and foodways (Pike 2008). To do this I draw from theoretical frameworks to describe the afterschool setting as a space for consumption and cultural practice. The afterschool space is a constructed environment for children and characteristics of the space dictate what activities children engage in, which foods are consumed and how they are consumed. According to Bell and Valentine, space shapes identity and consumption in meaningful ways (1997). As a site of cultural construction, the daily routines of afterschool programs become imbued with symbolic meaning (Geertz 1973). Bourdieu’s concept of daily habits or habitus is useful for understanding how daily routines reflect their unique culture (1993), as is Soja’s concept of thirdspace, or the norms, values and believes attributed to a space (1996). This research is also based on the position that children are active agents in their social worlds. In order to address child nutritional behaviors and obesity, children’s voices and culture must be investigated and incorporated into health promotion solutions (Metcalf et al. 2008; Pike 2008). I present findings that highlight the symbolic meaning children attach to certain kinds
of foods and the ways in which children use food and other objects in exchange to create and maintain social capital among peers.

The study investigates two areas of inquiry, the study of children’s culture and the symbolic meaning of food, including the symbolic classifications of foods and consumption practices (Douglas 2002 [1966]; Counihan 1997; Meigs 1997). The work of Mary Douglas informed this investigation into children’s attitudes about the qualities of foods and categories of appropriate foods for children versus adults, and children’s use of the dichotomous categories of healthy versus unhealthy foods. My investigation of the role that food, specifically kids’ foods, play in identity formation and group cohesion has been informed by the work of Carol Counihan (2004), Mechling (2010), Elliott 2011, Ludvigsen and Scott 2009 and James (1998).

The Study’s Aims

The primary aim of the study is to investigate how children interact to co-create cultural knowledge and practices. The study is based on the assumption of a distinct children’s peer culture and the idea that children use exchange to mediate social relationships. The study entails an investigation of children’s peer groups including peer interactions, creation and maintenance of friendships and peer groups. Additionally, an investigation was conducted of how children use foods in peer social interactions and explore the social meanings attributed to kids’ foods.

The study’s research questions were:

- How do children develop social networks within peer groups?
- How do children’s peer culture and social interactions influence exchanges and food consumption in afterschool settings?

These main research questions were expanded in sub-questions:

- What factors shape social networks among elementary aged children?
• What role does kids’ food play in children’s peer culture?
• What are children’s perceptions of kids’ food and healthy foods?
• What motivations do children recognize as reasons to eat healthier?

In order to immerse myself within children’s culture, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at two afterschool programs providing care for elementary school children in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. I conducted a qualitative study of children’s social interactions focusing on friendships, social networks and exchanges. I worked with third through fifth grade children at the programs. My investigation included participant observation, informal interviews with the children and program staff, and participatory group interviews with a sample of the children at both sites. The fieldwork was conducted over two academic years. Field notes were analyzed for themes to reveal how children use foods and how children build social groups among peers. The results indicate that children are active participants and creators in their peer cultures. They manipulated adult norms to structure oppositional identities as children. One tool for identifying with peers and gaining acceptance are kids’ foods, which are processed food items marketed for children. Food and particularly kids’ food served as a form of social currency in expressing friendship and connection. For the children in this study, food provided for edible consumption, entertainment and symbolic connection to peers. The results of this research demonstrate the need to approach child nutrition promotion from a cultural and social viewpoint, not only based on physical and health motivation.

Definition of Terms

• Tween is a child in middle childhood or preadolescence. The term tween was developed in product marketing and is variously defined as ranging from six to eleven years old.
• Peers are defined as “nonfamily children who are similar in age and competence level” (Pope et al. 2006:23). In this study peers are contrasted with friends, who represent preferred relationships and hold more emotional and social value than peer relationships.

• Friendship is a “long-term relationship of mutual affections and support” (Hruschka 2010:2).

• Kids’ food is a broad category of food that is produced and served for children. It includes items that are often processed, prepackaged, higher in sugar, fat and salt, and produced and marketed specifically for children. In this study the term is used to categorize processed foods like chips, crackers, sweet baked items, ice cream, pizza, and candy that children report enjoying and that they believe are appropriate for children to consume.

• Social capital includes “resources that individuals can utilize in their relationships with others” (Coleman 1988:S98).

• Social currency is the ability to transfer social capital into other forms of capital. In this study it is used to describe exchanges made between children to symbolize social connections.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter Two discusses the literature reviewed for this dissertation. It is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on peer culture of middle childhood. The second section explores aspects of identity formation including gender identity. The third section includes information of the play activities and spaces of childhood relevant to this study, the school and afterschool spaces. The final section focuses on the factors that influence children’s food consumption. These factors include taste preferences, caregivers’, school, media and peer influences, and perceptions of appropriate foods for children.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in the research, which consisted of a participant qualitative study. I conducted an ethnographic study incorporating participant observation, and qualitative interviewing. The study was conducted with children ages eight to twelve years old in afterschool
programs. Participant observation was conducted with groups of children in these age groups at two afterschool program sites. A sample of forty-three children also participated in qualitative group interviews at the two sites. This chapter also contains a description of the afterschool program sites, the YMCA Afterschool Success program located in Hillsborough County, Florida.

Chapter Four delves into observations of the social structure of peer interactions in the afterschool programs inducing assessments of how the children are divided into groups based on age or grade-level, and how they sub-divide themselves based on gender and friendship. Characteristics of gender expression and the social networks of the children within their peer groups are noted, and serve to contextualize the kinds of interactions children have and the role social exchange plays. The chapter concludes with an exploration into the ways children express their children’s culture through kids’ food and use social currency to navigate peer interactions.

Chapter Five includes a description of participatory group interviews that were conducted prior to initiating participant observation and again once the fieldwork was underway. The preliminary study is included because it served as a starting point for the design of the present study and the development of research questions. It sparked the key question: why do children consume so much food that is described be them as ‘junk food’ when they have a basic understanding of the importance of eating health foods? This question led to the use of ethnographic fieldwork to better understand the children’s peer culture and daily food practices, and the follow-up group interviews that served to confirm children’s concept of healthy foods, and kids’ foods, and the motivations relevant to children to eat healthier.

Chapter Six provides discussion of main findings from the research. The role social dynamics play in affecting social networks and social exchanges between children is discussed, as is the impacts children’s culture and the identification of kids’ foods with children’s culture has on perceptions of healthy foods for children.

Chapter Seven includes conclusions and recommendations for policy changes in afterschool programs to encourage healthier snack consumption, and suggestions for health promotion programs and marketing messages directed toward children based on the results of the research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides a framework for understanding the fundamental concepts impacting children’s peer culture and the role kids’ foods play within peer culture. Exploration of children’s foodways is framed in the anthropological literature of the symbolic meaning of food and the role food plays in social cohesion, identity and daily practices. Since the study focuses on enculturation and socialization among children and the social dynamics affecting childhood, this review includes relevant literature on child identity, peer group formation and children’s food consumption. The literature is presented in five sections. In the first section, I describe childhood enculturation in peer groups and children’s peer culture as a distinctive experience from adult cultural models. In the second section, children’s identity formation is discussed through expression of gender, distinctive norms and behaviors based on gender identity and the role peer groups play in shaping identity. The third section presents a main activity of childhood, namely play, and two spaces designed for children pertinent to this study, the school and the afterschool program. The fourth section is about the factors that influence children’s food consumption. The section begins with a discussion on the symbolic nature of foodways, biological and cultural influences on diet, and is followed with discussion of the role caregivers and parents play in shaping food practices and preferences. This is followed with discussion on the influence schools and the media play in shaping children’s ideas about food consumption. The final section delves into children’s use of food among peers and how peers can influence food behaviors and the symbolism attached to kids’ foods.
Anthropological Contributions to the Study of Children and Child Development

The anthropological study of children reflects the social conditions and empirical prerogatives of the times. Anthropology, like all academic enterprises, is affected by popular conceptions, historic events and current research agendas. Studies of children are products of the time and reflect changing popular theories and objectives. Children have been conceived as adults in training and alternately as social actors in their own right. From fervor by early anthropologists to capture the lives of “disappearing” peoples to the use of cognitive theory by the Culture and Personality School to the politicization of children’s’ lives reflected in more contemporary research, the anthropological agenda has changed over the last century. Anthropological focus on childhood began strong as the field developed in Europe and America, waned during the mid-20th century to become a rising area of inquiry in the last thirty years. Recent research also represents a shift in how children are studied. Traditionally most ethnographic works focused on socialization, acculturation and development of adulthood (James and Prout 1990) resulting in the muting of children’s voices (Hardman 2001). Recognition of children as competent social actors has shifted the research agenda toward the social creation of childhood by children themselves.

The major contribution of anthropology to the study of childhood is this recognition of the variability of childhoods cross-culturally and over time (Hardman 2001). “The ethnography of childhood is based on the premise- constantly reexamined in empirical research- that the conditions and shape of childhood tend to vary in central tendency from one population to another, are sensitive to population-specific contexts, and are not comprehensible without detailed knowledge of the socially and culturally organized contexts that give them meaning” (LeVine 2007:247). The context children grow-up within are reflected in child care practices, socialization, gender roles, social relations, work and play. Studies of children’s experiences has provided a wider vision of childhood experience and especially in American anthropological literature has served as a counterpoint to dominant Western ideas of universal child development driven by psychological and educational research.
As with other social constructions, the anthropological study of children in America reflects popular and academic conceptions of children, and has served as a counter point to prevailing psychological theories of child development. Ideas about children’s roles and proper development have changed rapidly as social conditions in the family and political-economic events have changed lifestyles. These changes are reflected in ethnographic accounts of childhood. A brief historical outline (describing mostly Euro-American middle-class children) follows highlighting the variability of how children are perceived and the resulting changes in child rearing practices based on those ideals.

According to the influential historian, Philippe Aries (1962) the modern conception of childhood is a social invention that was unknown in medieval times and before. His theory that children were viewed as miniature adults is based upon analysis of portrayals of children in paintings, stained glass and literature from the 10th-18th centuries. Though Aries’ theory has been critiqued as methodologically suspect based on archeological evidence and historical text, (Lancy 2008; LeVine and New 2008; Cook 2004), his work does acknowledge that concepts about children are context and time sensitive. From his work and historical accounts a changing pattern of European and American childhood become evident (Schwartzman 1978). Aries stated that beginning in the 13th century and culminating in the 17th century children began to be seen as innocents who should be coddled, in contrast to previous medieval notions of children as miniature adults lacking a distinct period of innocence and play. In the United States during the 17th and 18th centuries, and under the influence of Christian theology, innocent children believed to need protection from evil and required stringent training for proper moral development. The child moral development model gave way to concern for hygiene and health in the 19th century.

During the early 20th century child theories continued to change from protection of moral development to protection of physical health. This historical summary is useful for contextualizing the beginnings of the anthropology of childhood during this time period. The shift reflects the expanding influence of medicine and public health in shaping childrearing practices (LeVine 2007).
States public health campaigns educated mothers on the “proper” way to care for and socialize children into adults (Cook 2004). This concern with child development is reflected in the early anthropological research on enculturation, child care, language acquisition, social roles and development in families and communities through the world.

During the 1930s and 1940s mothers were urged to attend to the emotional needs of their children and stringent child rearing practices were relaxed. The post WWII years prompted the baby boom and the belief that childhood should be a time for fun and play between parents and children. Parents became responsible for producing functional and successful children, while being actively involved in their children’s lives. Parents continue to give their children educational advantages for future professional success. Childhood has become an adult project in which children are viewed as vulnerable and requiring training.

Awareness of context is also valuable for understanding the academic and social conditions in which American anthropology formed as a field. During the late 1800s and early 1900s American and British anthropologist were concerned with understanding human behavioral and physical variation. Accounting for the wide range of patterns described in early ethnographic accounts combined with theories from other fields impacted early biological and cognitive anthropology contributions.

Influenced by the racial and evolutionary models popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Armelaglos and Goodman 1998), Edward Tylor viewed children as primitive beings analogous to the foreign savages the young discipline of anthropology traveled to study. In the evolutionary hierarchy of humans, children and the illiterate primitive peoples being studied seemed to be a link to mankind’s savage beginnings (Tylor 1871; Montgomery 2009). According to this hierarchy the maturity process of children parallels the evolutionary advancement of humans in a linear line ending with civilized, adult Euro-American men. Under this guise Dudley Kidd’s 1906 monograph entitled Savage Childhoods: A Study of Kafir Children would possess a double meaning; the children were savage due to their culture and lack of maturity.

Evolutionary theories of child development have been modified and given way to other theories, but an enduring notion of the child as being less developed child has remained for much of the last century.
Concern with child cognitive development and the role early childhood experiences played in later life based on Freud’s assertion drew academic researchers to study children. Based on current psychological theory dominated by Freud and Hall, psychological anthropologist viewed childhood as the beginning of individual and cultural personality. Early anthropological investigations were influenced by developmental and psychoanalytic theory and focused on enculturation (Malinowski 1922; Benedict 1934, 1935; Mead 1928, 1930; DuBois 1944). In certain cases their work served to dispel Western-centered psychological theory with cross-cultural comparisons. In Sex and Repression in a Savage Society, Malinowski (1927) critiqued Freud’s Oedipus theory. He believed that the theory did not coincide with his observations of people of the Trobriand Islands or the Hopi Indians. Mead’s work in Samoa (1928) was in response to G. Stanley Hall’s notion of a universal tumultuous adolescent stage caused by biological changes at puberty. In an effort to apply or dispute psychological theory, enculturation, child care, parenting styles, language acquisition and communication are heavily represented in the earlier literature. Much of this work is about children and though children’s concerns were often filtered through adult behavior, the beginnings of an anthropology of childhood began. Some research conducted in the first half of the 20th century recognizes children’s “central role in the organization of production and consumption within the home and in the transmission of genes, ideas, identity and property” (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998:1). Regardless of their theoretical motivations, observations of children and adolescents by researchers such as Malinowski and Mead indicated that children were an important part of the social and physical world of groups (Erikson 1984) and could speak for themselves. The result is a wide range of studies investigating children’s lives from many vantage points. Of particular interest are areas of children’s health and illness (Bluebond-Langner 1978), migration, education, and disenfranchisement. Anthropology has contributed greatly to understanding of children’s daily lives and unique experiences as children including schooling, peer socialization and development.
Age Grading and Cognitive Developmental Theory

Age grading is a common observation in ethnographies. Recognized stages of cognitive and social maturity seem to be a universal phenomenon. Adult care giving practices and children’s expected behaviors are determined by age and the perceived cognitive, social and motor development at a particular age. Ruth Benedict noted that “age graded cultures characteristically demand different behavior of the individual at different times of his life and persons of a like age-grade are grouped into a society whose activities are all oriented towards behavior desired at that age” (1938:46). The work of cognitive anthropologists have highlighted the contrast between age grading in non-Western societies that tend to be flexible progressions and tied to social competence as much as cognitive maturity, with the child developmental theories of 20th century American and European psychologists, most notably G. Stanley Hall, Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. Hierarchical developmental staging proposed by Piaget outlines a linear series of stages that children are believed to pass through to reach normal adulthood (Rogoff et al. 1975). Developmental stages are based on fixed progressions of conscious thought. Each progressive stage reflects a more advanced form of cognitive ability culminating in adult-level rational and abstract thought.

The developmental stage model has been incorporated into anthropological research. Much of early psychological anthropology studies looked for universal application of staging models as a way of understanding developmental processes. However the application of developmental theory based on American and European middle class children has been critiqued by anthropologists on several points (LeVine et al. 1994). Rogoff (1996) states that developmental transitions should be viewed in the socio-cultural context of the child and that children mature in response to their environment. Her comments are in critique of development research that she believes focuses too much on the individual child and neglects the role culture plays in child development. Her critique is repeated by Adler and Adler (1998). Development theory assumes that children will passively acquire adult skills, cognitive ability, physical and social maturity one stage at a time (Adler and Adler 1998:7). The developmental model is heavily
psycho-biological; it does not explain class, gender or cross-cultural differences well and does not adequately explain variations in linear stage progression (Adler and Adler 1998).

In practice, staging and age are often confused and alternative parameters for the beginning or end of stages are ignored. In the Western model, childhood transitions incrementally from infancy, toddlerhood, young childhood, middle childhood to adolescence and then adulthood. Each stage is distinct and fixed. Cross-culturally the length of childhood varies (Lancy 2008). Other cultures such as the Navajo define stages and the ages associated with stages differently. The Navajo identify eight stages of child development that extend well into adulthood (Chisholm 1996). The use of stage tests have produced unreliable results in non-western societies, indicating the inability of tests based on Western psychology to capture cross-cultural variation (Rogoff et al. 1975).

The Middle Stage of Childhood

Middle childhood, roughly encompassing ages 6-12 years, is a period of transition from young childhood to early adolescence (LeVine and New 2008). The specific terms and age categories describing this phase are variously defined depending on source. Psychologist Jacquelynne Eccles (1999) defines middle childhood as six to ten years of age and early adolescence as eleven to fourteen years. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines preadolescence as nine to twelve years, and a tween as an eleven and twelve year old. The term tween derives from commercial marketing. In practice, tweens are generally defined by marketers as 6-11 year olds, even though there are significant developmental and social differences between the extremes of this cohort (Eccles 1999), and marketers further sub-divide the age category based on the characteristics and target audience of the product (Linn 2004). This demographic has become a significant target of marketing firms like YPulse and Youth Trends (ypulse.com;

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In this research the terms middle childhood or preadolescents will be used to reference children ages eight to twelve years.

Middle childhood, as a “developmental midpoint,” is important for the development of social identities, academic and work skills, and initial independence and responsibility (Adler and Adler 1998:206). It follows the 5 to 7 year shift, a phenomena of rapid developmental transition identified cross-culturally, and ends with the emergence of adolescence.

The 5 to 7 year shift marks the beginning of culturally prescribed expectations for children to acquire social and life skills (LeVine and New 2008; Sameroff and Haith 1996). Rogoff et al. (1975) found in comparing fifty cultural groups that in 16 of the 27 behavioral categories assessed, children around five to seven years began to take on more responsibility and entered a new social status different from younger childhood. The shift seems to be nearly universal (Rogoff 1996). According to Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1962) the developmental phase involves operational or rational thinking and internal dialogues that aid in self-regulation. During this transitional period, children are believed to gain sense or moral judgment. According to the Ijaw and the Sisala of Africa, children at this age develop sense to understand right from wrong (Rogoff et al. 1975). In Western societies, children are also assumed to gain moral and social accountability at this point. Catholic doctrine and English common law grant culpability at age seven (Rogoff et al. 1975). Social accountability is accompanied with cognitive progression; according to Piaget, children can think in concrete terms by age seven (Levine and New 2008). Possession of reason and rational thought makes children teachable, so this period is the beginning of skill apprenticing, school, or work responsibilities that may involve caring for younger siblings or

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3 These companies produce marketing research on millennials and post-millennials based on age segmentation with the assistance of Youth Advisory Boards and panels of adolescents and young adults that provide information on child and youth peer culture. The reports are used by companies to tailor product development and marketing strategies for children and adolescents.
small animals, assumed household chores, and personal responsibility (Levine and New 2008). For many children in industrialized and non-industrialized societies, school and domestic chores are the work of this age. Consequently, academic and skill training and gender separation begins in earnest at this time and intensifies throughout middle childhood.

Social accountability is accompanied with cognitive progression. According to Piaget by age seven, children can think in concrete terms (Levine and New 2008). Possession of reason and rational thought makes children teachable. This period is the beginning of skill apprenticing, school, or work responsibilities that may involve caring for younger siblings or small animals, assumed household chores, and personal responsibility (Levine and New 2008). For many children in industrialized and non-industrialized societies, school and domestic chores are the work of this age. Therefore academic and skill training and gender separation begins in earnest at this time.

Periods of youth are often marked by ritual signifying a change in status, such as naming ceremonies in infancy and initiation rites and high school graduations or proms in adolescence. While the beginning of middle childhood may be widely recognized, the ritualized recognition of middle childhood is less distinct (Weisner 1996). The transition may be connected to a physiological experience, such as the Ngoni of Malowi who connect entering this developmental stage with losing their first set of teeth (Read 1968). More likely middle childhood is formally marked by the beginning of compulsory schooling (Weisner 1996) or the beginning of apprenticeship.

During middle childhood, children increasingly move outside of the family context, thus making social groups a factor in the development of personal identity or one’s mental image of one’s self. During preadolescence individuals are self-aware and are learning to respond to their social environments while still being connected to family. The independence of adolescence is yet to come though, the beginning stages of independence are being set. From a developmental standpoint, children should gain “cognitive changes that heighten children’s ability to reflect on their own successes and failures; broaden their worlds to encompass peers, adults and activities outside of the family and develop social comparison and
competition in school in peer groups” (Eccles 1999:32). Within peer groups they are learning and practicing the interaction skills that will carry them through adolescence and into adulthood.

Middle childhood is a time of separation and joining. Middle childhood marks the beginning of the transition from primary family socialization groups to peer socialization as self-identity is deepening. Participation in activities such as school separates children from parents and unites them with peer groups, which become pivotal for identity and enculturation. Childhood is a category of difference from adults and is displayed through resistance to adult culture (e.g., mocking adults). Within children’s peer culture, identity is expressed through social group inclusion and exclusion through shared activities, expressions of status and social norms (Adler and Adler 1998; Corsaro 1992, 2014). While families remain an influence on children’s lives, peers become more critical to daily routines and thus enculturation.

Opportunities for peer interaction occur in numerous spaces such as neighborhoods (Goodwin 1990), nursery schools (Corsaro and Rizzo 1998), schools (Simmons 2014; Nukaga 2008), fields (Chirwa and Bourdillion 2000), streets (Joanou 2014; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998), playgrounds (Marsh 2012; Hardman 2001), and athletic programs (Dyck 2012; Fine 1987). Anthropologists have described children’s activities in these public and institutional locations and reported the increasing expectations associated with this age period. Their work has also highlighted the social agency of children in defining what it means to be a child in each culture and setting. Instead of viewing children as passive recipients of adult culture, ethnographic research indicates that children construct their own cultures using adult cultural models; however, they make it their own. Sutton-Smith (1977) explains that a child is influenced by culture and in turn influences cultural products. Children participate in this process individually and through social groups. Corsaro (2005, 2014) has expanded this notion with the concept of interpretive reproduction. He explains that children interpret adult cultural models as their own and in the process produce and change culture. Interpretive reproduction places children in an active position beyond simply receiving the lessons of socialization wholesale.
Peer Groups

Peer group membership is an integral part of children’s lives. Interaction with friends and siblings, beginning in the toddler years and continuing into adolescence, socializes children in appropriate child behavior thus contributing to social development. Peers are defined as “nonfamily children who are similar in age and competence level” (Pope et al. 2006:23). Peer groups serve to teach same-age and younger members what it means to be a child, including appropriate behavior, rituals, games and myths (Harris 1998). Anthropological perspectives of children have changed from early studies that assessed how peer social interaction acculturated children into the larger society with emphasis placed on enculturation of adult culture thru play and games (Mead 1928, 1930; Benedict 1934; Whiting and Edwards 1988). This view holds that children practice the skills they will need in adulthood through playing games like house and negotiating rules during games. Much of the research on children has focused on the result of socialization, becoming an adult. According to Woodhead and Faulker, “the dominant image of a child is of a human becoming rather than a human being” (2008, 15). This invisibility of children’s perspectives in social science research (Montgomery 2009) led Corsaro and Rizzo (1988) to advocate for a break from focusing on socialization solely as the acquirement of adult roles, skills and norms. By recognizing children’s views in their spoken sounds and words, artwork, facial expressions, body language, music, dance, and play (McPherson & Thorne, 2000), their daily lives become ripe sources of cultural expression and creation. The expansion of the passive enculturation model with a more interactive model of peer groups based upon the idea that children are active social agents raises their status as individuals and as research subjects. This shift in perspective of peer culture follows changing conceptions of child agency and children’s construction of culture. As Sutton-Smith states, “peer interaction is not a preparation for life, it is life itself” (1982:75).

Children’s culture dynamically transforms adult culture to meet the needs of the peer group while reproducing adult culture. The shift from a passive reproduction model to an active model has led to increased interest in peer interactions and talk (Kyratzis 2004; Corsaro 1985). Children’s cultural
production occurs as children take adult categories and reconfigure them within their peer group. The dynamic nature of children’s enculturation was noted by Raum (1940), as he observed the Chaga children did not seem to directly copy adult behavior, but instead resisted adult models and mocked adults for their own amusement. This concept is repeated in the research of Corsaro and Rizzo (1988) who found that Italian preschoolers used talk and play to create friendships and alliances, and that children’s discussions were based upon adult models of ‘discussione’ - a dynamic discussion technique of counterpoints and interjections modified in style and purpose to children’s own ends.

**Children’s Peer Culture**

Studies of children’s culture represent a growing area of contemporary qualitative research (Lareau 2003; Moron 1996; Karsten 2003; Fine and Sandstrom 1988). Over the last several decades, ethnographic and cross-cultural studies have focused on the concerns of children and have used children as primary research participants. The result is rich accounts of the social lives of children (Montgomery 2009; Pufall and Unsworth 2004).

Traditionally, children described in research have often been viewed as incomplete adults with childhood valued only as preparation for future adult roles. However, contemporary children’s scholars recognize children’s culture(s) as distinct from adult culture and define it as a unique “set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns” specific to a local peer group (Corsaro and Eder 1990:1997). Evidence from research conducted with children demonstrates that adult cultural models are appropriated and modified by children to meet their needs (Sutton-Smith 1977; Corsaro and Rizzo 1988); therefore, common behaviors may possess alternate meanings and motivations for children than adults (Kyritzis 2004). Children’s culture provides a mechanism for separating from and resisting adults (MacClancy 1992). Manipulating adult cultures provides a mechanism for self-control and autonomy (Corsaro 1986). Traditionally, children’s concerns and activities, such as play, were deemed less consequential than adult work (Montgomery 2009). The production of unique cultural texts allows children to garner power by
transforming or mocking adult norms. Nonetheless, this process is not unidirectional; children respond to adults as adults respond to children. Cultural texts have historically been passed down through stories, games, and songs and shared experiences from child to child; however, today’s youth share information with peers that is influenced by adult-produced material goods and media messages (Marsh 2012; Linn and Novosat 2008). Through television, movies, music, print materials, the Internet and product marketing, children’s popular culture, which includes the “cultural texts, artefacts and practices which are attractive to large numbers of children and which are often mass produced on a global scale” (Marsh 2005:2).

In the United States the rise of children’s popular culture exploded in the wake of 1980s Federal Communications Commission deregulation of direct marketing to children. Children had been viewed as revenue sources by product marketers since the early 1920s with the development of breakfast cereals and children’s clothing and toy departments in stores (Cook 2004). Originally, marketing of children’s products targeted mothers, but as time passed advertising products produced specifically for children to children directly steadily grew during the twentieth century. After deregulation marketers could more easily communicate with children through increased advertisements during children’s television programs, and especially with a recently identified tween market who not only influenced adult purchasing decisions, but rather had their own discretionary spending money. From a marketing perspective children in middle childhood became a thriving consumer segment, and companies responded by increasing production of products for tweens and marketing of products in growing media avenues such as websites and on-line video games (Coulter 2005). The result is an increasing commodification of children’s peer culture through media. These products are used by children and shared across local peer groups in ways not possible prior to the expansion of television and Internet media.

Increased use of media has resulted in American children living in media saturated environments. Today, children’s culture reflects a combination of micro and macro contexts. American mainstream society and children’s popular culture advertised through television, film, print, music and the Internet permeate subgroups and supersedes geographic boundaries within the society. The result is local
children’s peer cultures that are both similar to the larger popular culture of a society and other local peer 
groups and distinct from them (Harris 1995). Popular culture and local contexts influence how children’s 
culture is expressed in a local group.

**Peer Enculturation**

While adults, particularly parents, play a key role in child socialization and development, peers 
socialize each other through interactions in the home, school and community (LeVine and New 2008). 
According to Frønes (1994), preadolescent peer culture connects individuals to the larger society. Peer 
groups connect to each other in mechanical solidarity. Their similar age and subordinate position unites 
them against adults. He proposes that through group socialization, culture is not transmitted directly from 
parents or society, but rather from parents’ peer groups and society in general to children’s peer group. 
The result is identification with the group and experience belonging to a society of peers.

According to New, peer interactions and play are the “context and vehicle for social, emotional, 
linguistic and cognitive development” (2008:214). As children begin formal schooling and enter middle 
childhood, peer groups become critical to socialization and the primary means of learning the norms of 
childhood (LeVine and New 2008; Harris 1998). In applying Giddens’s theory of structuration to peer 
groups, we see that groups represent “organized sets of rules and resources, outside of time and space” 
(1984:25). It is within the structure of social organization of peer groups that social learning occurs 
through daily activities during which children observe each other, play, talk, joke and argue.. These peer 
interactions serve as reinforcement for cultural norms and provide opportunities for cultural production 
(Sutton-Smith 1977). Interactions build understanding that becomes accepted social knowledge and are 
continuously modified (Corsaro and Rizzo 1988; Corsaro 2014).
Children’s Identity Formation

Gender Identity and Gender Segregation

Children begin to segregate by gender in play and work during middle childhood. This pattern continues into adolescence (Wenger 1989) and children act according to expectations (gendered behavioral patterns certainly may be exhibited at younger ages as well; however, by middle childhood children are expected to understand what it means to be a gender and act accordingly). Adult expectations of genders shape how children act out the roles. In cross-cultural comparisons of parental child rearing practices, girls are encouraged to display nurturing behavior, while boys’ aggressive behavior was rewarded (Konner 2010). It is little surprise that social behavior measured among the children of six cultures by the Whiting and Whiting (1975) revealed the same trends. In same-sex groups activities considered appropriate for the gender and age are enacted. For example, in domestic settings girls are more likely to be expected to perform food preparation and childcare tasks in play and practice (Wenger 1989; Lancy 2008).

Within peer groups, gendered behaviors and customs reinforce differences between boys and girls through separate play, ways of acting and speaking (Konner 2010). Differences in peer interactions between boys and girls have been described in a study of Norwegian preschoolers, where Berentzen (1984) noted that the boys attracted playmates by starting more games and demonstrating their physical abilities through play, while the girls used play and toys to create alliances. According to Goodman (1970) and Hold-Cavell (1996), American boys tend to play more formal games than girls and use playful aggression to establish status. Girls may be less concerned with competition, and thus use indirect means to secure status (Hold-Cavell 1996). Young girls tend to form close relationships and boys tend to form flexible groups with social hierarchies. While girls depended on intimate sharing for bond formation, boys intensify relationships by doing activities together. Among a cohort of American middle class, predominantly white preadolescent girls and boys, Adler and Adler (1998) found that girls use appearance
and material goods to obtain status, while boys strove to be cool through toughness and physical prowess. Gendered behavior among elementary and middle school children creates social groups and reinforces the perceived separation between boys and girls.

Though same-sex group segregation is common, it is not absolute. Konner (2005) and Harkness and Super (1985) contend that hunter-gatherer groups do not demonstrate the tendency toward same-sex groups. Nor did Goodwin (1990) find clear gender segregation in the African-American children she studied. In some contexts, it is acceptable to cross gender lines, or engage in border work as Thorne (1993) labels it. Thorne contends that American “tomboy” girls can more easily participate in boys’ activities than boys can participate in girls’ activities. Gender segregation may also decline as children age and enter adolescence; in fact, gender segregation may be more pronounced in some context, especially in school where gender segregation may be encouraged by adults, and may be overemphasized by researchers as a social organizational tool in peer groups (Chen et al. 2006).

**Peer Culture and Identity**

According to Corsaro and Eder (1990:197), peer culture is “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers.” Peer culture provides mechanisms for identity creation based on age, gender, cultural and personal characteristics. Understanding of the role peers play in children’s lives developed from ethnographic study of identity formation, group dynamics, role learning, daily activities, communication styles and play (Montgomery 2009). Most research on child interactions and play occurs in neighborhoods and community settings such as playgrounds, sports fields, pre-schools and schools (Goodwin 1990; Katriel 1987; Corsaro 1985; Rizzo 1989; Best 1983; Thorne 1993; Grasmuck 2005). Interestingly, there are few studies of peer culture in private homes between siblings or friends or in afterschool programs.

Peer group membership reflects characteristics of its members and directs the unique version of the local children’s culture for the group. In research on identity and group membership, personal
characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity are used to express group inclusion or exclusion. Age cohorts and same-sex groups are common in middle childhood (Konner 2005; Thorne 1986), and are reinforced through school practices. Groups engage in behaviors deemed appropriate such as particular ways of talking and playing that reflect or resist mainstream societal norms.

Interpersonal dynamics are negotiated through various methods in order to make friends and maintain relationships (James 1993). Studies of peer talk and social networking reveal that children situate themselves in relation to adults and other children. Inclusion and exclusion are constantly negotiated through sharing and conflict mechanisms. The studies of Corsaro (1985) and Rizzo (1989) identify how pre-school and elementary school children negotiate friendships and role expectations of friends using play and declarations of friendship. Shared play and reciprocal exchange are used to determine inclusion through sharing food treats and toys (Hold-Cavell 1996). Katriel (1987) describes the food sharing that young Israeli children do with friends. The great attention these children give to distributing equal size bites of sweets reflects the group’s value of equality and fairness. Coded speech is also used to reinforce group membership- children use jokes, gossip, teasing and stories to express power and group identity (Goodwin 1990). In her ethnography of American girls’ perceptions of body image, Nichter (2002) found that fat talk or the disparaging comments made by girls about their own bodies, was not always tied to dieting or body image. For the participants, fat talk was a social behavior among girls, an expression of belonging. Children also use other forms of identity such as race or ethnicity to create group membership. In a study of Korean-American elementary children in a school lunchroom, Nukaga (2008) found that ethnic foods were used to express identity and demarcate group membership. Connolly (1998) describes how young African-American boys used race and gender to solidify their image as streetwise Bad Boys in response to Caucasian peers. Conversely, status struggles and rejection can cause conflict within groups resulting in exclusion. Disputes serve to establish social order, test friendship alliances and express social identity when sides are drawn. Conflict may erupt in verbal and physical altercations, or through gossip, as in the case of the African-American girls studied by Goodwin (1990).
In this example, gossip was a powerful technique for social control that allowed the girls to avoid face-to-face confrontation.

By using talk, play, teasing, jokes, stories, arguments and gift exchange children express membership, power and status. Children connect with each other by doing activities, hanging out, sharing objects and using cultural texts from popular culture (Corsaro 2006). Sharing experiences, toys and food in ritualized, repeated performances expresses social identity, group inclusion and exclusion, status and social norms (Goodwin 2002; Corsaro 1992). Value placed on gift exchange depends upon the nature of the peer relationship and the “coolness” of the gift, whether it is a toy or candy (Counihan 1999). In this way, candy, toys, school supplies, clothes, music and video games become cultural artifacts. Gift giving, sharing and bartering children’s cultural artifacts are used within peer groups to create alliances and maintain friendships (Counihan 1999). Through interaction and exchange, social status is increased (Nukaga 2008). The items are relics of peer culture and hold symbolic value within a group. In the process of sharing, children create and reinforce norms and values.

**Activities and Spaces of Childhood**

**Children’s Play**

Learning children’s culture is often performed through play. Children’s play is a vehicle for social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive development (New 1994). If play is considered the developmental work of children, our understanding of play in children benefits from a long history of inquiry. Anthropological attention to play began with the work of Edward Tylor and Stewart Culin who recorded games and assessed the diffusion and universality of games (Schwartzman 1978). Apart from the few who studied games extensively, including the folklorists- Iona and Peter Opie (1959), and until the latter part of the 20th century, minimal anthropological attention has been given in published works to children’s play as anything other than practice for adult roles (Schwartzman 1978; Brown 2003). The lack
of extensive attention may be because children’s play is viewed as superficial and less important in contrast to adult work (Gaskins 2008). In Western settings children’s economic contributions to family incomes are downplayed (Orellana 2001), while school and play is highlighted (Lancy 2008).

Unsurprisingly, few studies document adults playing with children outside of Europe and America (New 1994). American parents seem to be particularly concerned with the quality of children’s play. In a study by New, she compared Italian mothers’ beliefs about child play as a natural experience that mothers did not have a role in with American mothers’ beliefs that play experiences should be educational and molded by adults. Concern with children’s play not a maternal role among Italian mothers New studied (1994). If play is conceived as a process of cultural creation that reflects the culture’s settings and norms, then understanding play is necessary for learning how children create meaning in their lives.

Analysis of different forms of play has identified various functions of play. Within peer groups, play allows children to learn their culture, practice roles and skills and negotiate relationships. The games and rules of play within groups reflect cultural values and norms allowing children to learn the rules of their culture and family (New 1994). Imaginative play among young children allows children to attribute meaning to objects and situations. Schwartzman (1978) noted that for children during play meaning is more important than the actual object used. Objects are given other purposes through imaginative play. Kelly-Byrne’s (1989) ethnography of the play world of one child provides insights into how children create imaginary worlds and use play to manipulate power. Her research shows how the rules of play are created in the process of playing, or used from previous play experiences. Pretend play allows children to practice roles using scripts and voices they associate with a role. For example, while playing family, a child may use a high-pitched voice to signify that she is the mother and act out the power of the mother role (Kyratzis 2004). Besides play functioning as practice for future adult roles as in “playing house” (Goodman 1970), play provides opportunities to express emotions, taboos, status and power within the group in socially acceptable ways (New 1994). For example in Inuit society, play allows for participants to act out strong emotions that otherwise would be unacceptable in tight-knit communities (Briggs 1991).
The Northern Irish children studied by Lanclos (2003) used play to say forbidden words and talk about sexual ideas. Such forbidden speech was sanctioned because the children were “just joking around.” Rule based games allow for the expression of hierarchy, exclusion, and pollution through games such as “cooties” (Montgomery 2009). Games serve to maintain status differences and reinforce the rules. In games such as hopscotch and foursquare, girls can demonstrate their physical abilities and enforce the rules of play. Appropriate forms of expressing status was valuable for the girls Goodwin (1995) studied who were precluded as girls from physically aggressive displays available to their male peers. Gender expression during play allows for children to practice future roles and explore the underlying meanings of gender. The idea of play as preparation for adult responsibilities led to the production of gender-specific toys like dolls for young girls preparing for the work of future motherhood (Brown 2003).

The dichotomy between work and play is artificial, and may reflect American preoccupation with the difference between children’s play and adult’s work (New 1994). Bloch and Adler (1994) point out that North American children define play as something they chose regardless of how adults defined the activity, and African children incorporate play into work and vice versa. Modernization and formal schooling have emphasized the distinction between work and play that is artificial to children who value play for pleasure and amusement (Lancy 2008; Lasater and Johnson 1994).

In the United States the spaces children fill during the time period after formal daily schooling ends has shifted from neighborhood spaces for play to institutionalized programs. Traditionally, afterschool time was filled with spontaneous, child-led play. Neighborhood children played in backyards, sidewalks, streets and playgrounds and parks. Developmentally, spontaneous play in mixed age groups is important for social development (Corsaro 1985). Play allows groups of children to practice group regulation, decision-making and negotiation (Coakley 1990). Discussion and renegotiation are key components of spontaneous play and allow older children to practice arbitration skills critical to problem-solving. Children also learn to pay attention to social and emotional cues from others and effective ways of resolving disagreements. While spontaneous play is still incorporated into many after-school programs,
the rise of adult-led recreational activities has resulted in children experiencing less time engaged in free play (Adler and Adler 1998).

**The School**

For many children in post-industrial nations, the work of childhood is obtaining an education. While mandatory, public schools are a relatively recent phenomenon; compulsory schooling has created major changes in the lives of children. The educational institution has become a source of institutionalized enculturation, and parents and communities are no longer the primary socialization agents of children (LeVine and New 2008). Globally schools represent the primary institution that children encounter, and in industrial contexts, formal schooling has replaced sibling care, gender segregation rituals, work, and informal apprenticeships while emphasizing micro age-grading (Montgomery 2009). Traditionally, children are assumed to learn skills by observation and practice, which is in opposition to the formal dialogical teaching methods of schools. The Western model of education has spread from industrialized to unindustrialized societies through development schemes. While the Euro-American model of education is designed to teach students knowledge and skills for civic and economic engagement, the socialization lessons of school are biased toward a western context and may promote inaccessible goals cross-culturally. Based on cross-cultural comparisons, Lancy (2008) criticizes cultural incongruence between local cultures and Western educational models. For example, Tongan children are expected to be silent in the presence of adults (Morton 1996), in opposition to educational models of active learning in which children actively respond during lessons.

Schools are intended to prepare children for successful adulthood, yet a lack of cultural capital may handicap many underprivileged children in industrialized and non-industrialized societies. The disconnect between academic performance and everyday life skills makes attending school futile for underprivileged youth (Nieuwenhuys 2003). Besides conflicting goals of educational systems and parents, students may experience racism (Ogbu 1974), language barriers, and poverty. Students may feel like they
will not be successful in mainstream society due to these factors. Parents may see schooling as lost child labor either in domestic and cash work, or as futile training for future unobtainable employment. Formal education can be detrimental to children who will not have access to white-collar jobs and do not learn local subsistence skills while in school. If parents believe that an education will help a child attain a better job, then the child is more likely to be sent to school and education valued. When jobs for the educated become unavailable, then parents are less likely to make the investment in schooling for their children. Even in the United States, a disconnect may cause poor and minority students to miss the opportunities that more privileged children enjoy. Morton (1996) describes the differences between private schools subsidized by American religious groups and public schools. The private schools are well equipped in modern facilities while the public schools lack basic materials. Schools become a means of signifying class; in this way, the village school and the inner city public school are comparable and contrast to the middle and upper class school. The differences between schools can perpetuate social, occupational and economic differences (Nieuwenhuys 2003).

**The Afterschool Program**

The shift from child-centered to adult-centered free time coincided with the overall effects of compulsory school and reform efforts focused on the after school hours. Historically, the changing urban scene of the late 1800s in the United States led to these developments. Two outcomes were the Play Movement and the development of Afterschool programs designed to edify the lives of low-income, working-class children and adolescents in urban centers who were no longer incorporated into child labor (Halpern 2002; Valentine 2011). Industrialization, economic constraints and crowded urban areas gave rise to concern for the well-being of youth and increasing desire to protect them from urban dangers. The result of early efforts in large cities like New York were the building of playgrounds and dedicated indoor programs that included enrichment activities such as music, physical activity and reading (Halpern 2002).
Since the 1880s the demand for afterschool programs has grown and expanded from low-income to middle-class families. Today over ten million American children are enrolled in afterschool programs (Afterschool Alliance 2014). This rise in formal afterschool programs reflects a number of potential factors. Adler and Adler propose the rise in afterschool is tied to the increasing numbers of women in the workforce and concern of children occupying public space while unsupervised (1996). Increased need for extended child care after the school day, greater geographic separation between family members who could provide care, and decreasing social approval for ‘latchkey’ children and unsupervised time alone within the home (Hull and Zacher 2010) are also prevailing parental concerns. Increased perceived risk of “stranger danger” along with increasing media coverage of juvenile crimes and awareness of the criminalization of juvenile abhorrent behavior has combined with middle class desires for educational enrichment activities to help children excel has also contributed to the rise in the number of and kinds of programs (Mahoney, Parente and Zigler 2009).

The diversity of contemporary programs is wide. Recreational afterschool activities are an appealing form of childcare for parents and children. Some are based on academic achievement and tutoring services. Others focus on the skill development of a particular genre such as dance lessons, martial arts and sports teams like Little League teams. Other programs such as YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and community recreation centers provide a holistic range of services. They offer adult supervised academic enhancement, skill development, fitness and social companionship. The similarity underlining all of the kinds of programs is the socialization platform for adult culture where obedience, discipline, sacrifice and attention are valued (Adler and Adler 1998). Hence, afterschool programs are designed as “informal learning environments” (Halpern 2003) and act in many respects as a continuation of the socialization lessons learned in school.

Afterschool programs have developed as enrichment opportunities for socialization, and enrichment of academic, social, physical and artistic development. Afterschool settings are designed by adults for children and serve various capacities. Current critiques of afterschool programs highlight the challenges these programs face in providing safe childcare, while also providing supplemental
educational and personal development opportunities. On one hand, the struggle to fulfill these roles is due to programs being “expected to ensure safety and socialization through the control of children’s and youth’s time and movement. On the other hand, program officials see their mission as enabling youth to grow toward adulthood by giving them freedom to take ownership of their activities and products and placing their interests and desires in the foreground” (Hull and Zacher 2010:22). The challenge to balance parental, child and societal expectations of what should be provided during the afterschool hours makes for a unique opportunity to explore children in what has become a natural environment for many.

**Factors Influencing Children’s Food Consumption**

**The Symbolic Meaning of Food**

In order to understand modern dietary choices and behaviors of children and adults, it is helpful to begin by situating modern foodways in the context of our human evolutionary past. Humans developed the capacity for large brains, omnivorous diets, and a need for social bonding (Anderson 2005). As Homo sapiens’ brains grew larger and more complex, the biological need to nourish large brains increased and contributed to adaptations like consuming a wide variety of foods to maximize caloric and nutrient intake. Increased brain capacity would have also allowed for language development and social connections. Sharing food resources increased survival chances for the group, especially for the young. Social cooperation and bonding fulfills a need to feel socially accepted, approved and secure (Anderson 2005). For humans food is physical and emotional security. It is how we demonstrate affinity, love, and belonging (Parkin 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that the basic survival need is a foundation of human culture.

For humans consuming food entails more than meeting physiological needs, food provides a basic social organizing framework in which cultural groups live. Meeting subsistence needs provides economic structure for societies and household units. The content of human diets depends on available resources.
Environment, economics and biology interplay to create the menu of human diets. Within an environmental context, how the drive to eat is satiated is determined by social rules of acceptable partners and eatable items. Society shapes the behavior of individuals by dictating acceptable choices. The socialization process is such that the “successfully socialized is unable to eat …and will vomit when given an unsuitable foodstuff. In other words, certain intrinsic biological functions…like digestion become socially structured” (Cantarero 2007:205).

Food acts as social cohesion and is imbued with symbolic meaning. Food is substance and metaphor. Meanings are attributed to foods and consumption practices that have shared meaning within groups, and also serve as markers of exclusion such as the adopting kosher dietary laws to signify inclusion of Israelites and exclusion of non-believers (Douglas 1997). As Messer explains humans use food to “define what it means to be a particular kind of human, one who belongs to a particular community or identifies with a particular social call or way of life” (Messer 2007:53). The role of social rules in dictating food consumption has been well documented by anthropologists beginning notably with the work of Audrey Richards and Margaret Mead. What is considered edible is comes from cultural knowledge shared through social interactions. This basic assumption that our social realities are constricted sits at the foundation of our understanding of foodways (Cantarero 2007). We are what we eat, but food is only edible if we determine it should be.

Lessons instructed through daily food practices inform individual and group identity (Mechling 2000). Individuals connect by eating together (Valentine 1999). Such that individual and group food choices are based on shared attitudes. Food knowledge becomes engrained in daily rituals of eating or practice to borrow Bourdieu’s term. As Backett-Milburn and colleagues state, “the most taken-for-granted aspects of preparing, eating and choosing food on a daily basis are based on accumulated habits and preferences built up within distinct social groups” (2010:305). Food habits are modeled by older family members and peers for the benefit of children. The foods children grow up eating and the ways of eating become habits and favorite foods. Children learn preferences and dislikes similar to their parents
and peers (Rozin et al. 2011). Food plays a vital role in organizing daily life and social connections. The accumulated habits they refer to become shared foodways of a group that are repeated and reinforced daily.

**Food Exchange**

Food sharing structures cultural identities and social time and space (Messer 2007:55). It helps create the structure of relationships and defining in and out groups. Among non-human primates and humans food sharing is seen in multiple relationships including parent-child dyads and reproductive dyads. Sharing among relatives provides a genetic advantage for offspring and encourages the continuation of genetic lines. Schiefenhövel (2014) also explains the “sex for food” exchange that occurs between potential and pair-bonded mates. The social and genetic benefits explain sharing and altruistic behaviors among relatives and mates, but does not explain sharing among non-relatives or strangers. To account for the complexity of primate and human exchange, evolutionary theory provides a useful explanation. Evolutionary psychologist Cosmides (1989) proposes the computational theory of social exchange that during hominid evolution those individuals who engaged in cooperative behavior with others had a survival advantage thus making traits of generosity and honesty preferred. Over time a willingness to share and open emotional affect became signs of a good social partner especially in conditions of scarcity and environmental stress (Schiefenhövel 2014; Hruschka 2010). This explanation is useful for explaining the complex social rules cultures develop to control what foods are considered acceptable and how foods should be distributed with groups. Cooperation and exchange are basic functions of foodways and shape food access and even preference.
Children’s Food Consumption

In order to understand children’s food consumption patterns, taste, access, social and cultural messages must be assessed (Caplan 1997). Food consumption is determined by economic and subsistence patterns that control food availability and personal food preferences based on taste and shared food practices. Children learn cultural values about food through messages about perceived nutrition, price, convenience, cultural norms and prestige (Sanjur 1982). In the following section, parents’ and peers’ influence on children’s food preferences and food consumption are presented. A discussion of the influence schools and media play on food consumption is included because schools are critical sites of food education and media shape ideas about food norms through product marketing.

The Physiological Taste Preference of Young Children

The decision to eat depends on a complex interaction of neurophysiologic responses to food taste, sensory cues and hunger in the context of environmental constraints and social rules (Small 2008). Infants are born with innate taste preferences, which are shaped by early life experience with food and eating (Birch 1999). Universally children exhibit a genetic predisposition to prefer sweet and salty foods and a tendency to reject sour, bitter and new foods. These preferences serve an adaptive function under conditions of food scarcity because sweeter foods tend to be more energy dense (Drewowski 1997), and an aversion to bitter foods could prevent consumption of poisonous vegetation (Duffy and Bartoshuk 1996). Young children also demonstrate neophobia, the fear of new foods, which serves a protective function in avoiding unsafe substances. Research has shown that neophobia patterns are curvilinear, beginning low in infancy, and increasing in early childhood before decreasing in adolescence and adulthood. Children typically like more foods as they age. Repeated exposure to foods increases the acceptability of new foods. According to Birch and Fisher (1996) between five and seven exposures to a new food are required to create food acceptance. Increased exposure to foods increases preference, which
is a stronger motivator of food consumption in children than adults. Therefore, once a food is preferred, children eat more of the foods they prefer than adults, and repeated exposure to preferred foods, especially to sweet tastes, increases that food’s appeal (Benton 2004).

**Feeding Patterns of Young Children**

From birth parents recognize their infants’ distinct dietary needs. Globally infants are fed breast milk or infant formula. At six to nine months weaning foods are introduced. Weaning foods are generally soft, mushy versions of the basic dietary staple of a cultural group. Over time more solid foods are introduced with increasing acceptance by the child until the child follows normal dietary practices. In the United States, infants are often introduced to a commercially produced cereal, like rice cereal that is made into a thin gruel, along with pureed fruits and vegetables. The bland, watery foods served to children in mainstream America harkens back to the Victorian English upper-class practice of nursery foods that grew from a concern for children’s digestion during a time of high infant mortality (Anderson 2005). English nursery foods like rice pudding, gruel, custard and boiled eggs were served to children during the first several years of life. It was believed that children needed bland foods. While contemporary children’s diets are more varied than this, perhaps the concept of nursery foods established a pattern that extends past the nursery years for American children. Grocery store shelves present thousands of commercial food products created and marketed for young children from toddlers to school-aged children. Kid versions of yogurt, cookies, and crackers reinforce the notion that children’s foods are different from adult foods.

**Parental Influence on Children’s Diets**

Much of the literature describing parental influence on child consumption focuses on maternal influence, because household food preparation is a gendered activity relegated to women (Counihan 1999;
DeVault 1994). Mothers’ roles in shaping household food rules have been more extensively studied than
other relatives. Because of mothers’ typical roles as primary caregivers to children and gatekeepers of
family diets, maternal influence on child diets is assumed to exert greater influence (McIntosh and Zee
1998). However, an increasing number of men are preparing foods in the home. Smith, Ng and Popkin
(2013) reviewed food preparation trends in the United States and found that by 2008, 42% of men
reported cooking in the home. As mothers are taking on more employment outside of the home, fathers
are taking up more feeding responsibilities for children. Fathers also play a role in controlling foods
purchased for the family through exerting their own preferences and “veto power” (De Bourdeaudhuij
1997). The presence of males in the household may also impact children’s diets through culturally
determined food allocation customs. Larger portions and foods of higher nutritional quality like meats
may be served to men first based on assumptions of the nutritional needs of men especially impacting the
diets of poor children (Ross 1987; Fitche 1997). Fathers are also less likely to restrict their children from
eating less healthy food items or control amounts consumed by children (Khandpur et al. 2014).
Investigations of family influence on child diet should take into consideration the influence of all
household members on family food rules. For instance, in a study by Spungin (2004) mothers reported
that attempts to control their children’s consumption of unhealthy foods were often undermined by other
family members such as grandparents.

Daily routines in the home teach children social knowledge about mealtime manners, preferences
and beliefs about food (Lupton 1996). Parental influence on child food consumption occurs through
parental modeling (Birch 1980), parenting techniques (Birch and Fisher 1995), encouraging eating certain
foods (Wardle 1995) and controlling the availability of foods (Hearn et al. 1998). These behavioral
mechanisms seem to be more significant than genetic predispositions in shaping taste. Research exploring
parental genetic influence on child taste and physiological responses has not shown a strong relationship.
In fact, shared dietary patterns of non-related household members are as strong as genetically related
individuals, which suggest the effect of social learning. Family food rules develop through daily patterns
that dictate the use of food and meanings attached to consumption. Food rules may directly shape food
attitudes and preferences or subtly shape food attitudes of children (Wilson, Musham and McLellan 2004; Benton 2004).

Messages about appropriate foods and eating behaviors can be indirectly manifested to children through parental social cueing or serving specific foods (Brown and Ogden 2004). Children’s preferences for and aversions to particular foods are altered if parents and peers are observed eating the foods (Birch 1980). Thus, without direct verbal communication, food messages are received by children. Exposure to foods influences child dietary habits as well. Since foods disliked by mothers tend to not be served to their children, mothers influence food preferences in their children toward their own preferences by controlling availability, introducing novel foods and indicating their own food attitudes verbally and by modeling (Wardle 1995; Birch 1999). In fact, a longitudinal investigation by Skinner and colleagues (2002) followed children from the ages of two through eight years old and measured mother and child food preferences and consumption over this time period. It was found that by age eight the mothers and their children reported like the same foods. Associations have been identified in milk and soda consumption in mothers and daughters and between the fruit and vegetable consumption of parents and daughters (Davison and Birch 2001). Maternal nutritional knowledge, consumption and attitudes about fruits and vegetables have been shown to predict children’s consumption of fruits and vegetables (Savage, Fisher and Birch 2014; Draxton et al. 2014; Edwards and Hartwell 2002).

While some messages concerning the appropriateness of foods are indirect, other mechanisms of influence are direct, such as control of eating behaviors and access to foods. The motivation for parental control of child food consumption may be based upon nutritional beliefs or desire to control child personality and behavior (Fisher and Birch 1999). According to Griffiths and Favin (1999), Javanese mothers feared their children becoming fat and greedy. This concern led to food restrictions in accordance with the social value of thinness. Using food as a reward or punishment to control child behavior has been studied and it is found that such tactics can affect food preferences. Treats given as a reward hold different meaning from treats offered for affection (Lupton 1996). Parental control of food using food as a reward has been shown to increase child preference for foods associated with rewards and decrease
preference for foods attached to a punishment (Birch 1981, 1999). In effect, telling a child she must eat her broccoli before she can eat cake decreases preference for the broccoli and increases preference for cake. Parent restrictions of “bad” junk foods seem to have a similar unintended effect. Validating previous research Rollins and associates (2014) found that when parents restricted foods considered unhealthy, which were foods high in sugar, salt and fat, the result was increased child preference for those foods, especially among children with lower impulse control tendencies. When parental control was absent, the children ate more of the prohibited foods. Parental control of child eating through restriction was also associated with greater consumption and body image dissatisfaction in children and risk for overeating (Brown and Ogden 2004; Savage, Fisher and Birch 2014).

Parents influence child diets through control of household food availability, which both reflects and influences family eating practices (Baranowski 1996; Savage, Fisher and Birch 2014) through reciprocal determinism (Bandura 1986). Food choices based on preferences, attitudes and habits create the patterns of children’s diets and the overall nutritional quality of their diets. The impact of household accessibility on consumption has been examined, especially in relation to fruit and vegetable and soda consumption. Research has confirmed that household availability of healthy food items is positively associated with healthier diets in youth (Guthrie, Lin and Frazao 2002; Iannotti, O’Brien and Spillman 1994). For example, even if adolescences do not prefer fruits and vegetables, when fruits and vegetables are available in the home, adolescent consumption increases, and soft drink availability in the home is strongly associated with increased consumption in children (van der Horst et al. 2006; Pearson, Biddle and Gorely 2007). Likewise, overall fruit, juice and vegetable consumption of children decreases when these items are less available in the home, especially among low-income families and when children eat outside of the home at fast food restaurants more often (Cullen et al. 2000).

Household food availability is constrained by household budgets and food policies that control food prices. Food costs and a lack of time are reported by families as factors limiting the nutritional quality of diets (Glanz et al. 1998). Due to market conditions, the prices of fruits and vegetables increase faster than fats, oils, sugars and soft drinks, making fruits and vegetables more expensive per calorie.
(Himmelgreen et al. 2014; Glanz et al. 1998; Story et al. 2008). Healthier food items tend to be more expensive than less healthy alternatives that are often high in sugar, salt and fat. In industrial societies, modern lifestyles, working women and value placed on speed, convenience and cheapness has encouraged a change in foods selected. Parents work longer hours, which results in fewer family meals and more meals consumed outside the home (Story et al. 2008). Mothers employed outside of the home report having less time to prepare meals (Smith, Ng and Popkin 2013). Family meals are associated with increased vitamins and minerals, fruit and vegetable, grain and calcium consumption. Family meals also decrease the overall consumption of fried foods, sugar sweetened beverages, and saturated and trans-fats (Gillman et al. 2000; Andaya et al 2011; Fink et al 2014). Processed foods and fast foods that often contain high amounts of calories, fat and sodium offer a more convenient choice (Crocket and Sims 1995; Gardner and Halweil 2000:16). Economic consideration also influenced parent food choices among Scottish working class families, parents believed that fruits and vegetables were healthier and that their children should eat them. However, the parents faced a hierarchy of worries that relegated nutrition to a lower priority in the family life (Backett-Milburn et al. 2010).

In fact, the types of foods consumed and purchased by the family greatly impacts the overall diet of children since 67% of calories consumed among two to nineteen year-olds are done so in the home. 4 The impacted of food access provided by families is dependent upon the age of the child (Baranowski, Cullen and Baronowski 1999). Younger children in elementary school are more dependent upon their families for food in the home and at restaurants than older adolescents who have more independence. The family food environment involves a dynamic exchange between parents and children. Parents have food beliefs and practices from their dietary pasts, which combine with nutritional beliefs, lifestyle and economic conditions to create family food rules for their children. Children exert their influence on family food rules to increase availability of preferred foods, oppose parental control and manipulate their position in the family (Nash and Basini 2012; Roberts 2006; Christensen and James 2001). Children are

not passive receivers of food; Rogoff (1990) points out that children play an active role by redirecting parent’s attention, making requests and by responding to parental requests. Children use resistance at the dinner table and grocery market to affect mothers’ family food decisions (Grieshabber 1997). Further, both parents and children are receiving messages from external sources: media, peers, schools (Young 2003; Marshall, O’Donohoe and Kline 2007). Children studied by Roberts (2006) used pester power to circumvent parental attempts to make children eat healthy foods. Mothers tended to purchase foods the family would like and allowed children some control over food purchases. In a survey measuring child influence on parent purchases, 80% of parents reported that their children had requested the purchase of a specific brand (Spungin 2004).

**School and Media Influence on Children’s Food Consumption**

Institutions such as schools and the media affect children’s foods choices by communicating information and values about food. Schools and media communicate messages about health, pleasure, fun, role expectations and group behavior to children. Schools are significant educators of health messages through health curriculum (Borra et al. 2003), and transmit cultural, social and political information to children, while serving as the primary institutional setting for children (Golden 2005). School cafeterias serve as sites for daily commensal eating with peers, and provide access to soda, snacks and candy in vending machines and fundraisers (Crooks 2003; Story, Neumark-Sztainer and French 2002). Schools are increasingly becoming sites for corporate marketing and product placement through promotional events, in-school marketing and school vending (Christopher 2012).

Media influence on child consumption occurs through coverage of health information and food marketing on television, in films, contests, magazines, video games, and social media websites like Facebook, MySpace, and Instagram. Food marketing directed to children affects desires to consume and preference for advertised foods (Linn 2003; Jordan and Robinson 2008). Food products marketed to children are typically candy, snack foods, sugared cereals and fast foods, not fruit and vegetable products.
(Linn and Novosat 2008). Marketing messages expounding the attractive qualities of these foods thus increase children’s desire for the foods, which leads to requests for parents to purchase the products (Albon 2005). The marketing of foods to children combines the appeal of tasty foods and emphasizes the values of children. In taste test research it has been shown that when personal values align with values attached to products through marketing messages, subjects report more favorable tastes. Consumers enjoy the taste of food more when they are eating something that reinforces their values and self-image (Allen, Gupta and Monnier 2008). Marketing food products as “cool” and “fun” may increase the enjoyment children feel when consuming them (Schor and Ford 2007; Elliott 2009).

Product marketing is criticized for manipulating children. An Institute of Medicine report states that marketing strongly influences food preferences, requests and consumption of children. The outcome of this marketing is that children spend $30 million of their own money on junk foods. Commercial products have become the artifacts of children’s cultures (Corsaro 2005; Cook 2004; Albon 2005). With the rise of consumerism in American society over the 20th century has come the commercialization of childhood (Schor 2004; Linn 2003). The increased purchasing power of children and range of products marketed directly to children has increased more products are advertised directly to children. Schools and media are parts of children’s culture that affect food consumption by providing a context for eating and by influencing preference for foods.

Children’s Consumption of Snack Foods in Afterschool Programs

Consumption of snack foods, which are often pre-packaged, processed food products marketed directly to children, are consumed in greater quantities by today’s American children. Mean snack food consumption among children has increased over the last three decades from one per day to three per day, resulting in an increased balance of 200 calories consumed daily (USDA). More children are consuming

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snacks outside of structured meal times at home or at school, and more children are consuming those snacks in afterschool programs. The nutritional quality of snacks provided by programs and snacks brought from home by children has also been questioned. An assessment of snacks provided at YMCA programs in the United States reported that only 17% of the snacks fully met the recommended nutritional guidelines. Grains were provided in 75% of the snack occasions. Fruit and vegetables accounted for only 27% and 18% of the snacks respectively (Mozaffarian et al. 2012). In a study of home-packed school lunches and snacks, Hubbard and colleagues (2014) found that only 4% of snacks a sample of elementary school children brought from home partially met recommended nutritional standards. Processed snack foods, desserts and sugar-sweetened beverages were most often brought from home by children in the study.

Peer Influence on Children’s Food Consumption

The literature provides evidence of the role that families; especially mothers play in influencing children’s food consumption modeling behaviors and attitudes; the study of peer influence on food consumption is limited due to parental, media and school influences receiving more attention. Greater understanding of the social dynamics of children’s interactions with foods is needed. Peer influence on food behaviors is unique from other factors because peer interactions are situated in children’s cultures. Parental, school and media messages about foods certainly affect children’s attitudes and access.

Peers play a critical role in shaping consumption of children through a variety of influences, including role modeling, attitudes and values about food. Peer culture plays an important part of children’s lives. Judith Harris (1995) states that “peers [are] more critical to socialization than family groups because inter and intra-group processes, not dyadic relationships, that are responsible for the transmission of culture” (Alder and Alder 1998:13). While parents provide food and have some influence on consumption, as children become integrated into peer culture, peer influence on food consumption increases.
Peers affect food attitudes through group identity formation and social interactions (Elliott 2011). Groups define what acceptable behavior is for members, and by extension define what is acceptable eating behaviors (Birch 1980b). Peers seem to influence food consumption and attitudes through behavior modeling, food exchanges and food talk (Salvy, de la Haye, Bowker and Hermans 2012).

The Role of Food in Peer Groups

Within peer groups, food plays two significant roles: social cohesion and socialization. By eating together, sharing food, talking about food, playing with food, and bartering food children enter and maintain relationships (Kyrratizis 2004). Children also learn about accepted food norms and beliefs and express ideas about food, their bodies and childhood while eating together (Counihan 1999; Hold-Cavell 1996; Katriel 1987; Meigs 1997; James 1993; Stewart et al. 2006).

Shared food rules, beliefs and behaviors among children constitute children’s food culture. Adherence to food rules allow children to express identity and status while resisting adult food norms (Markovits, Beneson and Krammer 2003). Multiple criteria dictate which foods and eating patterns are appropriate for children by both adults and children based on perceived benefits and preferences (Birch 1980). Research on food preferences demonstrates that the preferences children report often reflect expectations of what children should eat and “current rulings by the peer group will have strong influence on acceptability of foods” (Birch 1980:4). In a study by Norgaard, Hansen and Grunert (2013) preadolescents and adolescents acknowledged that peers influence their attitudes about snacks and what they chose to consume. Younger children and girls reported a stronger peer influence on their snack choices compared to older youth and boys.

Comensal eating, bartering and sharing foods provides a means of solidifying relationships and gaining status (Shuman 2000), which can be especially important as children enter or attempt to enter a peer group (Wiesner 1996; Meigs 1997; Counihan 1999). Developmental theory predicts that altruism should increase with age, but this is not always true (Birch and Billman 1986). Food sharing is based on
negotiations and evaluations of relationships among children and the value attributed to food items (Markovitz et al. 2003). In a description of school lunchroom food exchanges, Roberts states that children swapped items from lunch boxes for preferred foods and “to avoid letting their friends down” (2006:70). In this setting, exchanging snack foods allows children to circumvent parental control over what they eat and engage in a social experience with peers. Food talk is also a way for children to express group membership. Talk about food in peer groups allows members to share information about normal child preferences and reflects group membership (Chapman and MacLean 1993; Roos 2002). Children may believe it is normal for children to eat junk foods based upon group opinion. Food may also be used as a way to distance themselves from adults or from other children’s groups. In a study assessing gendered use of food in children, Roos (2002) found that adult versus child food differences were more meaningful to the children than differences between boys and girls. Child food norms may represent resistance to adult food norms (i.e., candy is for children, because adults view candy as ‘junk’), and a way of exerting independence (Caplan 1997). Adults may reinforce child food norms by providing these foods. Morrison (1996) found that parents recognized candy as kids’ food and believed that providing their child with candy to share with peers would help their child fit in.

Adherence to peer food rules may allow children to express status and membership in the group (Frank 1994). Research children demonstrates that children’s food preferences reflect peer expectations of what children should eat. An assessment of 11-16 year old youth’s perceptions of the healthfulness of foods and consumption patterns of parents and peers by Worsley and colleagues found that peer’s food consumption was a significant predictor of the subjects’ snack food consumption eaten away from home (1984). Snack foods were more often eaten with friends. Peer influence on fruit, juice and vegetable consumption as reported by Cullen at al. (2001) may reflect social norms as well. In focus groups, children reported liking fruits, yet preferred sweets and snack foods, and even recounted being criticized for by peers liking vegetables. Quantitative data from the same study showed that peer influence on consuming these foods did not have statistically significant relationship. Although the children reported
that, their peers believed eating fruits, juice and vegetables were positive behaviors; their peers did not actively model or encourage them to eat fruit, juice and vegetables (Cullen et al. 2001).

There is a recognized need to better understand children’s culture, health and consumption outside of the family context (Tinsley 1992). Currently, there is recognition of the powerful role peers play in children’s lives. Empirically measured relationships between healthy food consumption and peer influence is inconsistent across studies (Sanjur 1982). The role of peers as models for health beliefs has received significantly less research attention than family influence, cognitive development, school achievement and social adjustment (Tinsley 1992).

**Children’s Perceptions and Consumption of Healthy Foods**

While knowledge and attitudes of healthy foods are important for understanding child food consumption, they are not necessarily predictive of consumption patterns due to multiple factors. For example, a child’s decision to eat vegetables is filtered through beliefs about the benefit of eating vegetables such as a strong body, although may be tempered by parental attitudes and eating practices, the child’s distaste for the food, and a belief that children don’t like vegetables because his friends don’t eat vegetables (Cullen et al. 2001; Domel et al. 1996).

Children’s beliefs about and preferences for foods impact their attitudes about their food consumption. In general, healthy foods are described with positive attributes and unhealthy foods produce negative and ambiguous feelings (Dixon et al. 2007). O’Dea and colleagues (2004) conducted a national survey of Australian children grades three through twelve to investigate children’s eating habits. They found that healthy foods were perceived to increase cognitive function, physical performance and self-confidence.

When questioned by Roberts (2006), children stated they knew what healthy foods are and what they should be eating to be healthy. American and European children’s folk concepts of food values generally reflects standard nutritional recommendations (Edwards and Hartwell 2002), and incorporates
dichotomous evaluations of food as positive/good or negative/bad (Roos 2002; Domel et al. 1996; Persson Osowski, Goranzon and Fjellstrom 2012). Across studies, general patterns of food classifications report that healthy foods are unanimously fruits and vegetables (Roos 2002; Edwards and Hartwell 2002), and are associated with overall positive health and weight control (Sheppard et al. 2006). Unhealthy foods were identified as candy, fast food, and junk food. In a study conducted by Roos (2002), foods such as hamburgers had ambiguous meanings as healthy or junk depending on where the hamburgers were made. Hamburgers made at home were considered healthy, and hamburgers from fast food restaurants were unhealthy. Ambiguity reported in the study may stem from the limitations of using dichotomous good/bad categories to define complex nutrition and social values attributed to foods. Also more nuanced understanding of nutritional qualities of foods may be difficult for younger children to understand. In an evaluation of the predictive power of intensions, using the theory of planned behavior, children had only partial knowledge of the fat content of different foods, which affected their ability to classify foods (Baranowski et al. 1999).

**Kids’ Food**

Similar to other dichotomous food classification systems, such as hot/cold, heavy/light, and masculine/feminine food classifications (Meigs 1997; Counihan 1992; Furst et al. 2000), children and youth also use binary concepts to divide foods into child/adult food lists (Chapman and Maclean 1993; Roos 2002). Kids’ foods represent items that children enjoy eating such as pizza, candy, fast food, some fruits and vegetables, French fries, ice cream and soft drinks. Adult foods are described as foods that children do not prefer such as cooked vegetables and fish. According to Sheppard and colleagues (2006) and Borra and colleagues (2003), children associate healthy foods with parents, adults and eating at home, while fast food was associated with peers, fun and social experiences. Healthy foods received negative evaluations if parents made them eat fruits and vegetables they did not like or if preferred foods were
replaced with healthy foods and fast food represented an opportunity for children to make independent choices.

Furthermore, children’s concepts of “healthy foods” may be different from adult conceptions (Roberts 2006), and motivations for wanting to be healthy may vary dramatically from adults. Given that children’s diets contain less fruits, vegetables and grains and more calories, fat, cholesterol, and sodium than recommended (Jacobson 2005; Nestle 2006; Poti, Slining and Popkin 2014), the question of why children do not eat healthier foods despite having basic understanding of nutrition is an important concern for children’s health promotion (McPherson, Montgomery and Nichaman 1995). Children’s health motivations may be a reason. Tinsley (1992) notes that health may not be a motivating priority for children especially for children under the age of nine. A sample of 8 to 12 year olds investigated by Borra and associates (2003) reported that while having good health is desirable, it was of little concern to them. Of greater concern was their physical appearance (especially among female respondents), physical performance in sports and games, and fitting in with peers and friends (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009). Worsley and associates (1984) found that children’s beliefs about healthfulness are not a good predictor of child food consumption. Though health may have some influence on food consumption, the relationship is weak (Worsley et al. 1984; Woodward et al. 1996). Likewise, research conducted by Bordi and colleagues (2005) found that when children believe a food to be bad for their health they had a negative attitude toward the food, though consumption was not necessarily affected. For example, foods that taste good (pleasurable) and are considered bad (unhealthy) are still consumed (Lupton 1996). Social aspects of eating, access and food preferences may have greater impact on food consumption than health motivators in children. Given children’s beliefs that unhealthy food are “kids’ foods” and that children more often eat these foods with their peers, the social role unhealthy foods play is a powerful influence on diet (Nestle 2006). MacClancy (1992) describes candy and junk foods as a representation of youth’s rejection of the older generation’s values and ideas about nutrition. James (1998) even describes the differences between adult candy and child candy indicating the nuanced meaning attributed to even the same category of food. Candy and junk food are “subversive forms of consumption, enabling
youngsters to create their own gastronomic lifestyle and their own feeding patterns” (MacClancy 1992:92).

Justification of research on children’s food decision making is often couched in biomedical explanations of future disease risk and concern for their health (Meigs 1997). Food habits and taste preferences developed in youth may continue affecting diet throughout adulthood and be passed on to offspring (Pelto 1987; Albon 2005). Concern for children’s diets is warranted in light of the increasing global rates of childhood obesity and associated morbidities, furthermore, nutrition interventions should address psychological and social factors that affect food consumption not only health.

**Summation**

In this chapter I outline the key literature contributions of previous research on middle childhood and the developmental concerns of this stage. During this age period peers gain social prominence in their lives and participation in peer culture becomes a critical socially and developmentally. Along with awareness of the cultural co-construction children engage in, researchers have placed increasing attention on children’s agency. Children are positioned as active agents in research contexts and in daily life. The oppositional position of children and adults are based on differences of power and status. This difference is mediated by children who modify adult cultural models for their own ends. Furthermore, the influences adults and peers have on the food consumption of children is discussed. Parents play a key role in the socialization of foodways through controlling access to foods and through modeling behavior, but as research has revealed peers are significant influences on child food consumption. For children, certain foods become engrained in notions of identity, daily consumption and commensal experiences.
CHAPTER THREE

Research Design and Methodology

This study utilized ethnographic methodology including participant observation and group interviews to examine the social dynamics of peer groups in afterschool settings. The purpose of the research is to investigate how peers engage in social interactions and the role food plays in child peer culture. In this chapter, two phases of the study are described. An initial, exploratory research was conducted during one semester using photo elicitation and qualitative methods. The exploratory phase served as a starting point by investigating questions of children’s perceptions of health and nutrition. This phase was followed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a two year period that expanded the original scope of the project to research the social uses of food among peers. The research design employed is presented here including the methods used during both phases, the role of the researcher, the research settings, and the data analysis process.

The Development of the Research Questions

Like many qualitative research projects the purpose and research questions of this study evolved over time. My original intention was to understand how children understand messages to eat healthier foods and engage in physical activity. This line of inquiry was pursued in the exploratory phase of the study, which included a sample of children in afterschool programs who participated in photo elicitation and qualitative methods. The research questions of the exploratory phase are:

1. What are children’s attitudes toward healthy eating and healthy lifestyles?
2. What classifications do children attribute to health and food?
3. Do children understand basic nutritional guidelines?

4. How do peers influence food practices?

The outcomes of the initial research led to more questions. The research questions of the second phase address the major aims to assess how children use foods during social interactions with peers and friends in the afterschool setting, and the perceptions about foods that impact their food consumption. The research questions of the second phase are:

- How do children develop social networks within peer groups?
- How do children’s peer culture and social peer interactions influence exchanges and food consumption in afterschool settings?
- These main research questions were expanded in sub-questions:
  - What factors shape social networks among elementary aged children?
  - What role does kids’ food play in children’s peer culture?
  - What are children’s perceptions of kids’ food and healthy foods?
  - What motivations do children recognize as reasons to eat healthier?

The research questions of the study were drawn from the literature on children’s peer culture food ways and methodological considerations of conducting research with minor children. The qualitative approach taken incorporated participant observation with elementary school aged children as a primary method of investigation. Participant observation was supplemented with informal interviews of children and staff, photo elicitation and structured group interviews that included participatory activities like creating menus and commercials to promote healthy eating among children.

**Methodological Considerations for Research on Children**

The selected methodology for this study took into consideration the children’s developmental and language capabilities. Research on children’s lives raises concerns of selection of appropriate methods to ensure validity of the findings. Children’s developmental and experiential immaturity may render some
methods less reliable (Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher 2009). Children’s age, gender, class, educational and cultural experiences should be of concern. For example, focus groups may be appropriate with middle school and high school youth and not with younger children. Limitations of attention spans, language acquisition and social experiences may make children less able to respond to traditional paper surveys.

While children’s ability to fully engage with traditional verbal methods is a valid concern (Christensen and James 2000; Clark 2004), the result has been a limiting of children’s voices in research (Gottlieb 2000). Contemporary social scientists are less likely to view children as “adults-to-be” (Clark 2004:171). The conceptual shift in ideas about children and their ability to participate in research has been facilitated in part by ethnographic studies of children’s lives (Scheper-Hughes 1987; Morton 1996; Lanclos 2003). Qualitative accounts have described the rich social worlds of children and prompted adjustments to traditional methods and expansion of new methods for use with children, thus providing valuable tools for studying children’s behaviors (Davidson Edwards and Alldred (1986).

**Ethnographic Methods Used to Study Children**

The ethnographic study of children’s lives allows for multiple qualitative and quantitative techniques to be incorporated in the research design and for prolonged contact with participants. Participant observation conducted with children in which the researcher actively participates in children’s activities is a valuable tool for developing rapport and witnessing children’s environments from their perspective (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010). Prolonged contact is beneficial for building rapport with children who may be weary of adult strangers (Irwin et al. 2006; Eder and Corsaro 1999; Heyl 2001). The ethnographic methods described below are often used in conjunction with surveys. Using multiple techniques allows questions to be asked in different ways and in different contexts increasing the likelihood of asking salient questions and confirming results (Christensen and James 2000).

The context of ethnographic studies varies. Examples of ethnographic and qualitative accounts of children are often located in homes, neighborhoods and schools. Home-based research allows for
observations of private behavior and family interactions. Blecke (1990) conducted participant observation and informal interviews with the children of one family in their home to study child health care behavior in the household. Situating the research interactions in the home allowed the researcher greater understanding of the context in which these behaviors were performed. Borra and colleagues (2003) conducted food related observations in the homes of six families in their investigation of family food practices and children’s attitudes. Qualitative methods conducted in domestic settings can yield rich data on naturalistic behavior. Conducting research in homes does have limitations such as sample sizes and limited access. These limitations can make research sites in public locations, like playgrounds, community centers and schools more feasible and therefore popular in the literature. For example, Goodwin (2002) hung out in neighborhood settings in order to engage girls in semi-structured and informal interviews and to do participant observation. Schools and youth programs have become common entry portals for studying children’s daily lives. Structured settings like schools facilitate access to children and are rich cultural communities. Health research that examines the role of schools and programs in the diets of children is an important topic given the impact on children’s social lives and nutritional knowledge (Persson Osowski, Goranzon and Fjellstrom 2012). For example, Bauer Yang and Austin (2004) conducted focus groups and key informant interviews with seventh and eighth grade students in a middle school to examine their perceptions of the school environment and the effect of schools on nutrition and physical activity.

Participant observation with children necessitates particular attention to the role of the researcher and the dynamics of interactions between the researcher and child participants. In ethnographic studies, participants are granted status in relation to the researcher. The researcher from academia and professions generally holds a higher status than local subjects. The status differential is even more severe when research is conducted with children than adults. Researchers can attempt to minimize the difference between researcher and child (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). In response to unequal status, Corsaro describes adopting the friend role in his research with young Italian and American children (1985; 1992). He represented himself as a non-authoritative adult who asked silly questions. He admits that his limited
Italian language skills assisted in building rapport with Italian children who enjoyed correcting his Italian mispronunciations. As James (2001) explains: an adult researcher, who participates in children’s activities may not be viewed as a normal adult as children try to “figure you out.” Non-judgmental interactions are key to building trust and lessening reactivity from children as a research relationship is negotiated between the research and participants (Fine and Sandstrom 1988).

**Group Interviews**

Structured interactions with children in the form of individual or group interviews should be conducted with attention to rapport building and reactivity. As well, the selection of individual-, group-interviews, and a combination of individual and group interviews depends upon the characteristics of the children and the research questions being addressed. A combination of interview types may be useful for developing interview guides and confirming results (Lewis 1992). Individual interviews may be more appropriate with older children, or if discussing sensitive and private topics; however, younger children may be intimidated by a one-on-one interview with an adult. Individual interviews can be stymied if the child does not verbalize freely due to discomfort, disinterest and a lack of language skills (Clark 2004). Group interviews can mediate these limitations and are useful for studying social behavior, group norms and shared experiences (Lewis 1992). Just as with formal focus groups, attention should be given to social hierarchies when selecting group interview participants. Ideally, children should be on friendly terms with each other so that children are comfortable speaking freely and the discussion flows more naturally.

While group discussions may encourage rich responses, confidentiality cannot be ensured, and children’s responses may be constrained by social desirability bias of peers or the adult researcher.
Participatory and Task-centered Methods

Qualitative techniques that incorporate activities are useful for working with children. Task centered activities can help children express ideas to adult researchers (Punch 2002; James 2001), and account for children’s capabilities that may be different from adults (James and Christiansen 2000). Activities such as free listing, pile sorts, drawing and art provide formats for capturing concepts and beliefs while engaging participants in the process. “Talking-while-doing” prompts children to talk and may reflect normal modes of play for children. For instance, a traditional form of play for Eskimo girls is storyknifing. In this activity, Eskimo girls tell stories using words and symbols carved in mud with knives. DeMarrais et al. (1996) lived with an Eskimo family while studying the traditional and disappearing form of child play-storytelling. The researchers asked the girls to produce mud drawings with a knife as they told stories, and then correct field note reproductions of the traditional symbols used in the storyknifing practice. The original storytelling and subsequent review of the researchers’ notes with participants enriched the interaction between the girls and the researchers and led to more discussion. The value of play and talk activities has been used effectively by Roos (2002) who incorporated it with nine to eleven year olds and Koller and San Juan (2014) who used play-based activities in individual interviews with young children in a study of their perspectives of inclusion in school.

Projective Techniques and Photography

Projective techniques elicit information from children using art, photography, metaphor, writing, drawing, and stories (Pridmore and Bendelow 1995). Non-linguistic means of communication are useful when working with younger children and when dealing with sensitive topics (Thomson 2008). Storytelling and metaphor are common components of pretend play, school lessons and everyday discourse, so that it is considered be a valid means of eliciting information from young children who may not have the linguistic capabilities to concisely describe ideas (Clark 2004; James 1993). Projective
techniques are useful when studying topics experienced yet not necessarily vocalized by children. Christensen (2004) used art with children to investigate their ideas of illness and health, and Gadhainn and Sixsmith (2006) had eight to twelve year old Irish children photograph objects and places as a way of describing their concepts of well-being. Employing a metaphor technique with five to eight year olds with diabetes and asthma, Clark (2004) asked participants to sort pictures of outdoor settings, objects, and people in response to how they felt about facets of their disease. Pictures were associated with range of emotional responses; some held negative connotations and others were associated with fun and happy scenes. The sorting exercise provided a mechanism of expression for the children’s experiences. In a study of children’s health beliefs and neighborhoods, Irwin and colleagues used photographs of neighborhood scenes during one-on-one interviews with five to seven year old American inner-city residents. The photographs were used to clarify questions and elicit responses. The authors also used “kinetic conversations” (2006:356). Here children lead the interviewer on a tour of their neighborhood as the child told stories and pointed out objects related to health in their environment. These methods place children in an active, creative role in which verbalized language is combined with action. The techniques allow children to control the flow of information and to use images to spark explanation.

Another projective technique that has gained use in research is photography. The availability of inexpensive single-use and digital cameras has expanded the use of photography as a method of data collection (Prosser and Schwartz 1998). Photography is an activity that does not require high technical skill and is enjoyable for children. Photo-elicitation techniques like PhotoVoice enable data to be created by participants instead of being only taken from them (Wang et al. 1998; Strak, MacGill and McDonagh2003; Wang and Pies 2004). Children can be active participants in the creation of data, while sharing their point of view. Images allow for alternate means of communication and the composition of the image and the context in which it was made reflect the participant’s physical environment and perceptions (Thomson 2008). Photography provides a flexible format for a range of research designs and elicits information about cultural domains, physical artifacts, experiences and environments. Even so, it is considered an underused method and is seldom employed independent of other methods (Prosser and
Schwartz 1998). Photography-based research protocols require careful logistical planning and the adequate opportunities for discussion so that children can express what the photographs mean to them.

**Children’s “Voices”**

Another key consideration in the research design of this study is how to accurately capture children’s perspectives fairly. This includes children’s ability to comprehend what it means to be a research participant. Cognitive and social understanding of participation in research increases with age (Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher 2009). Most of the available research on children’s ability to give assent to research involves biomedical treatments that may pose physical harm (Ross 2006). Less is known about children’s understanding of social science research that may involve emotional distress and loss of confidentiality. The dependent status of children may jeopardize their ability to maintain privacy throughout the research experience (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). If research is conducted in groups of children, with parents, or if chaperones are required to supervise researcher and child interactions in school and community settings then maintaining privacy can be challenging (Lewis 1992). Privacy can be difficult to maintain even with paper surveys, for instance, in the event a parent demands to see her child’s responses. Clearly stated privacy policy should be explained to children, parents, and other supervising adults.

When participating in research children risk losing control over their words and self-representation in their social groups because of breaches of confidentiality. A similar concern involves how children are depicted in research products. Like other disadvantaged groups, politics of representation are relevant in how children’s words are used (Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher 2009). James (2007) cautions researchers to not speak for children, rather to include children in the research process and allow them some control over how they are represented. Her conception of children as socially competent actors lends itself to qualitative methods and engaging children as “co-participants in the research process, rather than being subjected to it” (Cook 2004:4). While children may be involved in the
production of data, rarely are they involved in data analysis and in setting research agendas (Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2006). Notable exception is the work of Brembecka et al. (2013) who engaged children as co-researchers of foodscapes.

A broader issue that may be beyond the immediate concern of children and their parents is the condensation of children’s diversity from many voices to one voice. Children should be described in the plural since a social group cannot be described as having a singular experience (Thomson 2008). Child advocacy efforts and research conventions contribute to the singular use of children’s voices. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified at the World Summit for Children in 1990 seeks to provide universal protections for children. It used a Western-defined individual rights agenda that as some anthropologists warn does not account for socially defined rights of children and contributes to the notion of a universal child (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998). The critique of these protections is meaningful when viewed in light of childhood as a unique experience shaped by cultural context and history. Awareness of the vast diversity of experiences makes codifying a universal ‘child’ challenging. While a singular category of “children” may serve the political purposes of the UNCRC, children should not be depicted as a collective whole (James 2007).

Ethnographic methods have facilitated greater inclusion of children in research, and have allowed them to speak for themselves in research (James 2001). However, inclusion of children raises concern over methodological and ethical issues. Speaking of children and their lives in fixed ways, as it is often done in the “ethnographic present” (Montgomery 2009:13), can be detrimental to our understanding of children’s lives by minimizing differences among individuals and over time. Adult researchers may feel a false closeness to youth because they once were children (Fine and Sandstrom 1988), and fail to recognize changes in childhood experiences over generations. The challenge is to identify methods that foster children’s expression while accounting for developmental and social limitations of children. In doing so, children’s lives should not be trivialized, nor should children’s diversity be ignored (James 2007).
**Ethical and Legal Considerations of Conducting Research with Children**

Researchers who study the lives of children must consider selection of appropriate methodology, consider the needs of children as a vulnerable research population, and be mindful that “our understanding of research with children is embedded in our understanding of children” (Farrell 2005:5).

Considerations of how to include children in research reflects a moral need to protect children due to their inherent powerlessness, weakness and vulnerability (Hurley and Underwood 2002; Whiteford and Trotter 2008). Children are considered vulnerable groups privy to special protections outlined in documents such as the Belmont Report and professional ethics codes (Ross 2006). Practices such as informed consent, confidentiality, disclosure and representation are germane to ethical research with children given their marginal status.

**Children’s Autonomy and Consent/Assent**

Children’s dependent status affects participation in research in important ways. The decision process to participate in research is complicated by children’s lack of legal self-determination. Due to their lack of complete autonomy, children are placed under the responsibility of parents and in the research context; parents must give permission and informed consent for children to participate (Ross 2006; Fluehr-Lobban 1994). Children’s assent is also requested. Assent is a simpler concept than informed consent; it assumes voluntary participation, not an understanding of potential risks and benefits (Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher 2009). The child informed consent/assent process raises two concerns. First, the child is dependent upon adult permission to participate regardless of her wishes (Leadbeater et. al 2006). The child does not have self-autonomy and self-determination only autonomy in relation to her guardian. Second, it can be challenging to communicate to parents and children the implications of participating in research, possible risks and how the data generated from research can be used in ways that both parents and children understand. Children may not fully understand what the study involves, and
may feel pressure to participate due to fear of getting in trouble, disappointing the researcher or because their peers are participating (Farrell 2005; Fluehr-Lobban 1994; David, Edwards and Alldred 2001).

For children to fully assent they must understand that their participation is voluntary, not experience coercion to participate, and understand the risks and benefits associated with participation. Fine and Sandstrom describe “informed rejection” as a meaningful opportunity to decline participation and key to informed consent (1988:31). Hurley and Underwood (2002) found that explicit explanations of assent and verbally giving elementary aged children permission to stop participation during a study increased participants’ comfort and increased the likelihood that a child would elect to stop participation. To mitigate the risk for involuntary participation, the role of the researcher should be clearly defined to avoid confusing children who may assume the researcher is a teacher or other kind of authority figure (James 2001). The power differentials between children and researchers need to be acknowledged and minimized when collecting assents as well.

**Research Design and Methodology of Exploratory Study**

The impetus for the current study began with a small exploratory study conducted in the spring of 2008. It served as an entry into the field sites and informed the development of the research questions and subsequent methodological choices used here. As such, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the preliminary work that developed into the present study.

As part of a larger study of the impact of maternal employment on family health, food choice and dinners, I conducted a small study of children’s food beliefs and attitudes. The larger study named the LINK Study (Linking Work with Community and Family Health) was directed by USF researchers Tammy Allen (Industrial Occupational Psychology), David Himmelgreen (Anthropology), and Rita DeBate (Public Health). The study was funded by the USF Healthy Sustainable Communities Initiative and partnered with the Tampa Metro Young Men’s Christian Association. The purpose of the study is to look at the impact of maternal employment on family and child health, specifically the impact of food
choice and family dinners. A survey was administered at two time points to 220 mother child dyads. Children and their mothers were recruited from twenty-three afterschool sites in Hillsborough County. The surveys were given in the fall and spring. Children and mothers reported on themselves and each other.

The smaller exploratory study I conducted involved a sub-group of sixty-five children ages eight to twelve at four of the twenty-three sites. The sites were selected for general geographic and ethnic variation. The child participants were eight to eleven years of age and attended the YMCA afterschool programs. Participants were recruited and parental permission and consent was collected separately for this project from the larger study. Before the research took place, parents and children were provided with informational hand-outs explaining the purpose of the research. Parent consent and child assent forms were collected prior to the start of the data collection activities. All research protocols were reviewed and approved by the USF Institutional Review Board.

The exploratory research employed creative and participatory methods tailored to the age group to assess the extent of children’s knowledge and attitudes about healthy eating and classification of health and unhealthy foods.

Table 1. Research questions, methods, variables and analytical tools of exploratory study

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Analytical Tools</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. What are their attitudes toward healthy eating and healthy lifestyles?</td>
<td>Group interviews, Graffiti wall, Art collages</td>
<td>Health, Taste, Enjoyment</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What classifications do children attribute to health and food?</td>
<td>Free listing, Photo Elicitation</td>
<td>Healthy food vs. unhealthy food, Favorite food, Physical activity, Fun things to do</td>
<td>Descriptive statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do children understand basic nutritional guidelines?</td>
<td>Free listing, Photo Elicitation</td>
<td>Healthy food vs. unhealthy food</td>
<td>Content analysis, Descriptive statistics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Several qualitative methods were used including free listing, photo elicitation, Graffiti Wall group interviews and art collages. The methods were designed to be age appropriate and hands-on activities. Group discussions followed each activity. Freelistinng and photo elicitation were both conducted during this exploratory phase in order to compare the results. In both instances the children were asked to write down or take pictures of the same domains. The results could then be compared to determine if children provided answers based on social desirability bias. The comparison also allowed for exploration of what children though versus what physical foods they had available to take pictures of.

Due to time constraints, the group interview questions were divided over the three sessions. This helped prevent the children from becoming disinterested during a long interview and allowed the activities to be completed before the children were picked up by parents. Each session lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

During the first session students participated in free-listing activities of relevant domains. They were allowed to write the words or draw their responses. Domains used in this study included healthy foods, unhealthy foods, my favorite foods, fun things to do, and physical activities. Free-listing activities were designed to elicit individual-based data on concepts of health and healthy behaviors. Next, students participated in a Graffiti Wall activity (Mathers et al. 2010). For this activity, large pieces of paper were posted to walls. On each poster a prompt was written, such as “Healthy foods are…” or “I do…when I am stressed.” Students were allowed to write and draw their response to the prompt on the posters. After every student had an opportunity to respond to each prompt, the group discussed the responses and created a consensus of important themes from the posters. The result was group-defined themes. The Graffiti Wall exercise served to explore themes of health and healthy foods. These interactive experiences offered a chance for group consensus building (Lewis 1992) among the students. Often, one child’s response served as a trigger for another’s comments in a dynamic way. The exercise served to discover ideas and experiences that resonated with the group.

At the conclusion of the first session, children were presented with a twenty-seven exposure disposable camera and given instruction of basic camera operation. Students were asked to take fifteen
pictures of objects, people and places that reflect the study objectives described in the five topics: healthy foods, unhealthy foods, my favorite foods, fun things to do and physical activity. The remaining twelve photos were returned to the student and could be taken of a composition of the student’s choice. Sharing the photos with the students provided an incentive for the student to return the camera for film development and provided compensation for the students’ participation. The cameras were returned to the researcher who had the film developed in preparation of photo activities in session two. Photovoice is a qualitative method that uses photography as a means of eliciting meaning from everyday experiences (Wang et al. 1998; Wang and Pies 2004; Strak, Macgill and McDonagh 2003). This method has been used effectively to organize and activate community coalition. With young people, it offers an interactive experience and a means of visually describing their lives (Lapenta 2011). In this study, the typical PhotoVoice methodology was modified to fit the needs of the project following the examples of Harper (2002) and Clark-Ibáñez (2004; 2007) Therefore, I describe the method as photo elicitation since photographs were used to prompt and enhance discussion. For example, the five topics were pre-selected instead of being decided upon by participants. The photo activity served to elicit intricate information, spur discussion and encourage participation (Pink 2007).

At the second session the “fun” photos were returned to the participants as a gift, the photos to be used for the study were then coded by the students according to the five domain topics mentioned previously. From these photos the students selected three pictures with which to create story boards. To create a story board, the children questions describing the “story” of the photo. The technique followed the recommendations of Barrett and Desmond (1985:42) in suggesting the use of questions to aid children in interpreting photographs. General questions were employed such as: What is in the photo? What is the photo about? Why did you take this photo? The story board form is included in the appendix section. The coded photographs and storyboards allowed for the participants’ view to dominate the explanation, instead of imposing the researcher’s assumptions on the material.

During the third session the participants’ photos and pictures from magazines were used to create art collages on the topics. The collages spurred discussion and stories about what food means, having fun
and the social and emotional experience of eating certain foods. The children were allowed to keep the art projects, after the researcher took photos of the collages and discussed the pictures with the children.

Data obtained from group interviews and observational notes were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic approach. A coding scheme was developed based on themes identified and applied using Atlas.ti v.6 (GmbH, Germany). Content analysis was performed on the photography and collage data following recommendations of Collier (2004). For each photo the code/s assigned by the child (e.g., healthy food, unhealthy food, favorite food, fun things to do, and physical activity) was noted, as was the actual content of the photographs, and the context of the photograph. The frequency of each category was computed using Excel and SPSS v.17 (SPSS, Inc., Chicago IL). Free listing data was analyzed using Excel and SPSS. The freelist data was reviewed for term consistency (Bernard 1995). Similar terms denoting the same food item were standardized (Bernard 1995). For example, “strawberry” was renamed to match the term “strawberries”, “Coca-Cola” and “coke” were made uniform, and spelling mistakes were corrected. After the data was cleaned frequencies were computed.

The combination of photographs and freelist allowed for a comparison of methods. Free listing is assumed to more closely measure the members of cognitive domains, while taking photos of foods (or people consuming foods) relates to physical access to foods and opportunities to be active. The photos served as an approximation of the food environment. Photographing physical objects from children’s environments has been used with success to enhance description of tactic concepts that children might take for granted and aid children in talking about their environments (Irwin et al. 2006). The narrative analysis conducted with the transcripts of interviews allowed for explanations to be made of the context in which foods are thought of and consumed or activities performed.

This exploratory study, while informative, raised questions for further in-depth research. The present study reflects a continuation of research in two of the YMCA afterschool sites from the exploratory phase. The purpose of focusing on two sites for continued study is to allow an in-depth examination of the how children perceive and use food in peer social settings. The results of the exploratory phase indicate that the participants understood the concepts of healthy vs. unhealthy (i.e.,
junk) foods, and readily acknowledged that they believed they should eat these foods; however, they admitted that they often preferred unhealthier foods and consumed them. The dissonance between beliefs about foods children should eat and their reported preference and consumption of unhealthy foods raised questions that warranted further study.

If children understand basic messages about healthy foods, yet do not consume those foods regularly, questions such as why do children eat other unhealthy foods and what are the factors that influence children’s food consumption are raised.

The second phase of the study sought to address questions about the role of peers in food consumption, perceptions of child versus adult foods and how children use food in social interactions with peers. The purpose of the ethnographic phase was to expand the scope of the exploratory research in order to investigate children’s peer culture. Given the complexity of the topics, an in-depth ethnographic approach was valuable for exploring the ways that children interact with peers and how foods are used in social settings. Participant observation was supplemented with group interviews conducted at the conclusion of the fieldwork. In this way group interview methodologies were useful in generating hypotheses for participant observation and then confirming the findings of participant observation.

**Research Methods of the Ethnographic Study**

The second phase involved an extended ethnographic study of two afterschool sites using participant observation, informal interviews with children and afterschool staff, and semi-structured, small group interviews with the children. The study involved several methods conducted over two academic years, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012. Participant observation conducted during the afterschool program allowed for observation of children’s peer groups and daily snack breaks and eating throughout the afternoons. Observations were made of child and staff interactions, for example, staff directing children during activities, staff serving children snacks and children making requests of staff, and children’s play and peer interactions during snack time and other activities of the afterschool program.
Examples of the kinds of observations made of peers include: eating together, food sharing, playing with food and wrappers, talking about food, playing games, pretend play and hanging out with friends. Also, semi-structured, group interviews were conducted with the children. Group discussions surrounded Graffiti Wall and menu activities to encourage discussion and active participation.

Table 2. Research question, methods, variable and analytical tools

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<th>Research Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. How do children develop social networks within peer groups?</td>
<td>Participant observation, Informal interviews</td>
<td>Social groups, Friendships</td>
<td>Thematic analysis, Social Network analysis, Cross-checking between discourse and proxemics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. What factors shape social networks among elementary aged children?</td>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td>Group characteristics, Social hierarchy</td>
<td>Thematic analysis, Social network analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do children’s peer culture and social interactions influence exchanges and food consumption in afterschool settings?</td>
<td>Participant observation, Informal interviews</td>
<td>Social groups, Social networks, Food consumption</td>
<td>Thematic analysis, Social Network analysis, Cross-checking between discourse and kinesics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. What role does kids’ food play in children’s peer culture?</td>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td>Food talk, Food play, Food exchange</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. What are children’s perceptions of kids’ food and healthy foods?</td>
<td>Group Interviews and participatory activities</td>
<td>Healthy food vs. Unhealthy food</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. What motivations do children recognize as reasons to eat healthier?</td>
<td>Group Interviews and participatory activities</td>
<td>Health, Taste, Physical activity, Identity</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptions of Research Setting

The research settings are two YMCA Afterschool program sites located in Hillsborough County, Florida. Hillsborough County is an ethnically diverse area located in central west Florida. In 2012, the population of Hillsborough County was estimated to be 1,277,746⁶ with a population of 347,645⁷ in

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⁶ [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/12057.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/12057.html)
⁷ [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/1271000.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/1271000.html)
Tampa, the largest metropolitan city in the county. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the racial/ethnic composition of Tampa is 62.9% white, 26.2% African-American, 3.4% Asian, 0.4% American Indian or Alaska native, and 23.1% Hispanic or Latino. The poverty rate during 2008-2012 of Tampa is 21.1%.\(^8\)

**The YMCA Afterschool Care Model**

The YMCA is a non-profit national organization with local branches. Historically, the national organization has promoted Judeo-Christian values, though currently the implementation of those values is secularly based. The mission of the YMCA is to support healthy families physically, mentally and socially (http://www.ymca.net/youth-development). The YMCA strives to be perceived as a family and community friendly organization. The YMCA provides a variety of programs designed to foster individual, family and community well-being such as physical fitness centers, recreational sports, enrichment classes and childcare. Youth development and childcare programs are a significant focus of the YMCA. Nationally there are 10,000 YMCA Afterschool Childcare sites. In Hillsborough County, the Tampa Metro YMCA is the largest private childcare provider with over 2,000 children participating in afterschool care located at thirty-two sites.

The selected afterschool program sites included in this research are part of the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA, which is “a charitable association dedicated to building strong children, strong families, and strong communities, puts Judeo-Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all.”\(^9\) The program’s focus is to encourage participants to demonstrate the core values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility. The objectives of the program are:

1. To have a safe and fun experience.
2. To learn and develop skills accomplished by group activities, sports, arts and crafts.

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\(^8\) [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/1271000.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/1271000.html)

3. To learn and develop social skills accomplished by group involvement and an emphasis on teamwork.
4. To learn and develop skills accomplished by incorporating the Y’s values of caring, honesty, respect, responsibility into the daily activities.
5. To develop self-confidence and self-worth, accomplished by the treatment of children as individuals and by positive reinforcement.
6. To improve health and fitness accomplished by movement and recreational activities.
7. To build strong children through the delivery of an asset-rich program experience.

The YMCA afterschool care program follows a standard curriculum. In effect it is not school, yet it shares characteristics of school. The program borrows concepts and structures from the academic environment as seen in the goal of The YMCA Success Afterschool program, which is to create a safe, nurturing environment for children to learn, grow and develop social skills. The curriculum of the YMCA program is based on organization, character development and health and wellness. These values are promoted as part of the Forty Developmental Assets that YMCA program strives to incorporate into the curriculum. The Forty Developmental Assets are designed to promote health, caring and responsibility in children. The categories of the assets are support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity (See appendix E for a complete listing of the 40 Developmental Assets). In the afterschool program, children are taught to be good citizens, productive and active participants. These goals are evident in the characteristics of the afterschool programs.

The Organizational Structure of YMCA Afterschool

The YMCA Success Afterschool program is directed by the Tampa Metro YMCA organization. The YMCA main office oversees the Afterschool programs at thirty-two sites across Hillsborough
County. Sites are housed on public school campuses and at YMCA community and fitness facilities. Thirty of the afterschool sites are housed in public schools, and four are located at YMCA facilities.\(^\text{10}\) The main office for Tampa Metro YMCA organizes the site locations, contracts with Hillsborough County Schools to place sites at schools, provides a budget for program costs and manages employee and human relations issues. The programs are funded through YMCA monies, participant fees and grants. The cost for families included a registration fee of $30 and a weekly fee of $220. The programs accept a sliding fee schedule based on family income. YMCA site staff are assigned to each program location. Staff-child ratios are usually maintained at one to thirteen, below the state mandated ratio of one to fifteen for child care services. The central office also provides a standardized curriculum and daily schedule for all sites. The curriculum includes structured activities including homework time, snack time, character development, choice centers, arts and crafts and unstructured, free play time. The sites are also provided set time schedules allotting specific amounts of time for each activity.

The main office expects the site staff to maintain the schedule and follow the curriculum. The responsibility of following the curriculum and leading each site falls to a local site director at each school or facility. The site director manages the local site and the site staff under her/his jurisdiction. The site director is also responsible for communicating with parents, collecting child care service fees from parents and monitoring and reporting child behavioral issues. Parents must show identification and physically sign their child out each afternoon. Daily schedules and snack menus are posted at each site.

### A Comparison of the Research Sites

The two sites were selected due to their differences in building types and settings, geographic areas within the county, composition of children and staff, and to a degree, for racial or ethnic and economic variability. The comparison also allowed for observations of program differences and the

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\(^{10}\) [http://tampaymca.org/3cmby/index.php/our-programs/success-afterschool]
impacts on child behaviors. The site directors of these two sites were also most amenable to a long-term ethnographic project from the four sites included in the exploratory phase of the study.

The two sites selected for this research, Soto and Middlewood, followed similar daily routines and curriculum. Daily activities and schedules were similar and included homework time, snack time, character development, group crafts and games and free play. Homework time was allotted every day except on Fridays when the children had extra free time instead. Children were given 20 minutes to eat a snack provided by the program. When tables and chairs were available the children were expected to sit in an orderly fashion and clean up the area afterwards. Character development was a group discussion of a value based topic such how to identify bullying, what constitutes a hero, and how to encourage others.

The choice centers included various educational games such as math flash cards, science magazines and puzzles, or recreational games like mancala, Connect Four, Legos, Lincoln Logs, or the Uno card game. The educational activities were typically set out on tables for children to play who did not have homework to complete. Children could also select a book from a small library of children’s books housed in the supply closet to read during homework time. The recreational games were provided during in-door free play times when quieter activities were expected or as an alternative to arts and crafts. Outdoor free play occurred either on a basketball courts or playground in the case of the Soto site, or in the case of the Middlewood site, the children played on a grassy field, and under a pavilion. During inclement weather the children had to remain indoors, though the children at Middlewood also had the chance to play games in an aerobics room and an indoor basketball court.

**Soto Site**

The Soto program was located in an urban area of Tampa, Florida. The program at Soto Elementary School is housed on a school campus. The campus is located by a busy road close to a university campus. Road traffic is visible from the outdoor play areas. For safety reasons the school buildings and campus are enclosed with fences. The exterior cafeteria doors that open to the driveway for
school bus and car traffic are locked at the end of the school day. Therefore, parents picking up their children had to knock on the door and be let in by one of the site staff. The staff use walkie-talkies to communicate inside to outside.

The YMCA contracts with the school in order to have use of the facility after regular school hours from 2:15 pm until 6:00 pm. The program rents the space from the school and has access to the cafeteria, outdoor playground spaces and a supply storage closet located in the cafeteria. The situation results in limited options for spaces and activities. The children were typically outdoors or in the cafeteria. The program serves 45 to 60 children in grades Kindergarten through fifth grade. The program staff included a site director and three to four counselors. This site operates only during the regular school year. The children are divided into groups based on grade-level and assigned a permanent group counselor. The children who attend this site are students at Soto Elementary and a charter school located across the street. The children attending this site are predominately African-American with smaller numbers of Caucasian and Latino students.

Figure 1. Image of cafeteria at Soto site
Middlewood Site

Middlewood YMCA Afterschool Site is located in a YMCA facility, which is located in a suburban area of the county and is surrounded by single-family neighborhood, green space and a county park and fitness trail. The facility is enclosed by a fence and parking lot. Parents enter the facility through front doors; pass an information desk staffed continuously by YMCA personnel before continuing to the afterschool rooms in the building.

The afterschool program runs concurrently with other fitness and wellness programs in the YMCA facility. The afterschool program activities are held in a multi-purpose room, game room, indoor gymnasium, and outdoor playing field. The children also have access to an outdoor pool during warmer months. The program serves 75 to 100 children after school, and also offers summer day camp programs. The children are divided into groups based on grade level of kindergarten through fifth grade, and the counselors assigned to each age group rotate weekly. This program offers extended hours from approximately 2:15 pm until 7:00 pm. Children who attend this program attend one of the eight schools in the area. The program owns a re-purposed school bus that is driven to each school to transport children from schools to the site and to transport children to field trips during summer camp. Public school buses also drop off students from the schools. The children attending this site are predominately Caucasian and Latino.

The game room houses two pool tables, a ping pong table, a foosball table, television, couch, and six desktop computers. The multipurpose room housed a dedicated office for the site director, a storage closet, and cubicles for children to store belongings, tables and chairs that were taken out for specific activities. In addition the program had intermittent access to an indoor basketball court, aerobics room and outdoor pool. In addition to the afterschool child care program, other programs were hosted at Middlewood in which parents could sign their children up for. Various sports and activities were available for additional charges including swimming lessons, soccer and basketball junior leagues, and dance
classes. These activities were offered in the afternoon and early evening hours so that children could go from the afterschool program to the other activity without requiring transportation.

The staff of each site varied in significant ways as well. Soto is led by Ms. Monique, (pseudonyms have been attributed to all staff members and children), an African-American woman who has worked in childcare services for the YMCA for nearly twenty years. Her part-time position is her primary source of income. The staff working with Ms. Monique varied over the two year period of the study. The long-term staff members included Ms. Martha and Ms. Lois who are both middle-aged women. There were several younger staff members in their twenties, several of whom also worked another part-time job. The Middlewood site is directed by a full-time employee who also oversees all children’s programs and the summer camps at the facility. Working under David, the site director, are several young adults in their late teens and early twenties employed as part-time counselors. Most of them are either high school students or college students.

Though racial, ethnic and socio-economic information was not directly collected on sites or study subjects, indications of SES are evident. Soto provides services for mostly minority students. Additionally, both feeder schools for the Soto program are Title I schools. The YMCA provides a sliding fee scale depending upon family income. According to information provided by the site director 70-80% of families at Soto were eligible for a discounted rate of the $220 weekly fee based on family income. The director at Middlewood reported that an estimated 30-40% of students there received a discounted fee for the Afterschool services (personal communication, Ms. Monique and David).11 Of the eight feeder schools that funnel students to the Middlewood program, two are classified as Title I schools.12

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11 The full monthly program fee for one child is approximately $220. Each academic year a $30 registration fee is required.
12 Title 1 of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (formerly known as ECIA, ESEA or Chapter 1) is the largest federally funded educational program. This program, authorized by Congress, provides supplemental funds to school districts to assist schools with the highest student concentrations of poverty to meet school educational goals. Title 1 regulations require school districts to provide services to all schools where at least 75% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals. (https://www.sdhc.k12.fl.us/ssfdiv/Title1.asp)
Prior to beginning the study, I obtained permission to attend the YMCA afterschool programs from the Tampa Metro YMCA main office during the spring of 2010. The study protocol was reviewed by the YMCA Childcare Director, who oversees all sites in Hillsborough County, and the two local site directors. During the fall of 2010 and 2011, entrance into the field site was delayed for two months due to management staff turn-over at the central office. For two consecutive years a new Childcare Services director was hired at the beginning of the school year. This position oversees all of the YMCA childcare service programs and is responsible for granting permission for supplementary or research activities in the sites. I requested approval for the research, provided relevant study protocol documents, completed personal background check forms and completed child abuse prevention training three times over the course of the two years due to the need for subsequent approvals. The necessary documentation was provided during the spring of 2010, during the late summer of 2010 and during the late summer of 2011. Once renewed approvals were obtained from the incumbent Childcare Service directors, I was able to begin attending the sites or reconvene study protocol. I attended each site two days per week over a two
year period from October 2010-May 2012. During the summer of 2011, I also attended the summer day camp program three days a week at Middlewood YMCA.

**Introductions at the Sites**

Prior to beginning fieldwork, I introduced myself to site staff and explained the study plan and purpose. This introduction process was repeated with the children attending the programs, and with their parents after sending an introductory letter home with the children (see Appendix B for introductory script). In the letter parents were informed that I would be attending the program and participating with the children and helping the staff. It was explained that a report would be written at the end of the study and that their child would not be identified in the report. It was also explained that their child could be excluded from inclusion in the study. My contact information was provided in the letter. I was also introduced to the parents of the third through fifth grade children when they picked up their child during the first two weeks of the fieldwork. This enabled me to speak directly to parents and explain the study verbally. No parents declined participation for their child. I purposely continued to greet and speak with parents throughout the study at pick-up times.

During the first day of attending the sites, I was introduced to all of the children in each program by the site directors. At that point I was able to explain who I was and the purpose of the study. I explained the process in terms the children would understand. For example, I told them that I was a college student doing a study for a school project and that I wanted to find out what it was like to be a kid, and find out about the foods they liked to eat with their friends. On a recurring basis verbal assent was obtained from children and the purpose of my presence was continually repeated to the children and questions answered. The children often asked me questions such as “who are you”, “why are you here”, “what do you do”, “are you married”, “do you have kids”, “how old are you” “are you a teacher?” I answered their questions and used the opportunities to remind them that I was doing a study, what a study entailed, that I would be writing a report (which several offered to help me with), and that they did not
have to talk to me or play with me if they did not want to. My candid responses and repeated explanations of my role in the program helped to establish rapport. Eventually the children began to answer for me when a new child asked one of the above questions. They shared my biographical details and explained my role. The children’s curiosity about me provided ways to review their assent throughout the fieldwork.

Group interviews were conducted with a sub-group of children at each site. The group interviews were conducted with twenty-five children during the June-July 2011 at Middlewood YMCA and with 18 children during March-May 2012 at Soto Elementary. Prior to the interviews, all of the third-fifth grade students were assembled at each site. I explained the group interview project to them and each child received an informational letter and parental consent form to take home. Parents were asked to read the information and contact me with questions. After a three week period for the return of consent forms, the interviews began at each site. Prior to data collection in the group interviews parental permission and consent forms, and child assent were collected. The sampling of children for the group interviews represents a convenience sampling. In order to ensure participant names remained confidential, all identifying names of participants, site staff and site locations have been assigned pseudonyms, and were kept separate from field notes and study materials and stored in a locked file cabinet in my office. The research protocol was conducted with authorization from the USF Institutional Review Board and Tampa Metro YMCA Afterschool Success program.

Prior to beginning fieldwork a matrix of categories of activities and behaviors was developed to serve as a guide for observations. This matrix was refined and expanded as fieldwork progressed to include a variety of activities (see appendix E). Observations were made of the site characteristics, daily activities including snack time, social networks of the children and social dynamics between children.

Observations were also based on multiple levels of analysis at each site location. The macro level is the site itself, which included comparisons of similarities and differences of the sites based on unique characteristics of each location, as well as, the curriculum and schedule. I also observed how staff influenced children’s behaviors and group dynamics. The middle level included the peer groups the children were divided into by staff. The groups were labeled by school grade level. Within these groups I
observed the social networks and social structure of grade groups and sub-divisions based on gender (e.g., the boy third through fifth grade group or the girl third through fifth grade group). Within the peer groups, I observed characteristics of gender and individual personality characteristics that impacted popularity within the group. At the micro level, I looked at how individuals functioned in dyadic and small friendship sub-groups. These small groups were comprised of preferred friends within the peer groups. I observed the interactions and exchanges between friends. The goal of this approach is to describe the overlapping factors at each level that impact behavior and child foodways.

![Diagram showing levels of analysis conducted at each site]

Figure 3. Levels of analysis conducted at each site

Participant observations were also impacted by methodological choices. I did not openly carry a notepad to jot notes upon during the afternoon around the children. My primary reason was the barrier this would possibly build and the fact that it might decrease my opportunities to be actively engaged. Making notes while in the site would place me in the role of passive observer, and I sought to be an active
participant, free to move from one activity and conversation to the next, and even juggle multiple conversations at the same time. However, I did carry a pen and small notebook in a pocket or backpack. I used the notebook to jot down one or two key words. To aid my recall, I often wrote the child's name and one or two words of what they said or of observations. My normal routine was to excuse myself from an activity to go to the teachers' lounge at Soto and the hallway at Middlewood two to three times during a daily session. These areas were selected because they were one of the few spaces that afforded a degree of privacy. This practice may have resulted in the loss of detailed notations, though it increased my ability to be an active participant and build rapport. My approach to ethnographic research is largely influenced by James Spradley (1980), and the methodological considerations of conducting fieldwork with children as outlined by Robyn Holmes (1998). Decisions of practical considerations such as whether to jot notes in front of the children came from reading the experiences of Gary Fine and his work with young adolescent boys (1987).

On most days I attended a site for three to four hours then immediately wrote out notes of the day's events, bits of conversations and speakers' names, questions for follow-up, and my impressions. The accounts of events and conversations recorded in field notes are rendered as closely to the original as my memory served. Since the actual setting of the site changed little from day to day and the general schedule of events was repeated daily, I focused on recalling conversations, speakers, behaviors and interactions. These notes were expanded and typed up the same day or on the following day. The group interview sessions were tape recorded with the participants’ assent.

The field notes and recordings were transcribed and coded for thematic analysis using Atlas.ti v.6 (GmbH, Germany), a qualitative data management and analysis program. Using a constant comparative approach, the primary code book was developed and modified continuously as data were collected and analyzed. This allows for emerging themes to be identified as the field work progressed and for subsequent observations to be refocused (Kolb 2012). A systematic process of analysis included the identification of themes within the data through multiple readings, the development of a theme directory, and the coding of themes into more specific units of sub-codes. Once all notes were coded, groups of
codes were clustered to identify categories of themes and to identify level of analysis. Categories were compared to see how interacting factors affected perceptions and experiences. Notes on analytical questions, questions to follow-up on and personal reflections were included as memos within Atlas.ti (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

During analysis, the site names and individuals’ names were replaced with pseudonyms in field notes and materials. Privacy was also extended to the issue of photographing study participants. The possibility of taking photos of participants was discussed with the site directors at each site and I was asked to not photograph children due to privacy concerns from some of the parents. The images included in this report are of objects observed during the fieldwork. All photos were taken when children were not present to accommodate the site directors’ requests.

**The Researcher’s Role**

In research with children the nature of the relationships between child, researcher, parents and other adults are of particular concern. Friendship may develop between a researcher and children; however, the relationship is never equal. Adults possess higher status due to age and life experiences. A moral responsibility is placed on adults to protect children from harm and control unacceptable behavior. This expectation to protect children can impact child adult interactions when parents, teachers and counselors assume an adult will intervene to protect a child from other adults, children and even from himself (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). The expectation to intervene may conflict with the need to maintain a non-judgmental relationship. Fine (1987) explains his dilemma while conducting participant observation with young adolescent boys. The boys “tested” Fine by engaging in lewd talk and smoking in this presence. Fine chose to not openly object to the boys’ behavior. He was rewarded with social approval and was taken into their confidence. Policing children’s behavior may be expected by other supervising adults and resented by children. A balance is necessary between protecting children’s confidentiality,
building rapport and maintaining a positive reputation with gatekeepers who control access to the participants.

As in all qualitative research, a unique relationship develops between the subject and researcher. I adopted the role of a quasi-adult, friend and playmate following the examples of Corsaro (1989), Fine and Sandstrom (1988) and Holmes (1998). From the onset I participated in activities with the children, including games, arts and crafts, snack time and hanging out. I positioned myself physically and metaphorically on the children’s side. I sat and stood where they did on the floor, in the grass, in small chairs. I waited in line during bathroom breaks or for the water fountain just as they did. I dressed in green and grey USF t-shirts, shorts or jeans and tennis shoes. My attire was pragmatic to enable me to play games. It also visually differentiated me from the staff who wore red YMCA uniform shirts.

I purposely did not reprimand or correct children unless their behavior would put them at serious bodily risk. As I sought to align with the children, I had to balance this with the needs of the staff who allowed me to be a guest in their site. Therefore, I assisted the staff by helping children with homework, leading a line of children and at times leading a game or activity. When asked by staff to supervise children or lead an activity, I did not reprimand the children and often made a joke of my role as a “leader” in order to communicate an alliance with the children. I spoke with staff each day and developed relationships with them. They seemed to appreciate the assistance I provided with the children.

The balance between being a friend to the children and a responsible adult was delicate. I engaged in small acts of service to the staff such as cleaning tables, setting out chairs, leading games and assisting the children with homework. Helping with homework was regarded as an important service, because the staff could not provide individual help to each child due to the number of children. Helping with homework also served my purposes because I was able to interact with the children individually and build rapport. I was able to get to know the children one-on-one and in small groups. Homework time was an opportunity for informal conversations and observations of eating and food sharing.

My goal was not to be perceived as a big child, rather as a kind of quasi-adult. My status as an adult and guest in the afterschool program prompted me to seek ways to lessen my status and power in
order to build rapport. The result was a degree of intimacy between the children and me that was strengthened by prolonged engagement with them over a two year period. The prolonged interaction with the children supported rapport building, lessened reactivity and provided opportunities for observing and asking questions about a wide range of behaviors. Over time, both the children and the staff took me into their confidences and shared the afterschool world with me.

Research activities included observations, group discussions, free listing, individual interviews, pile sorting, and menu creation. The purpose of the study was to understand children’s conceptions of child versus adult foods. The children created pile sorts of the foods that children mainly eat and foods adults mainly eat and created two types of menus, a healthy (what adults want you to eat) menu and unhealthy menu (eat whatever you want). These techniques allowed the children to be active, hands-on participants.

In this study participant observation and informal interviews were supplemented with group interviews of children. The purposes of the participant observation and informal interviews were to learn about the afterschool context, the social networks and social dynamics of peer groups and investigate how food is used in the context of children’s peer culture. These goals lent themselves to long-term, cumulative data collection. In order to ascertain more specific kinds of information such as confirming perceptions of healthy versus unhealthy foods and confirm conclusion from the exploratory phase of the study, the group interviews were not conducted until after I had established rapport over several months of participant observation. I also wanted to avoid influencing later naturalistic observational data with interview questions on perceptions of healthy foods and questions about how children show friendship.

For these reasons and for logistical considerations at each site, the group interviews were conducted during the spring of 2012 at the Soto school site, and during the summer of 2011 at the Middlewood YMCA site. The group interviews were advertised using an informational letter that was sent home to the children’s parents. The children had to be at least eight years old and in the third, fourth or fifth grade to participate. Participants of the interviews were given a small toy for participating.
The small group interviews were conducted with groups of two to five children. All participants in the group interviews received parental permission and consent in order to participate. Child assent to participate was collected from all participants. Once parental permission/consent forms were returned to the site, the group interviews were scheduled by the researcher. Care was given to schedule children in groups according to social networks observed during the course of participant observation. Friends were grouped together to increase their comfort and decrease negative reactivity following the suggestions of Holmes (1998).

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach. Each group interview lasted about forty-five minutes. Depending on the flow of the discussion, the following questions were asked to the group. Respondents verbally indicated responses, or wrote and drew their responses on large poster boards as used in the Graffiti Wall technique.

Group Interview Guide

1. Individual Food Preferences
   - Do you like the snacks that the YMCA teachers give you?
     - Are there foods that you would rather have?
     - Is it better to bring your lunch/snacks from home or to eat the school lunch/YMCA snacks?

2. Kid vs. Adult Foods
   - What foods are kids’ foods vs. adult foods? Menu activity: Together you will make up a menu for breakfast, lunch, snacks, dinner and drinks. One for children and another for adults. Write and draw the menus.
     - Why do children/adults eat these foods? What foods are children supposed to eat? [List of foods children are supposed to eat. List of foods children really eat.]

3. Food Choice
   - How do you decide what you want to eat?
• Rank five potential influences: your friends, your family, the taste, the cost, healthiness of the food, commercials-Which one is the most important and which one is the least important? Which of these is most important to you when you decide what to eat?

4. Friends/Peers
• How do you know someone is your friend?
• What do you like to do with your friends?
• How do you show someone you are their friend?
  o Do you ever share your lunch and snacks?
  o Do you expect them to share with you?
• If your friend came over to your house what would you give them to eat?
• What do you usually eat with your friends?

5. Commercials
• Pretend your job is to convince other children like you to eat healthy foods. Let’s make up a TV commercial for it. What would happen in the commercial? Who would the characters be? What would happen? What would the characters say and do?

Limitations of Ethnographic Research with Children

The qualitative methods described above provide tools for engaging children in research, yet also pose limitations whether children are speaking for themselves or adults are describing children’s lives. Criticism of qualitative methods question their methodological vigor and generalizability. Ethnographic methods are critiqued for unsystematic and anecdotal coverage of typical or public behavior (Bernard 2011; Barry 1981). Sample sizes are generally small and it cannot be known if those in the sample exhibit typical behavior of the population (Barry 1981). Research with children is often conducted in public, formal settings, such as schools, hospitals, day care centers and children’s programs. These settings
facilitate access to children’s lives; however, constrain research activities. Activities of these settings are contrived and context specific and may limit data collection (James 2001). For example, gender and age segregation may reflect site procedures more than children’s inclination to divide themselves into groups. These sites also represent public spaces where private behaviors are not performed. Children may require long periods of interaction with adult researchers to build trust (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). Long term and frequent contacts are necessary for valid ethnographic data collection (Heyl 2001). Research is also constrained by the structure of the program, in this present case, children had to remain within eye-sight of YMCA staff and so conducting group interviews in private rooms was not possible. This increased the distractions and noise level while conducting the group activities. The use of group interviews may have created biased responded between participants. Individual interviews may have resulted in different outcomes.

These limitations are of concern in this study. The conclusions drawn from the research present limited generalizability and may be reflective of the American afterschool experience or the study sites only. The sample of children included in participant observation and in the group interviews is small. Ethnography, while a powerful method in capturing detailed data on daily life, does not readily lend itself to objective or statistical measures of behavior. This methodological choice may have limited the conclusions I can draw from the available data. Also, conducting fieldwork in afterschool sites may unduly influence the ways children interact and therefore the findings of this study. The procedure to organize children by age may have impacted the results and overemphasized age as a factor in social organization. Ethnographic research conducted in a different environment may result in different outcomes. To combat these limitations the research questions and methods were derived from the literature on children’s culture and food and thus serve to reinforce or refocus previous scholarship. Methodological strategies such as longitudinal participant observation and the adopted researcher’s role were intended to decrease bias and improve validity.
Summation

Above, I describe the methodology utilized in the study and the unique concerns that research with children poses. In this study I used a combination of methods designed to elicit active participation by child participants and to capture a deep understanding of children’s daily experiences. The study began with an exploratory study of children’s perceptions of healthy and unhealthy eating, physical activity and health using freelisting and photo elicitation techniques in group interviews. This preliminary phase served to direct the development of an in-depth ethnographic study of elementary aged children in two afterschool programs. It informed the expansion of research questions and the selection of participant observation in the second phase. The ethnographic fieldwork I conducted over two years focused on the social networks of children and the role that exchange played in their peer interactions. During the fieldwork, a second set of group interviews were conducted with a sub-sample to confirm findings of the participant observation. Across the entire study, care was made to use developmentally appropriate research activities, to obtain parental consent and child assent in meaningful ways and to protect the privacy of the participants.
CHAPTER FOUR:
CHILDREN’S SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

Children’s social worlds are shaped by the context in which they socialize. In this study, the afterschool environment serves as an opportunity to explore the foodways of children and the social dynamics that impact knowledge and attitudes about eating. This chapter presents results from field work focusing on two main areas of inquiry: 1) children’s food beliefs and social uses of food and 2) how children’s social networks impact peer culture and food consumption. My investigation into afterschool experiences began with an exploratory study focused on children’s beliefs and attitudes about nutrition and food categories (healthy/unhealthy foods). This research raised questions of why children consume so much “junk food” and the role peers play in consumption. As such it influenced the design of the long-term field work I conducted and therefore is described below. Following are the results of participant observation that incorporated analysis of social structure of peer groups used to better understand how food fit into children’s perceptions and social uses of foods in afterschool programs. The factors that affect group formation, social status, social stratification and friendships are discussed in this chapter. Additionally, the mechanisms children use to facilitate interaction are also described including shared experiences and exchanged items. Data on the social context is presented before specific exploration of food related behaviors because the social context sets the stage of how children use and consume foods with peers.
Findings of Exploratory Phase of Study

Prior to initiating long-term fieldwork, an exploratory study was conducted during the spring of 2008 at four YMCA afterschool sites with a total of 82 children ages eight to twelve years. The research design incorporated three data collection sessions with sixty-five participants completed all three sessions. The purpose of this research phase was to assess the children’s perceptions of healthy foods vs. unhealthy foods and to elicit their ideas concerning the effects of eating certain kinds of foods. The project incorporated creative and hands-on methodologies to collect their words and ideas. They were asked to write or draw lists of healthy foods, unhealthy foods and their favorite foods in a freelisting exercise. They were also provided with disposable cameras and asked to take photos of food items that met those three categories, and the children were asked to describe how eating foods made them feel during group discussions using a Graffiti Wall technique.

Table 3. Characteristics of the sites in the exploratory study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middlewood YMCA Site</th>
<th>Soto Elementary Site</th>
<th>King Elementary Site</th>
<th>New Elementary Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 participants</td>
<td>21 participants</td>
<td>16 participants</td>
<td>21 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 female</td>
<td>14 female</td>
<td>7 female</td>
<td>14 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 male</td>
<td>7 male</td>
<td>8 male</td>
<td>7 male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Healthy Foods vs. Junk Foods in Freelisting and Photo Elicitation

Generally, the children’s food beliefs reflect basic nutritional guidelines, though there were some cases of variation and ambiguity. Healthy foods were predominately described as fruits and vegetables in the freelists, photographs and during discussions. During the free listing activity, 130 distinct food items
were listed. In fact, 77% of the items listed under the healthy foods category during free listing were fruits or vegetables, and 46% of the photos coded as representing healthy foods were of fruits and vegetables. Other categories of healthy foods included meat dishes, entrees, dairy products and water. These results reflect previous research associating healthy food with fruits and vegetables and foods prepared at home (Borra et al. 2003). Healthy foods were also generally generic, non-branded food items (such as oranges, wheat bread).

The children’s ideas about unhealthy foods and junk foods also adhere to conventional nutritional messages. Responses describing unhealthy foods were dominated by candy, potato chips, salty snacks, soda, sweetened beverages and baked sweets, such as cookies and brownies. Unhealthy food lists were comprised of 196 distinct food items, which is a greater variety than the healthy foods lists. This is due to the use of specific brand names used when describing pre-packaged foods. ‘Junk food’ was described in more detail with specific brand names used to describe the foods (i.e., Lay’s potato chips, Milky Way, and Sprite), while this was rarely seen with healthy foods, even when describing packaged foods. Photographs of unhealthy foods were also more likely to be taken of a peer eating or holding the item, instead of the item being placed on a table for the composition indicating more active engagement with the foods. Also, fast food was rarely included in either freelists or in photographs. Of the 166 photos depicting unhealthy foods and favorite foods, only four were comprised of items from fast food restaurants.
Figure 4. Example of healthy food photo, an apple

Figure 5. Example of unhealthy food photo, a bag of graham cracker cookies

Figure 6. Example of unhealthy food photo, brownie mix
Discussions of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Foods

During group discussion the children were asked how consuming various types of foods made them feel. Healthy foods were positively described as “good for you, delicious, and good for your body.” Positive emotions were attributed to eating healthy foods and negative emotions were attributed to unhealthy foods.

Table 4. Health food versus unhealthy food discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you feel when you eat healthy food?</th>
<th>How do you feel when you eat unhealthy food?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Pumped, happy, ready to go”</td>
<td>“Tired”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Strong”</td>
<td>“Like wanting to lie down”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“More energetic”</td>
<td>“Yucky”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Active, excellent, well”</td>
<td>“Hyper then weak”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Bad”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“More hungry”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sugar rush”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sick”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gaining weight was also associated with consuming junk foods. ‘Feeling fat’ after eating junk food was described by both genders though girls talked about it more frequently in discussions. When
questioned why the participants eat junk food if it causes such poor feelings, several factors emerged. One girl acknowledged that she sometimes felt “a little bit bad, but they taste good” and another responded that she felt ashamed sometimes “because I know it’s bad for you” but would eat her favorite foods anyway. Preference for the taste of junk foods was a strong motivator for the children as was their belief that it was kids’ food. The participants described the pleasure associated with the tastes of junk food with enthusiasm and eluded to the social aspects of eating junk food with friends. As one nine year old girl stated, “if it’s your friend’s birthday you have to eat birthday cake, and you give your friends stuff. You are supposed to share candy.”

Interestingly, the favorite foods category revealed the greatest variety of response items (239 distinct foods), and included a combination of healthy and unhealthy, generic and brand name foods. Taste and status seemed to be the major factors determining preferred foods. Some favorite foods were eaten regularly, such as fruit and pizza. Other items were consumed only for special occasions. Higher status food items like steak, crab legs or lobster were described as special and the participants shared stories of eating these foods.

The results indicate that the children understood general nutritional messages and had internalized the meanings of health and food. When asked why some foods are healthier than other foods various reasons were given relating to the composition of foods or how the children felt after eating various foods. The ten and eleven year olds offered more sophisticated explanations. They explained that various foods contain more or less sugar, salt, fat, vitamins, carbohydrates and calories. And some foods are fried or baked and “give you energy and vitamins you need.” The children also spoke about food processing and things being added to food. For example, the children differentiated between natural sugar in fruit and processed sugar in cookies. During the Graffiti Wall activity, one ten year old boy drew and described a sugar factory in which sugar was added to food to make it sweeter and therefore less healthy.

This exploratory assessment of children’s food perceptions raised critical questions around why they chose certain foods. I questioned if they understood that eating healthier foods is better for them, why did they admittedly prefer to eat junk foods. What other factors besides taste influence eating junk
food or kids’ food? The photos also revealed clues to how children interact with food. The photos of friends holding and eating junk foods contrasted with the lack of photos of friends consuming or playing with healthy foods, coupled with their discussions about eating kids’ foods with other kids were interesting findings that I wanted to explore further. To address these questions further participant observation conducted at two of the original four sites. The participant observation focused on peer interactions as a source of influence on food consumption and observations of the kinds of foods eaten by children in afterschool settings. The dominate food consumption of children were snack foods and candy. As has been presented in chapter three, children and adults associate snack foods and candy with childhood. As such kids’ food becomes part of child identity and expression of group membership (Elliott 2011). As has been noted in a previous chapter, structural constraints within afterschool programs also re-enforce the notion that processed, and often pre-packaged snack foods are the right foods to eat after school.

Findings of the Fieldwork

Social Organization within Afterschool Programs

The selection of afterschool environments as research sites afforded a unique opportunity to explore the social dynamics of peer groups. Spending time in afterschool programs allowed me access to children’s culture. Afterschool is similar to school in that it offers adult supervised activities with an emphasis on adherence to rules and group interaction. This context makes certain characteristics important for group identity and interaction. For example, afterschool programs are structured similarly to school in that children are divided into groups based on grade level, semi-structured activities are provided, and the goal is to enrich the development of children. However, afterschool is much less formal than school and children are given greater freedom. For instance, children are not assigned specific seats and or assignments. Most activities are group-oriented which also lends toward greater sociability in the
afterschool setting. In the following section, the two key ways that children were grouped are presented. Age and gender served as the basis of social organization in the programs.

**Age Grading**

The afterschool programs included in this study organized the children by grade. The groups were divided into two main groups, kindergarten through second grade, and third grade through fifth grade at Soto. At Middlewood, the groups were divided into three categories, kindergarten and first grade, second and third grade, fourth and fifth grade. Grade groups or age cohorts are assigned age appropriate activities. This division is most evident during free play periods. Staff separate younger groups from the older groups by placing the children on different basketball courts and on separate playgrounds, and by rotating the time that groups are outside in order to minimize interactions between younger children with older children. The staff were concerned that younger children would get hurt when playing with older children. Despite the staff’s attempts to separate groups, there were many opportunities for the groups to interact during free play. In fact, exceptions to this rule were allowed by staff more for mixed-age groups of girls than for mixed age groups of boys. Younger girls were more often allowed to sit with the older girls as they talked since there was less risk for an incident than for the boys who typically played active games like touch football and basketball. When I questioned the staff on why the younger children were so often separated, I was informed that the older boys played too rough and when the younger boys were knocked down or couldn’t keep up, they cried and then staff had to intervene. In this respect the staff initiated age segregation was implemented for their convenience.

**Privileges of Age**

At both sites the oldest groups were given more freedom and autonomy than the younger groups. They were allowed more input when selecting a group activity. For example, the staff allowed the older
children to offer suggestions of games to play and to vote on the game they played during structured play
times. Among the younger groups, the staff directed the children to play particular games without input.
The older children were expected by the staff to be leaders and to set the example for the younger
children. This was communicated directly by staff who reminded the older children of their expectations
to be role models to the younger ones who “look up to you.” This was especially true at Soto, where due
to the limited space options the different groups were generally in close proximity to each other, and
younger children could easily witness older children misbehaving, therefore the staff held high
expectations of older group. This was less of an issue at Middlewood since the groups were generally
engaged in different spaces and rooms within the facility and there was less interaction between grade
groups during structured activities.

In both afterschool programs, the staff also used less formal means of singling out older children
to serve leadership roles. Staff asked particular children deemed to be “mature” to help with tasks such as
leading a group of younger children to line-up for bathroom breaks, carrying sports equipment to the
outdoor play area, retrieving the first-aid kit, passing out arts and crafts supplies or handing out snacks.
Ms. Monique explained to me that this was “good for them to build responsibility.” The additional tasks
were often rewarded with small favors on the part of the staff such as allowing an older child to select a
group activity and to be captains of games.

At both sites several fifth grade students held leadership positions at school as bus patrol helpers.
Fifth grade students applied for a position on bus patrol by writing an essay about why they wanted to
help the school and be a leader. Students were selected by their schools’ teachers and administration and
were assigned duties to help younger students exit cars and buses during early morning drop-off periods
and afternoon pick-up times. The students “on bus patrol” wore neon green sashes that indicated their
status while on duty. During the afterschool hours, I noticed that they often continued to wear the sash
over their clothing. The sash served as a visual sign of their special responsibility and status. These same
children were often selected to be leaders in the afterschool context as well.
Besides being given specific tasks, the older children, especially those in fourth and fifth grades, were admonished for acting-out and setting a bad example for the younger children. Staff also encouraged leadership development by asking older children to supervise younger children’s behavior and report back to the staff any infractions. Occasionally, when staff were engaged in another task such as talking to a parent, an older child would be asked to write down the names of children who acted out and talked while the counselor was busy. Once the staff concluded the other task, he or she asked the leader to report on how well the group behaved. Even though the staff member was always positioned close by and could overhear the group, this exchange placed the favored leader in a special position above their same-age peers and the younger children.

As a result of the adult condoned authority, and the physical and social advantages of older children, the fourth and fifth graders held higher status as the informal leaders of the programs. The older children were physically larger than the younger children, and socially more sophisticated. They were looked up to. The older children exhibited their status by reprimanding younger children for not following instructions and acting out. The process of controlling initiated with verbal commands from older children as in the following scenario.

While I was leading a group of kindergarten through second grade children in Character Development one day at Soto, the younger children became antsy and started talking out of turn. Caleb, one of the fourth grade boys, walked over to our table and said, “you guys are being disrespectful because you are being so loud. The third through fifth graders are over there trying to do their homework and we can hear you all the way over there. You guys are being disrespectful. You need to sit and be quiet.” The younger children quieted down and he walked back to his table.

“Telling us what to do,” was resented by the younger children, yet they generally followed the older ones’ directions. If this direct method did not work, the older children responded with one of two approaches. A couple of fourth and fifth graders reinforced each other by adding reprimands to what the other had already stated. Having multiple “big kids” correcting the younger ones generally did cause the
smaller children to listen and follow instructions. If this tactic proved unsuccessful then they threatened to “tell” and involve staff intervention.

At Soto for instance, the threat of reporting an incident to Ms. Monique was an effective way of stopping inappropriate behavior such as being too loud or pushing another child while standing in line. Ms. Monique was a strong disciplinarian and held high expectations for child behavior. I often observed her lecturing all of the children and using an incident involving the misbehavior of one child as an example to teach all of the children about appropriate behavior. This led to a strong element of peer pressure because if caught the entire group might likely all be punished or at least lectured to by staff. The older children used these controlling tactics with the younger children to avoid getting in trouble with the staff. This actually served the entire group well, because if the staff had to respond to an incident then the upcoming activity would be curtailed. The threat of losing time for free play was especially relevant since this was the children’s reported favorite activity of the afternoons.

Older children looking after younger children is a common experience in mixed-age groups of children (New 2008). In fact, the older children did not only act as de facto disciplinarians, they also acted as arbitrators in playground disputes and cared for younger children by helping them play games or “mothering” them. While playing basketball one afternoon at Soto, two third grade boys, James and Marcus, argued over control of the ball and James yelled at the other boy that he was trying to “be the boss of everyone.” Upon hearing this, Bridgette and Caleb, who were two fifth graders, walked over to the boys and told them to stop fighting and Caleb took the ball from one of the boys and restarted the game. James and Marcus gave into their authority without question.

Younger children, especially girls, sought favor with older girls by acting sweet, submissive and vulnerable. Their cuteness allowed for the older girls to “baby” them, and the younger girls received desired attention from older girls. For example, I observed Mayla, a kindergartener with long dark hair, slowly walk up to where a group of older girls were sitting and slowly get closer until she was sitting next to one of them. An older girl, usually Amber, would then acknowledge her and tell her to sit in front of her and the older girl fixed her pony tail and doted on the little one. Despite staff attempts at segregating,
there was consistent interaction between age groups which children used as a means to learn social skills, express dominance and gain favor. The older ones learned leadership and responsibility, while the younger ones benefited from the knowledge and status of their relative elders (New 2008).

**Gender Segregation**

Besides dividing by age the children divided by gender. While the program did not formally divide groups by gender, there were subtle messages provided by the staff such as offering ‘girl’ toys or ‘boy’ games for the children to play with. I observed that the children did self-segregate by gender on their own accord as has been shown in previous research. Adler and Adler (1998) found that preadolescent children in their study of suburban, middle class children adapt adult gender norms and roles to fit their own context. In this study separation of gender seemed to be based on adult gender roles. The children clearly demarcate the differences between how boys should play and how girls should play. This strict gender dichotomy was followed to a degree, though there was flexibility for cross-gender friendships and play. These patterns of gender segregation have been previously measured in preadolescents and adolescents (Persson Osowski, Goranzon and Fjellstrom 2012). In my research this pattern was evident in eight to twelve year olds. Like Adler and Adler, I also found gender self-segregation and gender norms taking root among the younger children as well.

Within the age-graded groups in the after school programs, children were allowed flexibility of whom to interact with. At both sites all age groups further divided into sub-groups predominantly based on gender and further divided into groups based on friendship, and common interests. Girls tended to associate with other girls and boys tended to associate with other boys. Their gender groupings shaped the kinds of activities they participated in. Boys were more likely to play sports like soccer, basketball and football during free play time periods. Girls were more likely to “hang-out” talking, play 4-square, hopscotch, jump rope games, and pretend games. The gender segregation was also subtly condoned by the staff who provided different kinds of play equipment to the boys and girls. The boys often requested to
use balls during outdoor free play, and girls often asked for the jump rope or Frisbees. Gender separation was also evident in how the children physically used the spaces. The children physically separated at tables, while sitting on the floor and by using different areas of a space such as the girls sitting at the picnic benches while the boys played games in the open grassy areas. Even while sitting at the same table boys and girls positioned themselves at different ends of the table. For example, during lunch time at Middlewood summer camp, Trina and Maria asked me to eat lunch with them. As we walked into the multipurpose room and toward the lunch tables we realized that there was no more space at the tables where girls were sitting, but there were empty chairs at one of the boys’ tables. Trina whispered “I don’t want to sit with the boys,” the girls hesitated and then asked if I would sit with them at the boys’ table. We ate lunch with the boys. Despite their hesitancy, Trina, Maria and Michael started talking about what they would be eating for dinner that evening and they seemed to enjoy the conversation.

The physical separation of the groups of girls and boys was more evident at Middlewood than Soto. At Middlewood there was more space and more areas where children could hang out separately. The girls and boys at Middlewood routinely sat and played in different areas during free play time. The girls often sat on the picnic benches under a pavilion, while the boys played games in the grass field and sat on metal bleachers on the opposite side of the field. One afternoon I asked Maria and Stacy “why the boys always play games. Why don’t they just hang out here?” Stacy replied, “because they don’t want to do what we do.”

**Differences in play between girls and boys**

My observations and interactions indicated different patterns between girls and boys. The girls used separation and social distance to maintain group boundaries. They engaged in private conversations and secrets as a way of reinforcing relationships. The shared secrets and talk strengthened their connections in intimate peer groups. I observed older girls say “we need to talk, we need privacy” as they sequestered themselves in corners of a room or at far ends of tables from the rest of the peer group.
For example, one afternoon at Soto I noticed Trinity and Emily sitting on a far corner of the basketball court away from the other children. I tentatively approached them and was invited to join the dyad. Emily had brought her notebook, a big flower barrette and a ball and they were playing with them. For a few moments they played with the ball almost like it was a doll or a baby. They told me that I could sit down with them because they didn’t want me to attract a lot attention among the other children by my standing up, and they confided that they had a secret password. They shared the password with me by jumping on the numbers on the hopscotch board. I watched the girls jump on the numbers, but didn’t catch the numbers at first so I made a guess and they said it was wrong and made me watch again. Trinity jumped on the numbers again in order and the passcode was 2-4-5-7-10. This secret passcode was a means of symbolizing their friendship and separation from the other children. It was something they made-up and made their relationship unique. On several occasions the fourth-fifth grade girls’ proclivity to isolate themselves into small all-girl groups resulted in staff intervention. Ms. Monique at Soto often reprimanded the girls for excluding others and were told that “we play with everyone here. No one is left out.” Despite the reprimands, the girls continued to separate themselves.

The gender separation required different means of building rapport and acceptance for me during fieldwork. At both sites I more easily integrated into girl groups than boy groups in the beginning of the fieldwork. Building rapport was easier in the beginning with the girls than the boys. I was approached more by girls at both sites. Girls tended to ask me questions about who I was and invited me to join their activities more frequently especially during the first several weeks of the study. This was especially true at Middlewood where the older girls and boys maintained a more pronounced gender separation than at Soto. During my early days of fieldwork at Middlewood, the girls “claimed” me as part of their group and actively involved me in their activities. I was regularly greeted and invited to sit with them and play games with them, or just chat. The boys seemed hesitant to interact with me and mostly watched me from a polite distance during the first couple of weeks. I had to make concerted attempts to play “boy” games like basketball and hang out on the playing fields where the boys congregated. In fact, on numerous occasions, I attempted to sit close to groups of boys, and the girls told me to “come sit by us.” Annmarie,
a fourth grader at Middlewood, informed me that I didn’t want to sit by the boys because “they are gross.” I believe that the girls considered me an interesting curiosity at first and enjoyed the attention I gave them. The girls at Middlewood often pressured me to avoid the boys. One afternoon after a game of Duck-Duck-Goose-Seven-Up (a game invented by the staff as a combination of Duck-Duck-Goose and Heads-Up Seven-Up. Players sat in a circle with their eyes closed and thumbs up in the air until one of three players tapped their shoulder and the tagged player had to guess the correct person who had tagged them and chase them around the circle. The first to tag the correct person and reach the empty space won the round.) After the game the staff instructed the children to sit along the walls. I sat next to the boys. After a couple of minutes I heard my name and looked up to see Amy making a funny face at me by squishing up her nose and pursing her lips. A couple of minutes later Annmarie came up to me and said, “come here I need to tell you something” and took me over to where the fourth and fifth grade girls were sitting. Annmarie grabbed my ankle and said, “I am not letting go.” I laughingly said, “let go, let go.” Then Maria and Olivia held onto my wrists. Maria said, “we are not letting go, you have to stay with us.” After a couple of minutes their game ended and I remained with the girls for the rest of the afternoon.

Slowly over the first several weeks of the fieldwork, my status began to change among the boys as they tested me by breaking minor rules in my presence such as eating candy on the playground and complaining to me about the rules. When I repeatedly did not reprimand them or report their behavior to the counselors, they grew to trust me and share more confidences with me. Within a couple of months at both sites, I feel like I had built enough rapport to be included in boys’ conversations about cars and sports. One exception was Malik. During the first year at Soto this third grade boy remained polite and distant. He would respond to my greetings though never asked me to play or to provide small favors to him like the other boys did. This changed the first day I returned to Soto during the second year of fieldwork. I entered the cafeteria and he ran across the room to give me a hug. I was surprised by this expression of friendship. He said, “you said you would come back and you did.” I had promised everyone that I would return the following fall after the first year of fieldwork. From that day Malik routinely invited me to play and made sure that I had a seat at the boys’ table.
The gender lines that separated the children physically and socially were reflected their perceptions of the opposite gender as much as ideas of their own gender. For the girls, inclusion in the group was paramount, and girls expressed this through common interests and activities as did the boys. The difference lies in the types of activities and the kinds of items they shared within the group.

As described by Best (1983), the girls participated in games and activities that follow gender norms and encourage social cohesion and support. Their activities tended to be more cooperative in nature than the boys. They played pretend games like “family” and “house” occasionally, and games like hopscotch, 4-square, and basketball. They played jump rope, hula hoops and chase tag during outside play. During inside free time their activities often involved playing with objects. They played card games, drew pictures together, such as fashion outfits, braided friendship bracelets out of colorful threads, showed each other treasured Smencils (The pencils are treated with scents like bubble gum and root beer. The pencils were highly prized and collected by the children.), played with cell phones, and shared “girl stuff” like lip gloss and nail polish.

These “girly” items were highly prized and the presence of nail polish resulted in group nail painting sessions. Nail polish proved to be an opening for me with the girl group at Middlewood. During my second week at the site, I noticed a group of fourth and fifth grade girls sitting in the corner of the rec room. I approached them and they quickly hid things behind their backs and under book bags. I said hi and one of the girls asked if I could go away. I began to depart and there was whispering and the leader of the group, Amber, said “you can stay if you don’t tell.” I shrugged and confirmed that I wouldn’t tell the staff. The girls had several small bottles of nail polish and were furtively painting each other’s nails. This was the first time someone had brought polish to the site and they were afraid that the site director, David, would disapprove and take the polish away. They asked me not to tell David. I agreed I would not and was invited to observe. The next day they painted my nails too, thus beginning a nearly weekly ritual of nail painting that lasted a few months (see Figure 8). The girls brought the polish and shared with each other in the group, often letting another girl borrow a color over night as long as she promised to bring it back.
An interesting point about the girls’ activities is the predominately inclusive nature of their activities. Usually, each girl could participate in some way, even if participation involved observing others and offering suggestions. Looking over shoulders and talking about what they were doing was a part of the production of their play as much as the active behavior of the play. Another key distinction is the girls’ reliance on objects to dictate their activities. As was the case with the nail polish, the presence of a novel item led to new activities and in a sense set the play agenda. This was also the case for the boys who also brought toys and comic books from home to share with friends; however, girls more often brought items and used them to interact with each other as a group. The habit of using items to entertain and share was also reflected in the use of snacks and candy. Girls more often brought edible items to share than boys. As a result, other girls and boys were drawn to the girls who brought food in the hopes of receiving some.

As recognized in other research, the boys in this study played in large, competitive, athletically oriented groups (Best 1983; Fine 1987; Goodwin 1980; Thorne 1993). During free play the boys usually played sports like soccer, basketball, or tag football in larger groups. Incidentally, this kind of play is
encouraged by the staff and the facilities. Outdoor play occurred on concrete basketball courts, open grassy areas, or on a soccer field with boundary lines and goals marked. Both sites also provide a variety of balls and sporting equipment such as basketballs, footballs, soccer balls, Frisbees, and smaller balls. The ball bag was brought out of the supply closet each day at the sites for outdoor free play time. The boys usually used the site’s equipment to play games, and sometimes brought their own baseballs and mitts and other kinds of balls from home. During indoor free play they also played with toys and other items. The most common objects used by boys were sport and comic trading cards, comic books, Lego and action hero figures, small toy cars and motorcycles, and handheld video games like GameBoys and DS. Boys’ toys were used to show what one boy had versus the other or to demonstrate acts of competitive aggression. Examples are crashing toy cars into each other’s’ Lego figurines and comparing trading cards to see who had “the best ones.” Boys were also more likely to bring and play video games, whether handheld versions or in the case of Middlewood, video games available on the site’s desk top computers. Since there were more boys than video games, watching over shoulders and commenting was also part of the video game experience. The boys rallied each other on with comments encouraging the player to “get him” and “crush him” in regards to the on-screen foe.

The boys’ use of competitive play, bragging, verbal and physical sparring, and signs of toughness were openly displayed and contrasted during one particularly cold December afternoon at Soto. The staff decided it was too cold for the children to play outside. A game of Silent Speedball was organized by the staff. The goal of the game is to throw a ball across a circle of participants without letting the ball touch the ground and talk while playing the game. If a player misses a catch then he or she is out and has to leave the game. The last player to remain is the winner. Mr. Donnie formed two teams. The first two teams were divided between third through fifth graders in one team and kindergarten through second graders in the other team. The older team won. For the second game, the teams were divided by girls vs. boys. During the mixed age and gender divided game, I noticed differences in how the teams played and the competitive behavior the boys displayed. The sounds the girls made were “whoooooo,” high pitches sounds. They laughed and giggled a lot. They jumped up and down. When someone missed a point the
girls gave instruction and reinforcement. Especially the older, dominant girls said “you’ve got to keep it up, up.” They gestured pointing up with their arms and hands.

On the other hand, when the boys won a point they made sounds like “hhhoo, yyyyeahhhh” in lower pitched tones. They threw their arms down and did a little crouch and moved their shoulders. The boys primed and contorted in a masculine way. The gestures and sounds were totally different between the boys and girls. When the boys missed a point the older boys were much more aggressive and told the younger boys what to do. “You’ve got to get that, come on, move over Jamie.” The boys ended up losing the game. The boys showed sad faces, folded their arms across their chests, and pouted their mouths with bottom lips stuck out. They said “uuuhhhhh.” They showed that they were very disappointed. All the boys demonstrated their upset, not just a few of them or the older boys.

Michael and Caleb had an altercation immediately after the game finished. I did not see the first few moments of it. Then they began saying “stop it man.” “Fight” gesturing by standing chest to chest and shoulder to shoulder, bumping off each other’s chests followed. I saw it and stepped away because I didn’t want to be a witness to it and be expected to stop them. I discretely watched them. They did not fight; they just used the aggressive posturing of fighting. They said “uuhhh,” “yeah, whatever.” And they walked away without a staff member intervening or the aggression progressing.

This episode is symbolic of the learned gender scripts that the children acted out in multiple ways. They seemed to be responding to peer expectations and staff expectations. Boys were expected to be more physically active, aggressive and competitive. They use these attributes to fit in and express their gender. Playing catch with oranges during snack time, jumping around, wrestling, flipping over a couch, and fake punching each other were ways to act like a boy. The girls acted feminine in their own ways with ‘girly’ games and objects. These observations and gender scripts were not absolute. In reality, the girls could be just as competitive with each other as the boys, and I observed boys providing genuine emotional support to a friend who was upset, despite the major trend of gender scripts followed gender stereotypes.
Perceptions of the other Gender

Comments made by the children also highlight perceptions they hold about each other. The social distain sometimes verbalized about “girl stuff” and “dumb boys” was more common among the younger children. It seemed to be most prevalent among the second through fourth grade children. The youngest children did separate by gender, and often played pretend games and more juvenile games together, and the fifth grade boys and girls also interacted more. This seemed to be a factor of smaller numbers of fifth graders at each site as older children graduate out of afterschool care into staying at home alone and other kinds of afterschool activities.

Among the second through fourth graders, the opposite gender was looked down upon or at least tolerated. While girls commented about the annoying attributes of boys, it was the boys who most commonly voiced distain about girls to me.

In one instance, I was sitting among a group of second and third grade boys and girls during a Character Development activity at Soto, Chris was sitting next to me. He turned to me and said “girls just pose” (meaning that they just stand pretty). “Boys, we run, we play, we do lots of stuff but girls just pose. We play sports, we play football, we play basketball, girls just pose.” He then looked at Victoria, one of the younger girls in second grade and remarked, “she likes Barbies.” I asked what was wrong with that and he said, “it is BARBIES” in an exaggerated voice. On another occasion, I agreed to read to a group of younger children during homework time. The kindergarten and first grade girls wanted me to read a book about Barbie. The lone boy in the group complained that “they be trippin’ wan’n a Barbie book” and left the group. Certainly, Barbies and other girly things were considered off-limits to the boys and they looked down upon the girls for playing with them.
Conflicts between Boys and Girls

Tension between boys and girls sometimes resulted in conflicts. These interactions provided insight into the dynamics between the genders. When boys had conflicts with girls they explained that the girls “got their way.” Boys complained that girls had unfair advantages over boys at times. They believed that girls were given less severe punishments and allowed to do things the boys were not. Before lunch one day at the Middlewood summer camp, Juan, a fourth grade boy became upset over how he felt a girl was given an unfair advantage. He was playing Air Hockey against a succession of children. They lined up waiting their turn to play against Juan. Emma, one of the girls, who happened to be next in line at one point went to the bathroom with a friend. She returned and saw that another boy, Zavier, had taken her place in line. She told him that she was next, and Tina, a staff member, interjected. She told the boy to let Emma go ahead of him. Zavier seemed fine with it though Juan said "that’s not fair. It is cause she is a girl. The girls always get away with stuff. It’s about gender. It is differences between genders. If a boy went away, he would lose his turn." (He actually used the term gender.) He was mad and ranting out loud. Renee, a fourth grader standing next to me was watching him and whispered to me, "he looks like he is going to cry." He was angry and frustrated. As he stopped talking about it I noticed he began playing very aggressively. He took out his frustrations through the game. He was playing against the girl and she complained to him that he was hitting it hard on purpose. He responded "well, that's how you play the game." She hit it hard back to him; however, he was more aggressive.

The girls displayed an interesting tactic to handle boys’ aggressive behavior. When boys picked on girls, the girls often cooperated to manipulate the boys into being fair. While I was helping Jenna with homework one afternoon at Soto, Malik, a third grade boy, sat two chairs away from her. While the children were working on their assignments, Jenna, a second grader, took out a bag of Red Hot Spicy Cheetos from her book bag. She told me that she paid $2 for the bag. She opened it, ate a few and then explained to me that she doesn’t like regular Cheetos, but liked this kind. Malik said out loud that he wanted one and helped himself. After a few minutes she told me that she didn't want anymore because
she had had too much ice cream at the Afterschool ice cream party held earlier in the afternoon. Then Malik stated that he wanted them and took the bag of Cheetos placing it in his backpack. He acted without a response from Jenna. She ignored him. After a few minutes she removed the Otis Spunkmeyer cookie left over from snack time. Malik said that he wanted it as well. She responded that he could “have it” and he put it in his bag. Jenna then told him to “give back the Cheetos.” He refused and she seemed resigned. I did not respond to their interaction. I simply watched him walk away with the snacks. The following week I witnessed a similar exchange between Jenna and Malik with a different outcome.

While working on her homework Jenna laid out her collection of colorful holiday themed pencils on the table. She admired them and Malik was again sitting close to her. Malik had a broken pencil that was dull with no eraser. He needed an eraser, so he said “give me one.” She gave him a look and ‘hummffed’ He said “come on, can I please use an eraser?” She picked one out for him to use, gave it to him. After he was done she said, “ok, I need my pencil back.” He didn’t give it to her at first. She said, “please I want my pencil back.” Tracy, a second grader, who was sitting across the table spoke up and said, “you need to give her pencil back, she said please nicely. You need to give it back.” Then he gave it back. A couple of minutes later he reached over to take it again, and he said I need an eraser. He used it. Jenna repeated for him to return the pencil. For a moment I thought he might not give it back to her; however, he did after Tracy again told him to return the pencil. The girls used their combined effort to make sure that he was fair and did what he was supposed to. I often observed the girls working together to control the boys and handle a conflict.

**Cross-Gender Interaction**

Gender segregation seems to be a common if not universal trend among middle childhood in this study. There were exceptions. In noting group membership and accounting for trends in interactions, I became aware of several children at both sites that consistently engaged in what Goodwin terms border work or cross-gender interaction (1990). These were children who cross border lines of gender and
engage in play with the opposite gender. In both sites, there were several girls who could be described as tomboys. The girls had friends who were girls although also enjoyed playing sports and interacted with boys regularly. They were “not girly-girls” as one fourth grader described herself. These girls exhibited freedom in shifting from group to group depending on their desire to participate in a particular activity. In contrast, there were fewer boys who engaged in border work. There were two cases of boys. In both cases, the boys had become good friends with a couple of girls that they habitually interacted with. Both boys were creative, intelligent, out-going and seemed mature for their ages. They did occasionally play sports and games with other boys but mostly hung out with their closest friends who were female. An example is Tyler who engaged in boarder work. His preferred friend group included Sammie and Aliyah. The trio played and hung-out. If the girls were absent, then Tyler played sports with the other boys, especially basketball and touch football.

A second key exception that should be noted in regard to gender groups is the consideration of the size of the site and the male-female composition at the site. Middlewood served larger numbers of children than Soto. The average daily attendance at Middlewood during the school year was eighty to ninety children across all grade levels. The average attendance at Soto was forty to fifty children. The male-female ratio was more evenly distributed at Middlewood across both years of observation. At Soto, during the first year of observation the females in third through fifth grade outnumbered the males. There was only one fifth grade boy. During the second year, the ratio had reversed. There were more boys, especially in the third through fourth grade cohort. There were two fifth grade girls during the second year. This meant that by necessity the out-numbered older children interacted more with the opposite gender.

The separation of children into gender based groups seemed to be influenced by the number of children and the setting, which may explain why more gender segregation, was observed at Middlewood where there were larger numbers of playmates for children to choose from. Boarder work also increased on a daily basis as the available number of children to play with decreased as parents picked up children during the afternoon hours. The number of children may matter. Smaller groups may lend themselves to
more cross-gender interaction. In the case of this study, as afternoons progressed there was more cross-gender play given that there were fewer options for playmates.

**Gender and Body Image**

Concerns about weight were voiced by both girls and boys at both sites. The girls’ comments revolved around wanting to be thin for appearance sake and to avoid being teased. Older boys commented on wanting to lose weight for sports.

At times concern over weight resulted in skipping snacks. One afternoon Caleb said to me that his stomach hurt and I asked if he ate too much during snack time, and he said that he hadn’t eaten anything. I asked why and he responded that he needed “to lose weight”. He said that he wanted “to be skinny” and I asked why and he said that it was because he wanted “to be faster for sports”. When he goes to sixth grade the following year he wants to try out for football and is concerned that he would not be able to keep up with the older boys. On another occasion while standing in line to collect snacks, I was standing next to a fourth grader, Lexi. Angel, a second grader, walked up behind Lexi and said out loud “I’ve lost weight so nobody else can call me fat.” Angel is a larger girl. She seems to struggle to fit in with the other girls. She is not a “cool” girl. As she stood there I noticed Angel pulled down her t-shirt over her stomach a few times. Lexi did not respond verbally. Instead, she looked at me and rolled her eyes before walking away. Angel did not receive a response from the older girl. As a younger girl who struggled to fit in, Angel did not directly confront Lexi, one of the more popular older girls, even though she later confided to me that she believed that “people” had made disparaging comments about her weight and that this was one of the reasons she didn’t fit in. The two girls belonged to two separate social spheres and were not friends. Interestingly, among the older and equal status girls, talk about weight and food was common. Occasionally, the boys made comments to me about being concerned with their weight and skipping snacks. I only made five observations of this behavior among the boys. In contrast, the girls referenced the fattening qualities of food and talked about being fat and their weight often. I observed the older girls
engaging in fat talk only amongst themselves. Fat talk includes derogatory statements about one’s own body, body parts or weight. These statements were negated by friends who then respond by offering derogatory statements about their own bodies (Nichter 2000). It was used as a way of comparing themselves to others and to create group cohesion. Girls made comments about being fat or comparing their weights and body size. At times the talk served as a means of comparison like during an episode at Soto in which the girls began comparing their weights. As I walked into the cafeteria from the basketball courts with a group of third through fifth grade girls at Soto, Lexi asked me to give her a piggy-back ride. I said I couldn't. I meant that it was not allowed according to the program rules; however, the girls thought it was because Lexi was too big. Bridgette piped in, "what about me, I weigh less." Lexi replied “I only weigh 68 pounds or something”, and Bridgette added “I lose 38 pounds a day.” I asked her how she did that. She replied “I eat right and I exercise. I weigh 68 pounds”, and Kimmy interjected, “I weigh 63 pounds. I am the smallest.” The girls were not being derogatory. They wanted to prove who was the smallest.

Talking about weight and being fat was also done to show a common experience among the group. An example of this occurred one day during free play time at Middlewood. A group of five third and fourth grade girls were sitting at a picnic table outside painting their nails. I joined the conversation a few minutes before Amari looked down at her stomach and said, “oh, look at my chub.” She looked at me and said “this is Bertha,” indicating her belly. I played along and said, “hi, Bertha.” She lifted her shirt and showed her “belly roll.” Then the rest of the girls started naming their belly rolls, which protruded from sitting in a slouched position. One girl said “mine is Billy.” The other names were Bob, Martha, and Marlene. Amari then informed me that they have given them “all hobo names”. “We named our chub,” she finished. I added “mine is called Buddha.” Stacey said “oh, you named your chub, you are part of the club,” and they giggled. None of the girls would be considered obese or over-weight from my visual observation. They may have some adipose on their stomachs, but by making a joke of it this seemed to help them feel less self-conscious about their growing and changing bodies.
Talk about being fat and wanting to diet also occurred among the fourth and fifth grade girls during afterschool snack time and lunch breaks during the summer camp at Middlewood. Discussions of whether food was “fattening” and how girls wanted to lose weight was sprinkled in conversations. Comments such as “I am so fat after eating that” were responded with “no, you are not, but I am.” The girls also talked about how eating too much made one fat and gave examples and counter examples. During one discussion, Olivia responded to the comments about becoming fat with "my sister eats like a trucker but she is really skinny." I asked her how old her sister is and she told me "seventeen, but she has big boobs and a big butt." She then offered that her sister has a high metabolism as a way of explanation of her thinness.

These examples show how boys and girls differ in relation to body image. Despite the differences in ethnic composition at the two sites, I observed girls and boys commenting about their bodies and weight at both sites. It seemed to be a similar concern across the sites. The few boys who commented on their weight sought thinness as a means to perform better in sports, while the girls wanted to be thin for the sake of not being fat or being identified by others as fat. The girls did not display dieting behavior in my presence. I did not observe girls skipping snacks or refusing to eat. In fact, they consumed candy regularly. Their verbal exchanges did signify acceptance of female bodily norms, which favor thinness. Fat talk served as a means to be part of the group.

**Gender and Video Games**

As noted previously, video games were used by both genders though primarily by boys. Gender distinctions were shown in the children’s behavior around video games and in the gendered content of the games they played.

Access to handheld video games like Gameboys was generally curtailed by site rules. At Middlewood during free play periods, the children were allowed to play on-line video games on one of the six desktop computers in the multi-purpose room. Controls had been placed on the computers limiting
Internet access to certain free on-line game sites. While boys usually played video games, sometimes small groups of girls played them. One of the games both genders played was named Disney Club Penguin, in which players selected costumes for a penguin character and raced the character in various arctic scenes and obstacle courses. In the game characters went to different places like a coffee shop, a store and ski slopes. On the slopes the penguins faced challenges like skiing over logs. The boys dressed the penguins in costumes like astronaut, skater, surfer, rock star, and male gender specific clothing. The boys decorated their penguin characters like boys. The few girls who I observed playing Club Penguin dressed their characters in female clothing like ball gowns and tiaras.

The distinction between the kinds of video games boys and girls played is even more evident when comparing the two other primary games played by the children. One of the games is named Roblox. This game is a massive multiplayer game in which players control robot-type characters that race around scenes and can interact and fight other characters and dragons. This game is geared toward young boys and only boys played it at the site. Given the limited number of computers, boys sat behind others playing and talked about the game and the moves of players on the screen. They cheered each other on, saying “get him” or “beat him” and jeered when a robot exploded and fell off a digital cliff.

The girls often played Match-Match Wedding on the Go Girl game site. This game began with a screen that prompted players to type in their name, then the player was prompted to dress a female and male character by selecting a color of the bride’s dress and the groom’s suit, and then selecting skin color for the bride and the groom, ranging from tan to brown. The clothing colors choices were a rainbow of colors. Once they made their selections, the player was prompted to select a wedding theme. The themes included animal wedding, rock-n-roll wedding, zombie wedding, flower wedding, and Japanese wedding. This concluded the player’s interaction with the game. Compared to the boy’s Roblox game it was a passive experience. The Match-Match Wedding characters did not move or act in anyway. The point of the game is to decorate a bride and groom. The game was essentially a digital form of paper dolls. Regardless, the girls enjoyed playing and if the final effect of their computerized paper dolls was to their liking they squealed and laughed with delight.
The other distinction between the games was the presence of commercials on the Go Girl game site that were lacking in either Roblox or Club Penguin sites. For example, while the game was loading one afternoon a commercial for Veet appeared. The game is geared toward tween girls, yet there was a fifteen to twenty second commercial for Veet, which is a hair removal product marketed to women. The commercial showed adult women in dresses, shorts and underwear walking around. The tag line was Veet: How Beauty Feels. The game created a captive audience for the product promotion since the game could not be opened until the commercial completed.

The video games discussed here show gendered versions of play. The boys’ game was competitive and active, while the girls’ game placed the player in a more passive position. Penguin Club was played both by boys and girls and could be considered more gender neutral. The penguin characters were made into male and female characters with costumes by the players. These games reinforced gender norms while being played in gender segregated groups of friends.

**Anticipating Growing Up**

During interactions with the children signs that the older children are anticipating growing up were observed. Boys and girls both seemed uncomfortable with the notion of being sexual creatures. For these children romantic attachments are tenuous and were looked at with distain and teasing, and allusions to sexual behavior was used as joke to entertain friends. They showed that they knew about kissing and sexual behavior yet still ridiculed the behavior in front of friends. Several boys and girls admitted that they liked someone to me, but by admitting it to friends one was open to ridicule from peers. In one instance among Middlewood fourth and fifth grade girls, I was asked about my wedding ring and when I explained that I was married and answered the girls’ questions about my husband. I was asked his name and when I replied, “Josh” a flurry of giggles erupted. Tiffany yelled out “Stephanie’s husband’s name is J-O-S-H” and Annmarie and Tiffany looked at each other and grinned. Emma, the recipient of the jab, looked down. The name of the boy Emma liked had been brought up and the girls were teasing her.
Physical contact, even accidental physical contact that was perceived to be sexual or romantic in nature was avoided. Contact between boys and girls could lead to being accused of liking someone. And even between same-sex friends, accidental physical contact was disparaged. One afternoon at Middlewood, Amber recounted the story how a near contact between two girls resulted in embarrassment. Amber said, “I leaned over to pick up my cup and my head went right by her butt [Claire’s butt].” The group of girls laughed and Amber added, “oh, gross.” Then Claire quickly added in, “oh, gross.” This sense of contagion was mediated by ridiculing the event and showing that it was not ‘cool.’ In fact, any expression of romantic affection was to be generally avoided and seemed to make the children uncomfortable. For example, while hanging out with a group of third through fifth grade children at Soto, they began singing songs. While singing “itchie-itchie ooh-baby I love you, bow-bow,” Bridgette and Michael inadvertently turned to each other. They caught each other’s eye and immediately Bridgette said, “ohhhh, it don't sound right. We can't both sing it at the same time facing each other” [As if Bridgette and Michael were singing to each other]. The singing stopped immediately.

Near misses aside, the children also purposely used mock displays of sexuality to provide entertainment for peers. Pretending to kiss one’s arm and act out romantic embraces were sources of great laughter. One afternoon at Soto, I realized while helping a group of fourth and fifth grade girls with their homework that they had become distracted. I looked up to see Michael standing with his back to the group with his hands wrapped around himself and gesturing that he was kissing and making out with his hands moving on his back while moving his head and making kissing sounds. I asked him what he was doing. I walked over to him and I realize was kissing the inside of his arm at the elbow. Then Lexi began doing it as well. The group laughed at the two of them. In another instance at Middlewood, Maria and Tiffany were sitting close to each other on the floor with a group of girls. Tiffany started to act silly and began dancing around on her seat and pretending to rub her chest. She noticed me looking at her and I laughed to myself and she laughed along with the other girls. Tiffany was mocking sexual behavior to make her friends laugh. In this age group, they are definitely becoming aware of sex and sexuality, but they turn it into a joke to make it funny and ridiculous in order to deal with their embarrassment.
Despite the jokes about liking someone, at times the children expressed sincere feelings for others and nervousness in anticipating how to be a boyfriend or girlfriend in the future. The sincere feelings of Sammie were evident the day she confided to Caleb and myself that she liked her best friend Tyler though wasn’t sure if he liked her or their other friend Leah. She was afraid to tell him and afraid he would choose Leah to be his girlfriend. Caleb’s suggestion was for each girl to go on a “date” with Tyler by playing alone together so that he could decide who he liked better. It was decided that Tyler would have a date with Sammie at snack time and Leah during free play on the following day. Leah was conferred with and the girls told Tyler of their plan. After the ‘dates’ Tyler decided that he didn’t want a girlfriend and the situation resolved itself. Caleb also was involved in another episode about romance later that spring. Kimmy and Caleb were sitting together and Kimmy told me that Caleb was writing a poem about how to get a girlfriend. Caleb was copying the poem, “How to get a Girlfriend”, word for word out of a child’s poetry book. I asked if he was trying to obtain some tips. He replied, “yeah, cause it is really hard to get a girlfriend.” Later Kimmy told me that she wrote it down for her brother who is sixteen. While Caleb was writing I read it over his shoulder. The poem described boys liking girls and girls liking boys, and explained that boys needed to be nice and give gifts to girls. It also stated that girls like flowers and if boys are really nice to them, they may eventually let the boy kiss them. The elementary school library book was a collection of poem on various topics written for girls. The poem was directed to boys in a girl’s poetry book. The anticipation of future relationships in middle school seemed to begin to become an issue the older children wanted to prepare for and understand what would be expected of them. Being cool about girls also demonstrated in an episode that occurred during the spring of the second year of fieldwork at Soto. The group of third through fifth grade boys were sitting together playing Uno and looking at a wrestling magazine that Ryan had brought to school. I was sitting a few seats down from him next to a couple of third grade boys crash cars into each other. In the magazine there was a photograph of one of the professional, female wrestlers in her costume. Ryan showed the group and commented that “I love that picture. She is hot. I could look at this all day”. I pretended not to hear his comments and continued to play Uno with Malik and Tyler. Jamie, who has an older sister, said, “don’t say that in front
of a girl. There is a girl here and you are making her uncomfortable.” The table of boys glanced at me and I looked down at my cards. Jamie’s chivalrous act and Ryan’s male gaze signaled the lessons the boys were beginning to understand. While romantic relationships remained elusive, they expected that boyfriends and girlfriends would be in their futures and they were beginning to notice girls.

The Social Hierarchy within Peer Groups

Within the age and gender stratified peer groups, the children further stratified themselves based on personal qualities. These factors influenced social standing within and between groups. Commonly known as popularity, it is the degree of preadolescent social prestige (Adler and Adler 1998). More popular children possess a social comfort, maturity, and communication skills. They seem better adept at manipulating other children. Having these skills affected who became friends and the social networks within the sites.

Within each age-grade group at each site there were sub-groups of boys and girls. Within these friendship groups, personal characteristics of certain children seemed to make them leaders of the groups. The more popular children led the groups, while they were followed by less popular children who possessed less social status. This circle was surrounded by the children who didn’t really fit in, the loners who clung to the periphery of the peer groups.
In Figure 9, the diagram of the social structure of the peer groups shows the interactive nature of sub-groups. The group labeled as the informal leaders are more popular and influence the activities and play of the other sub-groups either through persuasion or directive. They are considered cool and are generally older. Around the informal leaders are sub-groups of children who are attached to preferred friendship groups. These smaller groups play among themselves and also play with other sub-groups. The friendship groups are influenced by the informal peer leaders, especially when interacting as a larger peer group. The loners are not a permanent part of any subgroup, and mostly reside on the sidelines of the peer group. They may make temporary connections with other children through sharing and particular activities. It is important to note that despite the two-dimensional representation of the group, in reality the interactions are quite fluid with children interacting with each other in dynamic ways. For example, at times loners interacted with leaders and children joined other sub-groups if their preferred playmates were not present. Also, the afterschool program curriculum encouraged large group interaction by incorporating group games and activities. Therefore, this assessment of social dynamics was constructed.
based on observations of activities during individual interactions, such as who they talked to and sat with during snack time, free play, homework time and choice centers. These observations were tracked over time to identify patterns of interactions. For example, Tyler sat with and played with his best friend, Sammie, each day until she was picked up by her parent. After this occurred he moved over to the boys’ group and joined in their activity.

**Aspects of Popularity**

Within age groups children can be divided according to social status or popularity as it is commonly thought of. What makes a tween more popular is dependent on several characteristics. Age was given special privilege and recognition. In the elementary setting the fifth graders are the oldest students and carry the greatest amount of social capital. It was exhibited through actual physical size of course, but also through the ability to control the social timber of the group. Older children were more likely to be able to persuade younger children to play a particular game, or to direct the behavior of younger children. In this way age contributed to popularity. Sophistication or knowledge of teen and adult ideas, and language also increased social prestige. Though sophistication should not be confused with emotional maturity (Linn 2004), children who seem older and more experienced were looked up to. Popularity is also linked to access to material objects prized by others. The more popular children owned cell phones, DS video games, and had other children kinds of objects and food that could be shared to garner social approval. At the sites children with items like cell phones, video games received attention from peers who wanted to play with them and watch over their shoulder as the owner played with it. The use of these things was often restricted by staff leading to the need to be covert. Breaking the rules added to the allure. When Caleb was called out by a younger third grader for playing with a GameBoy during Homework time, he responded matter-a-factly with “I don’t care.”
Coolness

One aspect of social status is coolness. It is the laid-back and sophisticated self-presentation style that includes the ‘right’ clothes, shoes and stuff, and impression management (Fine 1981). Lyman and Scott describe coolness as “a prerequisite to entrance into or maintenance of membership in certain social circles” (1989: 93). The children in this study were beginning to adopt the idea of being cool. Though other research has found that coolness was expressed among pre-teens through branded clothing, this was less of the case in the present research. The predominant reason for this was the mandatory school uniforms required at all but one of the schools the afterschool participants attended. The economic context also presumably played a role as well. Adler and Adler (1998) describe particular brands that were in demand among pre-teens they studied in a middle class, white community. The sites included in the current research are a combination of working class and middle class families, which may have made branded clothes less financially attainable. Two girls who did exhibit coolness in their dress and demeanor were Kara and Alyssa. Kara was a fifth grader at Middlewood. She seemed sophisticated for her age. She did not wear a school uniform and often wore branded T-shirts from Abercrombie and Finch. She was friendly with the other girls, but only hung out with a few of the older girls and talked with the counselors quite a bit. Often her dad brought her fast food from McDonald’s and Checkers fast food restaurants in the middle of the afternoon so she didn’t always eat the YMCA snack. Her friendliness with the staff afforded her special privileges such as remaining inside to help staff members while the other kids went outside to play. When I asked the third and fourth grade girls about Kara she was described as “popular” and “pretty”. Alyssa also possessed a precocious air. She attended Soto and quickly became a leader among the third through fifth grade girls. She often removed her collared uniform shirt to reveal a t-shirt underneath from Justice, a popular clothing store that caters to tween girls. The other girls at both sites also invested time and effort into “looking cute.” They complemented each other’s hair styles, painted their nails with each other and shared lip gloss that was rubbed onto a finger and then applied.
Preoccupation with one’s appearance seemed to mostly appear among the fourth and fifth grade girls. Among the boys in this research coolness was expressed in other ways such as acting tough or having video games.

**Toughness**

For young boys, toughness is being defiant of adult authority and challenging rules. Acting out was used by older pre-teen boys to accumulate status among peers in research by Fine (1987). In my sample, acting out or boasting among friends that “I don’t care” was performed with one eye on staff members and out of ear shot of their hearing. Boys at both sites snuck behind the staff to throw balls and oranges at each other during quiet activity times. Their goal was to cut up with friends, but not get caught. Acting tough, and breaking rules was done in a secretive manner because the children in the afterschool care have less autonomy than the boys on the baseball teams described by Fine who were studied outside of the pseudo-classroom setting of afterschool. In this study the boys talked tough, but acted with discretion. At Soto Caleb and Michael had three arguments that I observed and pushed each other while eyeing each other down and sticking out their chests. On one occasion I overheard Michael tell Caleb that they “need a time out” to diffuse the altercation before they got in trouble. The boys understood that staff monitored their behavior and regularly communicated with parents about their behavior when parents picked up their children. Behavioral infractions were routinely reported directly to parents by staff, often while the child was made to stand in front of the adults. For behavioral infractions children were required to write a disciplinary “think sheet” and were often verbally reprimanded by the adults in front of on-looking peers. A physical fight would have had serious consequences. An altercation would result in being suspended from the site which would have meant being in trouble with their parents.

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13 The think sheets are disciplinary tools used by staff to help children assess a conflict situation or misbehavior, consider their behavior and determine how they can amend for the conflict or avoid the conflict in the future. The think sheet is a one-page form in which the child could write about the situation and then the staff used the form to discuss the problem behavior. Think sheets were shared with parents and stored in the child’s file.
Toughness was expressed through verbal or physical aggression, “talking trash”, picking on peers and boasting about one’s physical abilities and lack of fear. Exchanges between boys included verbally questioning another’s boast. This “calling out” was used if the boast seemed too far-fetched. For example, “you know you never gonna’ do that; prove it” was the response from Malik to James when James said he could shoot a basketball into the hoop from across the court. Counter responses allowed boys to save face. Toughness was not only displayed by boys. In several instances, girls also talked tough and acted as a group to control other girls. In one case at Soto, a fourth grade girl, Leah, said something unflattering about a prominent leader of the fourth and fifth grade girl group. In retribution she was shunned from the group and a group of seven to eight girls approached Leah en masse during outdoor free play. The gang of girls yelled at her and they said unflattering things to Leah. The intent was to intimidate her and seek revenge as a group. Leah’s rebuttal was that she was not afraid of them. The episode went on for about fifteen minutes before a staff member noticed and broke up the group with a lecture about getting along. Being seen as cool or tough were not the only mechanisms for popularity, but they served their purpose along with social finesse and genuine likability.

**Fitting In, or Not**

The social hierarchy of the afterschool sites were comprised of subgroups based on age and gender. Within each subgroup there existed a social hierarchy with leaders. The distinction of friendship or peer groups, and the unique category of a clique are discussed below. Beneath the leaders were second-tier members who were close friends. Under the second tier were the lower members who follow along and at the bottom of the hierarchy were the children at the periphery of the social network.

The leaders at the top of the social hierarchy were followed by children who for the most part fit-in by following social norms. They acted according to gender and age expectations. Regardless of where one fell in the social hierarchy, the process of fitting-in was an on-going one that required social maneuvering.
At the periphery of the groups were the children that did not fit-in. The social isolates were the loners, the nerds who float on the periphery of the social network. These children were different either in temperament and interests. They are less likely to fit into the norms of children’s culture. These children may be introverts, or may be extremely intelligent or socially awkward. They made up games by themselves and watched other children from the sidelines. The experience of social isolates according to Merten (1996) is one of longing to fit in with other children while being aware that one does not. In my observation, loners were not always on the sidelines. Though generally, they were ignored by the other children. I only witnessed outright ridicule of loners on two occasions. One of the occasions involved comments made by Annmarie about Connor. Connor, a fourth grader at Middlewood, didn’t fit in well with the other kids. He was quiet, serious and often read by himself instead of playing sports with the boys. He was sensitive to sunlight and had to wear sunscreen and a protective hat while outdoors. These characteristics along with his quiet disposition seemed to set him apart.

One warm afternoon, as I walked inside with Annmarie and Maria, Connor accidentally bumped into Annmarie. She blurted “excuse me” loudly and he rolled his eyes at her. She turned to me and whispered “I can’t stand him. He is so weird and gross”. She explained that they lived in the same neighborhood and she had to go to his house to do a favor for her mother. She said, “I went to his house. I didn’t go inside. He answered the door and he was holding his dog. Poor dog. We was just weird.” Annmarie didn’t seem to have a clear reason for not liking Connor. I had several conversations with Connor, usually about books or video games. He was polite to me, but never connected with his peers at the afterschool program.

Loners compensated by forming friendships with younger children, and with other lower status children. At times loners were brought into games by the group if another player was needed or if there was a benefit to including them. An example of a loner from Soto is Taylor. She was a quiet girl who was enthralled by dinosaurs and liked to pretend to be a jaguar when playing. She wanted to be a paleontologist when she grows up. She was not “girly,” nor was she athletically talented. As such she hovered on the periphery of the other children, never really fitting in. Taylor often played chase with Jimmy who was autistic. Another case was Jean-Paul, a third grader who emigrated from Haiti two years
before I met him. Jean-Paul was soft-spoken and had a lingering accent. He was not athletically gifted and the other boys did not invite him to play games with them. One day his half-sister and her friend were discussing his lack of friends and decided that he would be popular if he could play sports but they doubted he would ever be good enough at sports to fit in with the boys. Athletic ability and enthusiasm for sports is a mechanism for fitting in and gaining social status among boys. The boys with less athletic prowess did not have access to key methods for fitting in and gaining a “rep” (Adler and Adler 1998).

Social Networks of Children and Cliques

Though the term, clique, is used frequently in popular discourse, in this study most of the groups were more flexible than is allowed for in the definition of clique. As defined by Adler and Adler (1998), a clique is a special type of group that is dominated by clear leadership structure. A clique is also characterized by boundary maintenance, membership criteria, status stratification/popularity, and in-groups and out-groups. Therefore, most of the peer groups I observed included aspects similar to cliques, but did not follow the full definition. Usually, this was due to not having an obvious leader and having more permeable group boundaries and group decision making.
The diagram of the clique structure in Figure 10 illustrates the boundaries that develop between the various groups that form around a clique. The clique is led by a central leader or leaders who may be supported by high status affiliates which are considered close friends and have a great deal of access to the clique leader and may influence decision making. Encircling this core leadership group are the clique followers who fit in with the clique and generally follow the direction of the clique leaders. Outside of the clique is a diverse group, “everyone else.” This includes children who do not fit in with the clique but have strong friend connections on their own. These “normal” children are described as well-adjusted with their own interests and activities by Adler and Adler (1998). They may not fit in with the clique group, but can have some ties to the clique and may even participate in play and activities with the clique. The other two groups are given separate distinction. The “wanna-be’s” would like to be a part of the clique but do not fit in. They repeatedly attempt to fit in and may try to give gifts to the clique leader, and are usually not accepted due to judgment of the clique leader. The loners are a separate category who hold tenuous ties to all the other groups. They do not fit in and reside on the periphery.
The long term nature of this fieldwork allowed for observations of how peer groups change over time. During the fieldwork, I noted patterns of social interaction and preferred friends and their impact of the social networks within the sites. A case in point is the third through fifth grade girl group at Soto during the first year of the study that became a clique. This group originally was a loose network of nine to ten girls who played together and hung out. Certain girls had best friends, yet all of the girls were friendly with each other. Within the group, Bridgette and Kiara were leaders and held high positions of status. Within the group the girls had preferred friends and continuously reconstituted the group or broke off into smaller groups depending on the activity. Bridgette and Kiara often led the activities and suggested games, but the other girls also influenced the group’s activities. The flexible nature of decision making changed when Alyssa entered the group. She transferred to the school and began attending Soto in February.

Alyssa became the clique leader. She used manipulation, coolness, and sophistication to become a leader, and in doing so, she caused a power struggle and competition between the girls over who would be favored and remain in the group. Kiara and Bridgette had been leaders in the girl group. However, prior to Alyssa’s appearance the group would not have been considered a clique. When Alyssa came the girl group divided and Alyssa’s group took on the characteristics of a clique. There was exclusion (not sharing or playing with certain girls) and special activities, like a fashion show that led to boundary maintenance. Alyssa also played on the lower status members of the group by separating friends. She became friendlier to Kiara who had been a long-time friend of Trinity. Overtime Trinity began to feel left out by the closeness of Alyssa and Kiara. Trinity confided to me one day about six weeks after Alyssa began attending the program that she played with the girls (in the clique) but felt left out because Kiara was always doing what Alyssa wanted. Alyssa also pushed out Leah who realigned with Tyler and Sammie. Lexi remained on the periphery and became closer with Emily. Kimmy and Alexis remained on the periphery but were able to play with the boys as well. Those that become excluded like Leah and Lexi also complained that “Alyssa took Kiara away.”
The influence Alyssa garnered became evident when she had the idea of presenting a fashion show for the afterschool program. She and Kiara designed the outfits and auditioned or “tried-out” the other girls for positions as models. They received permission from the site leader and set the date for a Friday in May. All week the girls planned and talked about the fashion show. On Wednesday, Alyssa and Kiara had model auditions during free play time. The hopefuls had to strut like a model on a catwalk with Alyssa critiquing the way they walked and correcting them. The girls also brought in shirts, pants and skirts. The two leaders approved outfits and made two shirts by cutting t-shirts and re-tying them. The day of the show the girls fixed their hair, and applied lip gloss. The staff brought out the boom box and played pop music. Alyssa’s mother came to watch, and chairs were set up for the audience. The show began and girls strutted across the elementary school stage. The entire production was orchestrated by Alyssa with the following of the third through fifth grade girls.

This episode highlighted the dynamic nature of peer groups. Alyssa’s entrance into the girls’ third through fifth grade group resulted in a division into sub-groups. Changing alliances and playmates were also observed in more subtle ways besides the formation of a clique. The children did engage in contingency friendships (Davies 1982) when they were on the outs with preferred friends, and when preferred friends were not present at the program. In this way, social connections were more fluid in the afterschool setting where children were instructed by staff to play with everyone, and playing with a contingency friend was deemed acceptable in the context of afterschool. Preferred friends played together each day, especially in the early part of the afternoon when more children were present and therefore there would be more options in selecting playmates. Preferred friends also shared on-going interests and activities such as drawing comics together over several days, and contacting each other from home. They carried on their relationships during school and while at home. They had sleep-overs and talked on the phone, emailed, Instant Messaged, and texted each other. When preferred friends were unavailable children re-grouped with contingency friends.
Soto 3rd-5th Grade Girls Social Structure, Informal (Before Clique Formed)

Soto 3rd-5th Grade Girls Group (After Clique Formed)

Figure 11. Graphic of Change in Social Network of Girls’ Group at Soto
Making Friends

Accounting for social structure of children’s groups is necessary for understanding how children make friends and the role of social exchanges. The following conversation occurred between Sammie and Jean-Paul while sitting at a cafeteria table during homework time at Soto.

Sammie: I don't have any friends. No one wants to play with me.

Jean-Paul: Awwhhh, I am sorry.

[Pause]

Jean-Paul: I'll be your friend.

Sammie: OK. Do you have any more Skittles?

Jean-Paul: No, I ate them all.

Sammie: Well, I'll play with your soldier.

Jean-Paul: OK. [Hands her the toy]

Part of fitting in is establishing alliances with other children. Shifting from the status of peer to friend involves creating and maintaining relationships. Peers interact and are housed together in adult defined groups, but friends prefer the company of each other. Peers are grouped based on similar characteristics such as age and gender. Friendship is a voluntary, interpersonal relationship (Bunnel et al. 2012). Friends share common interests, they provide emotional support, they laugh together and they share with each other. Entering into friendships often is based on exchange and provides a mechanism for social ordering. Maintaining friendships “requires…active, ongoing and necessarily reciprocal work” (Bunnel et al. 2012: 493). In the United States friendship is thought to be outside of economic contexts, but friendships provide a mechanism for social, emotional and economic exchanges. Among the children in this study equality was valued between friends. They attempted to maintain equal exchanges so that both friends would benefit from the relationship.

The above conversation is interesting for a couple of reasons. Before this exchange I had never observed Sammie and Jean-Paul playing together. But this example demonstrates how sharing led to
playing together. Sammie had a core group of friends, whom she played with every day, but they sometimes fought and on this particular day, the group had argued. Sammie fit in with her group of friends and was likable. She could easily enter other groups as well. Jean-Paul did not have those kinds of social connections. He didn’t fit in well. He wasn't as cool as the other boys in the third through fifth grade group. He didn't bring toys or candy to afterschool, and was not as skilled at sports as the other boys so they didn’t ask him to play.

However, after this interaction Jean-Paul shifted into Sammie’s group of friends and continued to hang out with this group. Also, the negotiations of their first encounter were important. Sammie shared her social capital with Jena-Paul and received a gift from the exchange. The ability to transfer social capital into other forms of capital or social currency is a critical function of friendship and negotiation with peer groups (Bourdieu 1986). This scenario highlights the role of social currency in children’s peer culture. Social currency involves the exchange of objects to navigate social exchanges. In the world of children’s culture, the objects that children have access to such as candy, gum, toys, pencils, stickers, balls, lip gloss, nail polish, video games, and cell phones are exchanged between each other and in the exchange process come to symbolize the relationship. Social currency can also be expanded to include the emotional and social supports that children share with each other, such as when a friend sticks up for another in a conflict with a third party.

**Social Currency**

As Mauss (1967 [1925]) states the giving and receiving of items maintains a system of social debt and positive interaction. Exchanges create a network of debt and repayment that ideally is maintained in equality between trading partners. The balance of exchange dictates the nature of exchanges and serves to classify behavior as warranted or intruding. In Afterschool settings friends readily shared morsels of food and objects with preferred friends. Friends established relationships that were celebrated and reinforced through sharing things, play and information. Friendships also allowed opportunities for interaction and
therefore more chances to repay debts either in physical transactions such as alternately providing candy on different days, and repaying through playing together or psychic supports such as defending a friend in a conflict or comforting a friend who is upset. An example of third grade boys at Soto was when Dane stood-up for Cade after Cade argued with James about a basketball game.

The concepts of exchange, social capital and social currency are useful for describing children’s social groups. Like adults children engage in sharing, borrowing, giving, bartering; however, children use exchange objects that are culturally defined as appropriate for children. In this way available objects are defined based on children’s identity as children. Social uses of snack foods within peer groups fell in line with the concept of social currency. Objects were used to prompt and legitimize social interaction. The objects of children's social currency were used to validate friendships, establish peer alliances, and symbolize social connections. The exchange of small objects including food was a powerful tool for navigating the nuances of peer social dynamics. Friends shared and gave more openly and easily. They used “kid stuff” to meet an end (e.g., do homework, eat), but they also used stuff to signify who was a friend and to make and keep friends.

The kinds of objects children have access to, possess, and are able to exchange are children’ stuff. They have within their control mostly small, inexpensive items like pencils, toys, lip gloss, candy and snack foods. While more expensive items such as cell phones and video games are highly prized, the youth in this study had limited access to these status symbols while attending afterschool programs. Prohibitive factors were the cost of electronic devices, the young age of the sample, (adolescents with more spending power would have greater access to these items), and the prohibition of having them in the sites and the schools. At both afterschool sites children were routinely instructed by staff to return cell phones and hand held video games to the book bags because they might “be broken or lost.” The items children used in their social exchanges reflected things they liked, and things that were considered appropriate for children to have. Access largely shaped their choices in this context. The objects that were shared, given away and traded included: snack foods, candy, gum, toys, balls, pencils, paper, lead for pencils, pencil sharpeners, markers, hand sanitizer, books, stickers, comics, playing cards, nail polish, lip
gloss, video games, sports and game trading cards. Within children’s culture items that are consumed are of particular interest. Foods played a unique role in shaping child identity and group cohesion. The following section describes how the children used food and ideas about food in their social interactions.

**Kid Food in Afterschool Settings**

To paint a picture of the food environment in afterschool settings one can begin with the sickingly, sweet smell of large amounts of Valentine’s Day candy being consumed by a table full of children, and the visual effect of brightly colored candy wrappers, milk cartons and cookie packages littering the length of a table. Afterschool programs can be described as food saturated environments. This is due to food, specifically snack foods and candy, being present on a daily basis. This occurred because snacks were provided daily by the program, and these snacks were supplemented with items children and staff bring from home and purchase in vending machines.

Due to the daily ritual of snack time and the other food consumption that took place at the sites, afterschool programs proved to be relevant locations for studying child food practices. A daily snack time ritual meant that eating was ingrained in the afterschool experience. The venue also allowed research access to children outside of school and home, where eating with peers is a natural behavior.

**Snack Time at Soto and Middlewood**

Both sites provided a snack for the children in their charge. The types of foods provided were constrained by environmental factors. The snacks need to be affordable, easily portable, and palatable for the children. Neither site had access to a kitchen for food preparation. At Middlewood, staff did not have access to refrigerators or a food preparation area. At Soto, the afterschool program was not allowed to use the school’s kitchen area or use any food preparation or refrigeration equipment on a regular basis. Exceptions were made for special occasions. For example, the program staff was allowed to store ice
cream in the freezer for an ice cream social during an early dismissal day, though the staff was not allowed to use any school equipment and kitchen tools. For regular snack distribution at Soto, the snacks were delivered and stored in the kitchen area. Perishables (milk, cheese sticks and yogurt) were stored in a refrigerator. Each day a school cafeteria staff member passed out the snack to each child who lined up to receive them at the beginning of the afternoon. After that time, the kitchen was closed by the cafeteria staff. The staff at Middlewood passed out the snacks to the children from large cardboard boxes. The result of these constraining factors was that snacks were purchased in bulk by the district office and distributed to each site. In fact each day the snacks were dropped off at the sites from the YMCA district office.

The snacks were generally single-serving, prepackaged snack foods such as cookies, crackers, graham crackers, cereal, pretzels, refrigerated single-serve milk cartons, Dannimals Yogurt cups, and mozzarella sting cheese. These items were accompanied with a six ounce carton of white, chocolate or strawberry flavored whole milk, an apple juice or punch pouch, or whole fruit. The only differences between snacks at the two sites was that Middlewood did not receive milk or yogurt, and Middlewood did receive fresh fruit more often. The availability of fresh fruit depended upon cost and was less available at Soto than Middlewood. This is due to a grant awarded to the Middlewood facility that allowed supplemental funding for various programs including the afterschool program. With the additional funding, the site director was able to purchase additional fresh fruit. No candy or soda was ever distributed as part of this official snack. According to Ms. Monique at Soto, “the main office” attempted to provide more healthful snacks, and she had noticed that there were fewer sweets such as Oreos and pastries than in the past. Also due to budget restrictions, she had also noticed the brands of the snack had changed from name brands to mostly generic brands.

Snack time was offered each day during the first hour of the daily schedule. At Soto, which is predominately housed in the elementary school’s cafeteria, all of the children ate their snacks while sitting in grade groups at assigned tables. The older children at Middlewood often sat on the floor in either the game room or hallway during snack time because there were not enough tables and chairs in the
multipurpose room to accommodate the entire program. At both sites snack time lasted for approximately fifteen to twenty minutes, after which the children were expected to clean up their areas and dispose of their litter.

The children ate the snacks provided by the YMCA, as well as brought a wide variety of snack foods from home including, candy, Poptarts, plastic baggies of Pops cereal, dill pickles, chips, sandwiches, cookies, brownies, Little Debbie cakes, goldfish crackers, Cheez-its crackers, juice boxes, Nutrigrain bars, marshmallows, and applesauce cups. I observed and noted the kinds of items consumed and exchanged at both sites on a daily basis. It was noted that overall there was more candy at Soto and more snack food items at Middlewood. More of the children at Middlewood brought extra snacks from home which they consumed during snack time and later in the afternoon. Many parents sent snacks with their child since this site is open until 7:00 p.m. and a significant proportion of parents picked up their children later in the afternoon or evening.

Vending Machines

Besides the snacks provided by the program, children also purchased items from vending machines. Access to vending machines was determined by the lay-out of the site and staff rules about using vending machines. At Soto, the soda and snack vending machines were located in the faculty lounge, which is located in a separate room off the main cafeteria space. The children were not allowed to enter the faculty lounge unsupervised and staff restricted visits to the vending machines. The enforcement of the vending machine rule did vary according to the time of year at Soto. Towards the end of the school year the Soto staff seemed to be more lax in restricting access during both years of observation. Children asked the staff to go to the vending machines either during snack time or later in their afternoon. Initially the staff restricted access completely, and then mid-year began allowing access on Friday afternoons, towards the end of the term daily access was allowed, especially if multiple children asked permission.
At Middlewood a snack vending machine was located in the game room where all of the children were located at some point each day and a soda vending machine was located in the hallway adjacent to the entrance of the game room. Both of these locations were unrestricted by the staff. The stipulation of using the vending machine was that the children needed to receive permission from a staff member and go with a “buddy” to the soda vending machine since no child was allowed to leave the group alone. The result of the vending machine placement within or close to the children’s spaces and the “buddy” rule was easier access to vending machine snacks and soda at Middlewood than Soto since the machines were in closer proximity and did not require a staff member to physically accompany a child. Staff at Middlewood did not make strong efforts to restrict access. They only limited access to during snack times and free play times later in the afternoons. If a child asked for permission during these times, he or she would be granted permission.

Sneaking Food

Foods were only supposed to be eaten during snack times. Staff provided snacks and children accepted the snack or decline them. During snack time children also ate other foods such as items remaining from lunch bags or extra snacks and candy in the child’s backpack. At the end of snack time children were supposed to put up all foods. This rule did not preclude children from sneaking food and candy from pockets and backpacks at other times in the afternoon. Homework time was an especially popular time for sneaking snacks given the easy access to backpacks. Generally, the children were undetected by the staff in their surreptitious eating. On a few occasions the staff instructed the children to put away food during homework time. This occurred when it was obvious the child was eating, such as when the children were not hiding the food, eating had somehow become disruptive, or the staff witnessed them and other children noticed that the staff had seen the children break the food rule. Sneaking food increased as the afternoon progressed presumably when the children became hungry again before parents picked them up. It was also typical for children who brought extra snacks and money for
the vending machine to eat at the end of the afternoon after the children returned inside from playing on
the playground and basketball courts.

Food as Reward

It should be noted that adults often controlled the kinds of food present in the afterschool setting. At times, the candy consumed actually came from treats and rewards given to students by their school teachers earlier during the school day. During school, food and candy were regularly used to reward good behavior and academic performance. At Soto, children could earn tokens called Bulls Bucks to purchase classroom privileges, prizes, and candy. Food incentives were given for excellent performance on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test practice activities like writing tests. In fact, during the spring once a month the fourth graders at Soto were given a pizza party during school hours for earning a high score on a FCAT practice writing test. Candy was given by classroom teachers as prizes for academic games like math bingo.

Afterschool Special Food Occasions

Throughout the school year, regular school hours ended early on certain days. When this occurred, the afterschool program began at 12:15 p.m. instead of 2:15 p.m. At Soto, the staff provided extra food to the children because the site director was concerned the children would be hungry given the long afterschool time frame. She also worried that the bag lunch of an apple, half of a sandwich, and a juice box that was provided by the school cafeteria was not enough to sustain them until dinner time. The Soto staff organized special food occasions during these afternoons. They provided hot dogs and chips, pizza, and ice cream sundaes as special treats. The staff served the food picnic style outside or indoors in the cafeteria. They used disposable plates and utensils and cooked food like hot dogs in crock pots since they could not use the cafeteria kitchen facility for food preparation. Ms. Monique used an economy of
scale by collecting $1.00-2.00 per child for the special occasion in order to purchase pizza or asked each family to donate one item such as a bag of chips and a package of hot dog buns. Similarly, she requested that each family bring in one item that would be shared by the entire group. This practice allowed all of the families to contribute equally and ensured that all of the children could eat. Upon questioning the site director about the early dismissal special treats, she voiced concern whether all of the children would be “eating enough” consistently at home. She stated that she wanted to make sure the children “ate enough when under my care” in case they did not eat enough at other times. Her subtly voiced concern over food insecurity was repeated on several occasions during the fieldwork. Her concern was validated indirectly by the larger numbers of families on a discounted tuition fee rate at Soto compared to Middlewood. Ms. Monique also commented to me about the difficulty she had in collecting the program weekly fees from certain families. She confided that she understood some of the families were struggling financially; however, as she explained, “it is my job to collect the fees.”

The staff at Middlewood did not seem to share this concern or awareness of the families’ financial status. They seemed to assume that parents could afford to purchase extra snacks. While the staff at both sites officially discouraged sharing food among the children, Middlewood did not provide additional snacks except on Friday afternoons when children could bring $1.00 to purchase a slice of pizza. Additionally unlike the Soto staff who did not usually reprimand the children for sharing, Middlewood staff openly discouraged food sharing and food begging. If children wanted to have more snacks or different snacks than what was offered by the YMCA, then they were expected to bring food from home or buy items from the vending machine. During snack time at Middlewood one afternoon, a boy named Scott remarked that he didn’t have anything more to eat, and asked a few children close by him if they had anything he could eat. One of the staff members, Tina, heard him, and told him not to ask people for their food. She said he should pack a lunch and the little boy said that his mom didn’t pack a lunch for him because they don’t have the money for it. Upon hearing his remark, Ashley, another staff member, responded that it was “cheaper to bring lunch than to buy lunch”. At this he looked down at the floor and made a sad face. A girl sitting next to him who had been eating a granola bar during this
exchange broke off a piece and gave it to him. I also heard the Middlewood staff make comments like "this is why we don't share food" after there was a conflict between two boys over a snack in which one boy complained that the other had taken his part of his snack.

During the summer camp at Middlewood, a bag lunch was provided for free to the students each day. The food was laid out on a table during the lunch breaks and was handed out by staff. The children walked up to the table to get the items they wanted. The lunch included a turkey or ham sandwich or a pepperoni wrap, milk in cartons, vegetables like celery or carrot sticks and a piece of fruit usually an apple or orange. The site director told me that the YMCA program had secured a grant for additional funding that allowed him to contract with a local company to prepare the lunches each day and deliver them to the site during the summer months. He stated that he wanted to make sure that the kids had enough to eat or had something if they forgot their home-packed lunch. I observed that about 30% of the fourth and fifth grade children ate this lunch each day either in whole or supplemented it with items from home. The remaining portion of the group consistently brought lunch from home each day. Of the children that brought their lunch they sometimes also ate items from the bag lunch counter, especially the fruit and pepperoni wraps. During the summer camp children also had a snack time in the middle of the afternoon. The snacks were the same items given out during the school year such as small bags of graham cracker cookies and juice bags. The site directors’ concern over providing lunch was reinforced by an incident that occurred that summer.

One late afternoon during summer camp, I saw Scott sitting by himself. I sat down next to him and tried to start a conversation. After a couple of minutes of talking about the game the group had just finished playing he told me that he was still hungry. I asked him if he had gotten an orange during snack time. He responded yes. I asked if he had asked for another orange, but he said they had run out. He then commented that he was “tired of eating rice.” I asked him what he meant and he said that his mom told him that is what they had to eat. A staff member called out to us to join the group outside and the conversation ended. He was the only child that spoke directly to me of having limited food options at
Though the example of Scott was an isolated event, it suggests that children in the sites may experience food insecurity.

Though I did not directly measure food insecurity in the research design, my observations suggest that the site directors believed that some of the students in their care may experience food insecurity. The issue was handled differently at the two sites. At Middlewood, Ms. Monique made arrangements to provide extra snacks during early dismissal days. She also allowed the children and staff to take left over items during the late afternoon. I observed staff occasionally pick-up bags of cookies or crackers from the table. I frequently saw children pick up extra bags and place them in their book bags “for later.” I also frequently observed Ms. Monique handing out handfuls of potato chips, popcorn and sunflower seeds to children sitting around her during the late afternoon. Ms. Monique often brought a full-size bag of chips or some other item, and she told me it was for her snack, but I often saw her share with the children. The other staff at Soto did not reprimand the children for sharing with each other, and they also sometimes ate snacks with the children during snack time. At Middlewood, David was able to provide extra fruit during the school year and the bag lunches during the summer camp through grants. The staff that supervised children at Middlewood did reprimand the children for “begging” others and did not share their food with the children like Ms. Monique did. The two different attitudes and approaches concerning extra snacks do reflect varying assumptions by the staff about the affordability of food among the families. It also may have impacted the volume of snacks brought from home or purchased in vending machines at Middlewood. Here, if children were hungry and wanted to eat more than the family was responsible for providing extra.
Food as Entertainment

Food talk

Besides consuming food, this research also describes the ways food and ideas about food were used by children. The children often talked about food. Conversations between students and myself were sprinkled with food talk. Here I define food talk as conversational references to foods, stories of foods consumed, and verbal explanations of experiences and emotions about food. In this way, food talk served as a way to explain who one is and create points of connection. The children talked about their favorite foods, the meals they had for the previous night’s dinner and foods served on special occasions. Frequent comments such as “I like that too” served to indicate cohesion between peers. At times, food talk took on a competitive nature. Peers attempted to out-do each other by having a family member who could make the best version of a particular dish, and by boasting about feats of consumption. Food talk also included reminisces about the pleasurable emotions of eating favorite foods, or the strong disgust of eating ‘gross food.’

While waiting in line before the start of physical activity lesson with Mr. Donnie, I waited with Jasmine, a second grader, who suddenly blurted out that she “loved snails.” At that Jennifer, a third grader, added that she liked crabs. I asked Jasmine where she had eaten snails, and she said that she had them at a French restaurant and that “they were good”. Then Jennifer said that she had crabs the previous night. She said that “crabs and shrimp were my favorite kind of seafood and shrimp.” I asked her how she liked to eat her shrimp and she replied, “fried.” Then Jasmine said she liked crab too although she “didn’t like them fried that she liked it another way.” She couldn’t think of what it was called. In another instance, Chloe, she said that she smelled something burning. I asked her if it smelled like fire. She said that “no, it smells like pizza.” I asked her “really?” and if she liked pizza. She replied, yes and that it was her favorite. She said that pizza and donuts were her favorite and that watermelon, grapes, and strawberries were also her favorite foods. While playing Connect-4 with Kiara the week before
Thanksgiving, she made a comment about the game’s chips. The yellow chips reminded her of squash. I asked her if she liked to eat squash, and she hesitated and said, “umm, yeah.” She asked me if I like squash and I said “not really.” She asked me if I like Brussels sprouts. I said it depends how they are cooked, and Trinity piped in and added, “I hate cabbage.” The conversation continued with talk of what we would eat at Thanksgiving celebrations.

They enjoyed sharing stories about high status foods they had eaten such as lobster, crab, escargot, duck or steak. These foods were consumed with family at celebrations. They also vividly day dreamed about the foods they would eat for upcoming holidays like Thanksgiving or the kind of birthday cake they requested for an upcoming birthday. Discussions of holiday and celebration foods included comparisons of what each child’s family eat and comparisons of what they do and do not like to eat.

Children also talked about the snack food they were eating during Snack Time. One afternoon I sat with three third grade girls as we munched on the graham cracker cookies provided by the YMCA. The cookies were in the shapes of sea creatures and palm trees. Tina lifted her cookie and said that it looked like a crab with a diaper on it. We laughed and then two other girls joined in talking about the various shapes. They made a game of identifying the shape. One was a tiki mask and when I lifted a palm tree shaped cookie, Sydney said, “gross, you don’t eat palm trees,” And the girls laughed.
Sharing Food Beliefs and Knowledge

Food talk also included discussions of the qualities of foods and instruction on how to eat kids’ food. The palatable merits of school food and “Y snacks” versus branded snack foods were debated. It was generally agreed that lunch from home was better than school lunch, and the generic snacks provided by the program were not as good as the branded snacks purchased in stores.

For instance, one afternoon as I sat with a group of third and fourth grade boys at Soto, James dunked his cookie into an opened carton of milk, and he said, “uhh, I don’t want this.” I told him that he did not have to eat it. He said ok, then said, “I don’t like cafeteria food and the Y snacks.” Chris piped up and repeated that he didn’t like cafeteria food. I asked why and Jamal said “cause it’s not any good.” James then opened his backpack and said, “I have my own food.” He took out a Capri Sun drink and began to drink it. Chris then muttered, “lucky.” The basis of this exchange was replicated in various contexts as children told me “the school food is gross” and that “the [afterschool] snacks are gross” (even
as they ate them). I had the opportunity to eat the YMCA snacks on many occasions when they were shared with me by staff or children, I found the snacks palatable. The children clearly believed that the institutional snacks were inferior to higher-status, branded foods. This notion was reinforced through conversations at both sites.

Ideas concerning health came up during conversations while eating. Eating too much food and eating “junk food” was described as the cause of stomachaches as was the case during special occasions when the staff provided extra snacks such as ice cream sundaes and hotdogs. It was also associated with “getting fat” or described as detrimental to athletic performance. For instance, girls more often associated eating with weight as exemplified in the comment, “This [chocolate candy] is fattening, but I don't care”, by Bridgette, a fifth grader, while boys’ comments described wanting to be good at sports as indicated by Caleb, a fifth grader, who stated “so I'm not having any [ice cream]” at an ice cream party during an early dismissal day at Soto. As previously noted, his explanation was that he wanted to be able to run fast for football. He planned to try-out for the middle school football team the following year.

The children also provided instruction to each other about how to eat certain foods. For example, during the beginning stage of the fieldwork, I observed a second grader showing a kindergartener how to neatly open and drink the juice pouches served by the YMCA. A couple of weeks later I received similar instruction from a few fourth graders as I attempted to open a juice bag. The juice bag, often served with crackers and cookies, was literally a clear plastic square pouch filled with juice or punch that you drink out of. They described in detail how to open it; one must hold the pouch and bite a corner off first. Then one can hold it and carefully drink out of the slit. They said sometimes you can use a straw if you have one, or you could use your teeth to make a hole and then insert a straw. I was warned that care is needed in how the pouch is placed on the table so that it doesn’t spill out. Then they demonstrated the technique for me. I was also instructed in the method of eating a Dannon Danimals Yogurt cup without a spoon. Though plastic spoons are provided by the staff, the children do not use them. Danimals cups, which are small yogurt cups in plastic containers, are made so that the children can eat them without a spoon by crushing the cups from the bottom. One must hold the plastic cup underneath and squeeze the yogurt out
into one’s mouth. Another technique that was taught to younger children and me was the waterfall drinking technique. This was used when sharing a communal cup or bottle of soda. Each child tilted his or her head back, opened her mouth and lifted the beverage above in order to pour the drink into one’s mouth without touching the rim of the bottle. The waterfall prevented the children from risking cross-contamination of illnesses, and allowed boys and girls to share a drink without their lips touching the same bottle rim.

The children also discussed methods of eating such as the merits of eating candy and chips in whole pieces versus biting small bits so that the candy lasted longer. Alexis, Kimmy and I had a ten minute conversation on this topic one day. Alexis decided that it “depends on what you are eating”. Kimmy agreed. They stated that if you really liked the food you should take small bites to prolong the enjoyment. In another scenario, two children discussed how to eat stale candy that had hardened without hurting one’s teeth.

Leah opened a Sugar Daddies candy and started chewing it and said, “oh, it’s hard.” Sammie told her, “you got to suck on it.” Leah said, “my mom says you have to be careful when you eat Sugar Daddies cause if they are hard they can break your teeth.” Tyler added that “if Sugar Daddies are out too long they get hard and become hard to chew, but if you hold it in your mouth for a few minutes then you can chew it”. This led to a discussion of which candies become hard when stale and how to soften them so that they can still be eaten. For the children, these are practical matters relevant for afterschool snack time. The conversations they shared about eating techniques served to perpetuate peer cultural knowledge and practices.

**Food in Stories**

References to food and eating also came up in creative storytelling made-up by the kids and in books and songs written for children. Candy was the dominant theme in two stories written by fourth graders at Soto. Trinity’s story was written for fun one afternoon. It was a nonsensical story. She let me
read it. The plot was simple. She was with her friends and they were eating candy. At the end of the story the characters “ate, and they ate and they ate and it was sooo delicious.” In another example, the fourth graders at Soto wrote speeches for a speech contest that a local business sponsored. Kiara and Trinity worked on their speeches together one week during the fall at Soto. Kiara’s speech was titled Utopia. In her speech she defined what Utopia was, a perfect place to be. Her idea of utopia was basically like the Candyland game. It was filled with candy. There would be no violence and everyone would get along. The houses would be made of gingerbread, furniture would be made of gum drops, cars would be made of Skittles, glass would be made of crystal sugar. Her utopia was candy, a cross between candy land and Hanzel and Gretel’s story. If you were bad or mean to someone then you would be kicked out and everyday there would be a party. If you were bad and kicked out you would be sent to a dungeon and couldn’t go to the party.

At Soto Kimmy and Alexis often played together. One of their pastimes was drawing comics. The theme of their comics was usually good guys versus bad guys. Superheroes and ninjas were often their preferred characters. On one occasion the main character was a soldier. The soldier looked tired and hungry and the caption the girls wrote stated that he was starving and needed food. Alexis added a hamburger, a cup of soda, ice cream, apples and carrots to the comic in thought bubbles to show that the character was thinking about food. Kimmy then explained that since he was starving he would turn into a werewolf, an alien werewolf. I asked why he would turn into a werewolf if he was starving and she said it was “because he drank a potion” that she had drawn a glass in one of the thought bubbles. She explained that because he was thirsty he drank from it. His hunger made him do something dangerous according to the girls.

The children also read published books in which food played a pivotal part in the story. At Soto the program had a small library of donated books that the children could read during the homework or quiet activity times. I often read books with the children. Amanda, a first grader, asked me to read A Mouse Went Out to Get a Snack with two other younger girls. As I read about the mouse eating they cheered “yummy” at the illustrations of food in the book. The girls talked about how they would like to
eat the food and Amanda commented while I was reading that “he is the hungriest mouse in the world.”

On another day during homework time Tyler read a book to me titled, *Zach’s Lunch*. In the book the main character Zach goes to a diner for lunch instead of having his boring ham and cheese sandwich at home that his mother made for him. He goes to a diner named Zach’s Place and orders all kinds of food. He orders so much that it becomes mountains of food. It began with a huge hamburger with a pound of pickles and more and more food is added. By the end of the story the restaurant is overflowing with desserts. Zach ends up on a mountain of vanilla ice cream and a hill of chocolate. Tyler asked me, “could you eat all of that food?” I said no. He said he didn’t know if he could eat all of it either. He said he could eat a pound of pickles. I asked him if he would like to eat a pound of ice cream and he said yes with enthusiasm. He said he’d even like to slide on it like Zach did in the story. He said “the ice cream mountain would be cold and sticky, but it would be fun.”

**Food in Games and Songs**

Allusions to food also appeared in chants and hand games that they children played with me. While the YMCA instructed them to play formal games during structured play times, during free play times the children often devised their own versions of games or broke into song while waiting. The spontaneous games were interesting for their creativity. References to foods, especially candy weaved into the games they played. For the older girls at Soto, Four Squares was a common game. A foursquare game was painted on the basketball court, and pick-up games often occurred during free play. There were various versions of Four Squares. One in particular was called “Peanut Butter Skittles.” In this version the girls jumped on the edges of the Four Squares lines and then ran to the middle when the ball was bounced to get an opponent out. I had never heard of this game, but all the third through fifth grade girls knew it. Skittles candies were also references in a hand game based on hitting the other person’s hand in a “high five” before the hand is pulled away. If the challenger missed slapping the hand he or she was considered “out”. Trinity at Soto spontaneously started playing the high five game with Michael as I
watched. She said, “Up high, down low, in the middle you get Skittles.” Michael then said “down low, with the motion, you get lotion” for a second version with his hand moving around to make the hi five game harder. Michael and I then started to do a call and respond that he started. “Hey”, “ho”, “hey-hey-hey”, “ho-ho-ho” with me repeating each part. We loudly whispered it so as to not get in trouble while standing in line.

While many of the songs and games at Soto seemed to be made-up by children, the songs and games at Middlewood were generally more formal and initiated by the staff. During summer camp at Middlewood, we attended fieldtrips on Fridays. The children were transported on a repurposed school bus driven by a YMCA staff member. To occupy the children, the counselors routinely led group singing. All of the staff and children seemed to know the camp songs and I quickly learned the words and gestures in order to join in.

One song about Tarzan was a call and response song in which a leader began and the group responded.

“Tarzan”

Leader: Tarzan (while beating chest with his fists)
Group Response: Tarzan
Leader: Swinging on a rubber band (swing arms)
Group Response: Swinging on a rubber band
Leader: Tarzan (while beating chest with his fists)
Group Response: Tarzan
Leader: Got hit by a frying pan
Group Response: Got hit by a frying pan
Leader: Oww, that hurts
Group Response: Oww, that hurts
Leader: Now Tarzan has a tan
Group Response: Now Tarzan has a tan
Leader: And I hope it don’t peel
Group Response: And I hope it don’t peel
Leader: Like a banana (pretend to peel a banana)
Group Response: Like a banana
Leader: Jane
Group Response: Jane
Leader: Speeding on a bullet train
Group Response: Speeding on a bullet train
Leader: Jane
Group Response: Jane
Leader: Got hit by an air-plane
Group Response: Got hit by an air-plane
Leader: Ouch that hurts
Group Response: Ouch that hurts
Leader: Now Jane has a pain (touch side)
Group Response: Now Jane has a pain
Leader: And Tarzan has a tan
Group Response: And Tarzan has a tan
Leader: And I hope it don’t peel
Group Response: And I hope it don’t peel
Leader: Like a banana (pretend to peel a banana)
Group Response: Like a banana
Leader: Cheetah
Group Response: Cheetah
Leader: Booping to da beat-a (dance in place)
Group Response: Booping to da beat-a
Leader: Cheetah
Group Response: Cheetah
Leader: Got eaten by an amoeba
Group Response: Got eaten by an amoeba
Leader: Now Cheetah is velveeta
Group Response: Now Cheetah is velveeta
Leader: And Jane has a pain (touch side)
Group response: And Jane has a pain
Leader: And Tarzan has a tan
Group Response: And Tarzan has a tan
Leader: And I hope it don’t peel
Group Response: And I hope it don’t peel
Leader: Like- a- bananaaaa
Group Response: Like- a- bananaaaa!

Another popular camp song included a line about candy.

Leader: Reese’s peanut butter cup
Group Response: Reese’s peanut butter cup
Leader: We sing this song to pump us up
Group Response: We sing this song to pump us up
Leader: Wham bam choo choo train
Group Response: Wham bam choo choo train
Leader: Come on (insert name of selected person), do your thing
Group response: Come on (insert name of selected person), do your thing
Person: I can’t

Group Response: why not?

Person: I can’t

Group Response: why not?

Person: I just can’t

Group Response: why not?

Person: My back is too sore (touch back)

The sun’s too hot (touch forehead)

My booty shakes from the left to the right (shake hips left and right)

Group Response: To the left, to the right

To the left, to the right

Left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right

Food Play

The students were not only observed talking about food; they also played with food. Food play involved individuals playing with snack items and wrappers, groups using food during interactions and staff members using food to entertain the students. During snack time, foods and wrappers became toys and games. Sometimes the food was used in made-up play, such as when a ten year old girl held a pear by the stem with one hand and made jabbing motions with one fist, while saying “look, I’m a boxer.” Others around her followed suit. Throwing fruit and bags of crackers was common, as was using the plastic wrappers to make sound effects for the entertainment of peers. For example, the boys at Middlewood often threw oranges at each other, punched the oranges in the air, and dropped them on the floor, as if they were balls. They also purposely missed a toss of an apple core and snack wrapper into a trash bin to provide a reason for friends to laugh. Even though the students were often reprimanded for playing with snacks and making a mess, the staff also used snacks and candy to entertain the students. At both sites
staff often brought in their own food and ate it during snack time. Their candy, cookies, and chips were sometimes used as prizes for impromptu games to occupy the children between activities. Staff sometimes played with food themselves, like when two staff members at Middlewood, competed to see who could toss and catch the most popcorn in their mouths.

The children often created games with food in play. For instance, while sitting with Sammie and Tyler, she told me she was eating Nerd Soup. I looked into the open carton of regular milk and saw a pink liquid. She stirred the milk into which she had poured a small carton of strawberry Nerd candies. Sammie then asked Tyler for his purple Nerds to add to the soup. She ate her soup with a spoon. I asked if it tasted good and she replied, “yeah!” I then asked whose idea it was to make Nerd Soup. She pointed to him and he pointed to her. She said, “well, it was my idea but he named it. He came up with the name”.

On another occasion during snack time at Soto Tyler began playing with a left over straw. He used it as a knife and fake stabbed people with it. He hid it between his fingers and then asked people if they wanted to shake hands. The other children got poked with the straw. Then he began acting like a ninja with the straw. It became a game for the amusement of his friend, Sammie, who watched his antics. After several minutes of his entertainment as we laughed, she turned to me and said, “I don’t know why we became friends, but we’ve been friends for a long time. He’s funny so we stayed friends.”

Food play often ventured in to gross and untidy territory. Manipulating food and making a mess with food was seen as entertaining. Maya, a Soto kindergarten girl, was drinking chocolate milk and dunking her cookie in the milk. She completely opened the square top of a milk carton and dropped the cookie in the container. The cookie was lost, and that became amusing to other children sitting close to her at the kindergarten through second grade table. She said, “oh, I dropped my cookie” and the four children around her laughed. She said, “gross, gross.” After a few attempts she fished out her cookie pieces. Soon this became a game of mimicking. Another girl, Katrina, opened her milk container the same way and dunked her cookie and dropped it in. Then Sydney and Amanda did the same thing. Then Maya proceed to put her entire hand in the milk container to retrieve a piece of cookie. Milk spilt over the table. Milk covered her face and hands. She made a mess. The other children made messes too although Maya’s
was the biggest. The mess and “accidentally” dropping the cookie became a source of great amusement and laughter. As this scenario demonstrates, food play was not centered on eating the snacks. It centered on using them in creative ways to entertain others.

**Grossing Each Other Out**

Acting ‘gross’ was perhaps best exemplified by the boys. They purposely made food gross by opening their mouths to show friends partly masticated food. While sitting at a table during snack time with a group of third grade boys at Soto, the day’s snack, a carton of milk and chocolate chip cookie, was played with for fun. Towards the end of snack time they began doing things such as purposely dripping milk from their mouths while laughing and dunking the cookie into the milk and dripping milk on the table. I commented that the milk dribbling from James’s mouth looked like slobber and John added “like diarrhea.” The boys picked up on this word and repeated it several times while I added “ooohhhhh, gross” In response. James then said he had “hot cheese,” Malik explained to me that it was a fart. I told them they were “stinky” and laughed. James said he was doing a “bootie squeeze” and I repeated the words “bootie squeeze” questioning the meaning, and they laughed harder. Dante asked me if I “eat bacon”, when I replied yes he said “you eat bacon” in an exaggerated voice and laughed. As it happened, the word bacon had become code for passing gas. The hijinks at my expense continued until snack time ended.

This amusing and irreverent episode demonstrates the ways in which food was manipulated to entertain by purposely breaking the rules of adult social propriety. The boys seemed to enjoy the opportunity to break norms and to refer to impolite bodily functions such as passing gas. The boys used food terms, *hot cheese and bacon*, which were derivations of the phrase “cutting the cheese” to provide a code for flatulence and in using the terms they spontaneously created a child vernacular that is distinct from the common or clinical terms used by adults. They also enjoyed using ambiguous terms with me and making a joke, while letting me in on the joke since I did not pass judgment and laughed with them.
Breaking rules of social convention did not only involve “grossing each other out.” It also involved breaking the rules of etiquette in regard to kinds and amounts of food consumed. The concept of contamination affected what the children ate and prohibitions on eating foods considered contaminated. For example, food that fell to the floor was contaminated and eating it off the floor was looked down on. Nonetheless children did eat food off the floor. I observed children eating Sourpatch candies, gum balls, popcorn, and chips that had fallen on the floor. For example, Bridgette was eating popcorn and just as she was putting a piece in her mouth Michael asked her for a piece. She said “it is in my mouth now”, and pretended like she would take it out and hand it to him and laughed. She brushed another kernel off the table onto the floor and he made a face, she smiled and said “five second rule, you can eat it.” Lexi then said, “Give it to me; I would eat it without blowing it off. You want to see?” I laughed and said yeah. She did it-she ate a kernel from the floor. I asked her if it tasted better and she said yeah. The other children laughed.

**Feats of Digestive Strength**

Breaking rules of food etiquette also involved eating large amounts of food. Boys, especially, described the massive amounts of food they could consume. One particular verbal competition involved three fifth grade boys at Middlewood, Neil, Mike and George, who described their ability to eat increasing amounts of pizza, chips and hot dogs depending on the magnitude of the previous boy’s feat. Boasting about the amount one could eat was not only used by the boys. Kimmy, a petite fourth grade girl who often played with sports with the boys’ group, informed her table during snack time one day that she had gone to a pizza party during school and that she had eaten five pieces of pizza. I asked her what kind and she said that she had cheese and pepperoni pizza. She said she had eaten seven pieces of pizza before. Caleb, who was sitting next to her, was quite impressed. They began to compare notes on who had eaten the most food. Kimmy’s boast earned her status with Caleb based on male food norms of eating large amounts of food.
Competition also erupted during summer camp over dares to eat unappealing foods, especially “gross” food combinations with condiments. A group of boys and girls at Middlewood conversed about weird food combinations such as mac and cheese and chocolate syrup, and eating chocolate and hot sauce. They talked about gross food combinations and throwing-up and laughed while they were eating lunch one day at summer camp. Children who declared they had previously or would eat gross foods gained attention as other children were pulled into the discussion.

For example, John, a third grade boy, walked up to me and said, “Miss Stephanie, I dare you to drink a whole jar of hot sauce.” I said no, I don’t want to do that. I remarked that it would taste gross. He said no, I countered that a whole jar would. I asked him if he could drink a whole jar of hot sauce and he said that he had done this. I asked him when. He said when he was five. I asked him if “he was for real.” He said yes. I asked him again if he really did it. He nodded. Then Chris added that he had drunk cologne when he was two years old. To this, the table of children exclaimed “uhhhhh.” Then John added “when I was a baby I’d eat anything”. Chris said he ate dirt. Chris then said I’d eat anything. To this they agreed that little children eat anything.

Food contamination and breaches of etiquette could also be used as a form of ridicule. In one case two girls that often bickered were sitting at a table with other girls during lunch at Middlewood summer camp. Trina had a chocolate pudding cup in her lunch bag. She didn't have a spoon to eat her pudding with so she used her finger. Justine watched her and then stated that Trina “is sucking” her finger and “it is gross”. Then she remarked she had “lost my appetite” and was done eating. Granted, it was the end of the meal and Justine had finished eating her food; however, as she cleaned up her stuff and she said, “that was disgusting. I don't suck my fingers. I wash my hands.” The girls had an on-going tension and Joy used the opportunity to ridicule Trina in front of the entire lunch table. Trina seemed embarrassed and explained to the table that she didn’t have a spoon after Justine walked away.
Eating Competitions

Eating contests were used as entertainment during the summer camp at Middlewood. Each week, the camp’s activities were organized around a theme and culminated in a fieldtrip on Fridays. One week the theme was food. During this time children in each group completed arts and crafts, and created and performed a skit about healthy food. The fourth through fifth grade group decided to design a skit about superhero healthy foods that helped children to be strong and healthy. For the skit they drew posters of fruits and vegetables fighting junk food like pizza and soda. The fieldtrip was a special lunch at CeeCee’s Pizza, which offers an all you can eat pizza buffet. The restaurant caters to families and offers an all-you-can eat buffet. Next to the dining room there was a game area with arcade games and a jungle gym. Large screen televisions hung on the walls played children’s television shows from the Nickelodeon channel. At the restaurant, the children were divided into small groups and were given a tour of the kitchen with a demonstration of employees baking pizzas. The children were also allowed to make their own small pizzas with the ingredients of their choice. In addition to the small size personal pizza, the children were allowed to eat any of the items on the restaurant’s buffet. The buffet included a salad bar, baked lasagna, several kinds of pizza and sweet dessert pizzas with apple and cinnamon and chocolate flavoring. The children were also allowed to drink soda from the soda dispenser. The activities occurred over the course of the two and half hour long visit at the restaurant.

The children seemed to really enjoy the fieldtrip and this was a recurring activity that the older age group had been done for several previous years. Many of the children attended the summer camp each year, and anticipated their visit to CeCe’s Pizza. The staff and the children anticipated the pizza feast and throughout the week they talked about eating pizza and how much pizza they would eat. Among the male staff members and boys, there was quite a bit of boasting about how much pizza would be consumed on Friday. The previous year the staff members had held a pizza eating contest. The winner had eaten seventeen slices of pizza. Two staff members in particular and several of the boys bragged about how much pizza they would eat and who would win the contest. At the restaurant, the contest began and it was
a source of great entertainment for the whole group. Everyone sat and stood around the contestants cheering them on. After several slices, two of the boys stopped eating and the competition continued between Juan, an emerging fifth grader and Mitch and Rick, two young adult staff members. Juan ate twelve pieces, Rick stopped at seventeen and Mitch won by eating a total of twenty slices. The experience caused stomach discomfort for all involved, yet they were the center of attention and when we returned to the site from the restaurant, they were able to boast about being in the contest and the story of the pizza contest soon spread through the whole camp.

The boys were not the only ones to overeat pizza, several girls later complained to me about their stomach hurting from eating too much pizza that afternoon. The feats of digestive strength did not end. Later in the afternoon there was a pudding pie eating contest between all of the age groups. Each age group provided a contestant who raced to quickly consume pudding from four pudding cups dispensed on a paper plate. The trick was that hands and utensils could not be used. As it turned out, none of the children and staff from the fourth and fifth grade group would volunteer. Somehow I was elected to represent the group. I agreed and though I did not win the contest, I did gain valuable prestige as a competitive eater. We joked and laughed about the sight of me with pudding all over my face for several weeks after.

Social Rules of Food Exchange

Even though the rules of the program discouraged the students from trading snacks and asking other children for food, snack foods, candy and other items of social currency were often traded, shared and given away. Food exchanges were controlled by social rules based on the intrinsic value of the item, and the social relationship between trade partners. As has been stated previously, snacks provided by the YMCA were considered less valuable than branded snacks and candy. Giving away the plentiful ‘Y snacks’ was easily done without concern for future reciprocity. For example, one afternoon Emily didn’t want her unopened carton of milk, so she asked the group at her table if anyone wanted the milk by lifting
it up in the air and saying loudly, “who wants this?” No one responded and she asked me and I replied “no, thank you.” Then Sammie who was sitting a little ways down the table raised her hand and said that she wanted it so Emily gave her the chocolate milk.

In fact, on a daily basis there were left overs of snacks at Soto and Middlewood that children could pick up at the end of the day for a late afternoon snack.

![Figure 12. Left over snacks at Soto site](image)

The situation was different when more valuable items were involved. Candy, snacks brought from home and branded snacks held higher value and so the arithmetic of exchange became more complex when sharing, trading and giving away these items. A kind of mental accounting took place in which the value of one item and the proffered amount were compared against another. For example, Cheetos were readily exchanged with Airheads candy; however, the generic cookies provided by the YMCA could not equal the value of Cheetos. Beyond the exchange value of the items themselves, which was also influenced by individual taste preferences, the relationship of the exchange partners also mattered.

Friendship status affected snack and candy exchange. Sharing was a way of showing friendship. Friends were more likely to share first with a close friend then someone in their peer group. Close friends either didn’t have to ask for a piece, or if they did ask it was well tolerated. Close friends were routinely
observed sharing boxes of candy and bags of chips. Food was consumed while talking, doing homework, sharing an activity or just hanging out. One afternoon at Soto, I had talked with Tyler and Sammie about a conflict they had with their friend, Aliyah. Leah sat with them. She had begun hanging out with the pair when they had an argument with Aliyah. After the conversation about Aliyah waned, Tyler said to me “I have a surprise for you close your eyes.” I closed and covered my eyes with my hand. Then I opened my eyes to see a small candy package of three Whoppers candy in front of me on the table. I said, “thank you, that is very nice. Do you mind if I share?” He agreed. I shared one with Sammie and I gave one to Leah, and I ate one. He also gave Sammie a small package of chocolate covered Keebler graham cracker cookies. She gave me one and I ate it. Then Tyler removed a 2-pack of Starburst candies from his book bag and shared one of the individually wrapped Starburst with Sammie. Then he took out a lollipop and a Jolly Rancher candy and asked her which one she wanted. He gave Sammie the Jolly Rancher candy. Leah then said,” I didn’t get any.” He gave her a lollipop. While the children did not always have a bag of candy to distribute like Tyler did on this day, the children routinely had candy and gum that appeared from book bags and pockets to share while hanging out with friends.

**Equity in Food Exchange: Reciprocity**

A defining feature of the exchanges even among friends was the issue of equity and reciprocity. Breaking apart candy pieces in half or counting out pieces of popcorn for equal distribution were often observed. Due to the nature of their relationship and frequency of contacts, friends that played together every day had at their disposal multiple ways to share objects and experiences. They shared snacks toys, books, and other kinds of intangible things. Friends shared past experiences, memories, inside jokes, play and common interests such as Kimmy and Alexis who shared their drawing projects, or Tyler, Sammie and Aliyah made up jokes and games. They provided each other psychological and social support. As Sam, a fourth grade boy at Middlewood put it when describing his friend, Cole, and why they shared things, “I don’t know, he’s my friend and we hang-out so I share my snacks with him. He usually brings a
ball and DS and we play with them almost every day.” The physical and intangible exchanges allowed for a more flexible notion of equality in their relationship. However, equality in friendships was valued and keeping friends on equal standing was important for maintaining the relationship. Maintaining a sense of fairness underscored exchanges of favors and snacks. I observed Leah doing Lexi’s math homework on several occasions during homework time at Soto. One day I asked Lexi why she didn’t do her own homework. Lexi explained that she usually did but some days just didn’t want to do it. Leah was willing to help her and in exchange Lexi gave her snacks. On that day Lexi shared a ziplock bag of Pops cereal. When I asked her why she needed to give her friend something, she responded that “it keeps things fair.” In the following episode the concept of fairness is also highlighted when the rules of exchange are broken between two friends.

During homework time one fall afternoon at Soto, Kimmy and Alexis were sitting together doing their respective homework assignments. Alexis removed a snack size bag of Doritos chips from her backpack and began eating. She gave Kimmy a few pieces. After several minutes, Kimmy attempted to sneak out another chip without asking permission. Alexis became upset and called to me asking that I come to their table. She told me what had happened and we began discussing the facts of the case. Alexis then said, “we are going to court over Kimmy begging for Doritos.” This raised the attention of Leah, Lexi, and Kiara who joined the discussion. The girls began planning out roles for each person. Alexis was the plaintiff, Kimmy the defendant, and Kiara was a witness, Trinity and Lexi served as bailiffs. The girls appointed me as judge. The girls mimicked the theater of TV courtroom dramas by repeating the pledge to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God.” Then Alexis and Kimmy presented their cases to the group. Alexis stated that Kimmy should have asked for more chips and should have said please. Kimmy’s defense rested on the quality of their close relationship. She made the distinction between a close, long-term friend, or BFF (best friend forever), and a new friend. Kimmy considered herself to be a close friend of Alexis. She stated that earlier Sammie had also begged for chips, still Kimmy and Alexis had been best friends for years and Sammie had been a friend for only one year. Kimmy also stated that her mom would not buy chips to bring as snacks when Alexis stated that she
always shared her snacks and candy with Kimmy. Kimmy stated that she sometimes brought money to buy bring extra snacks from the vending machine and shared other things with her friend like her older brother’s DS video game. I asked what is the difference between sharing a DS and food. Kimmy explained that she couldn’t often bring the DS to school and besides it wasn’t food, which is something they share all the time. The exclusivity of the DS made it more valuable.

The “Doritos court case” was an example of the balance friends attempt to maintain in their relationships. In effect, Kimmy and Alexis had become long-standing trade partners and when the etiquette of the trading was breached. Alexis felt slighted even though the pretend court session was played out in jest. This was not a serious altercation between friends, rather a means to air frustration in a playful way. This scenario also raises a qualitative measure of friendship. Friendships take time to develop and deepen. They are active relationships and children use sharing as a means of interaction and to symbolize their connection.

**Sharing vs. Begging**

The previous example also highlights distinctions made between types of friends. Children were more forgiving of requests from close friends then from peripheral peers. When children who were not part of a friendship group asked for candy or other items, it was often labeled as “begging” and children tried to resist their advances. The distinction between sharing and begging was evident in an episode at Soto. While I was sitting with a group of fourth and fifth graders, Bridgette took out a packaged cupcake from her book bag. Imani asked her for a "little piece." Bridgette replied, "I can't eat my cupcake in peace." I commented that it was a pink cupcake to which Michael added, “I don't care if it is pink, I love cupcakes.” She gave both a piece. Imani whined, “he got a bigger piece”. Bridgette responded with "so what?” Imani asked for another "tiny piece." Bridgette said, “what is your problem? Let me eat my food” to her. She then turned to me and said, “see what I have to go through.” The cupcake was gone and Lexi walked up to the group and gave us a sad face because she didn't get any. Bridgette then asked Michael,
“remember Reana”? I asked her about Reana. Bridgette told me that Reana was a girl who used to attend the program. She explained that they would share food with Reana, but if they asked her for something she wouldn't share. They said she was “spoiled cause if she had a green day (a reference to a classroom discipline technique. A green day meant the student had not misbehaved and performed well) her parents took her to Chuckie E. Cheese” as a reward. In this scene Bridgette shared with Michael and Imani, yet became annoyed when Imani complained about her piece being smaller than Michel’s. Bridgette and Michael were friends and I observed them sharing snacks back and forth. Bridgette was friends with Imani and Lexi, but these two girls did not often have extra snacks to share, and repeatedly asked Bridgette “for some.” By mentioning Reana, the girl who did not shared, Bridgette reminded the others of their social obligations to share and not be judged as stingy.

“Begging” was also used to describe friends who repeatedly asked for candy and snacks without providing something in exchange. Leah’s experience as a periphery member of the girl group at Soto also exemplifies the distinction between sharing and begging. If Leah’s begging is described as “tolerated theft” as Shiefenhovel (2014) calls it, then her out-position means that she was not privy to exchanges with friends. Though she made attempts to form close alliances, she never seemed to fully manage a close friend. She was usually given a piece of candy or a small handful of popcorn by one of the girls, although she had to ask for it. To make matters more difficult, her parents did not give her money for the vending machine, or send extra snacks with her to school. If the other children were eating snacks brought from home she had to depend on the generosity of another child in order to participate.

Leah’s position on the sidelines allowed her to have tentative access to exchanges. She made continual attempts to fit in and wanted to make friends. Her experience is contrasted with Holly at Middlewood. Holly did not fit in with the other girls. She played sports with the boys every day and did not talk to the girls. One day during snack time, Annmarie, a fourth grade leader of the girls’ group, removed a snack size bag of Cheetos from her back pack. Annmarie raised it up in the air, and said the common refrain, “who wants these”? Immediately Holly waved her hand a few feet away from Annmarie. Instead of tossing the bag to Holly, Annmarie turned to a close friend and passed the bag to her. Holly
then said, “but I want them.” To this Annmarie tartly replied, “no, you can’t have them. They are not for you.” Holly acted upset. She made a sad face and walked away from the group of girls sitting on the floor. Holly returned to the group of boys she usually hung-out with. This was Holly’s problem. She could not ask for a favor from one of the girls without having social capital to draw from. Her request was negatively viewed because she was not part of the group, nor did she attempt to be part of the group.

**Exceptions to Exchange: Special Needs Children**

The example of two autistic children further demonstrates how exchanges and objects were part of social interactions. Anna at Middlewood enjoyed nature and was often found looking for bugs in the grass by herself during free play. Jimmy from Soto really enjoyed drawing. Instead of participating in indoor activities, he was allowed to sit and draw pictures with markers in his notebook. The staff displayed great patience and caring with both of these children. I observed Ms. Martha announced to the children, “don’t follow what Jimmy does, he is the exception” in reference to standing up and talking out loud when they are supposed to be quiet. The other children understood they were different and treated them accordingly. On my first day at both of the sites, several children approached me and informed me that Anna and Jimmy were different, and in fact, a kindergartener at Soto told me that I needed to be “nice to him ‘cause he can’t help it.” I assured her that I would. I often observed the children leading Anna or Jimmy by the arm and helping them keep up in the line when groups moved to different rooms and spaces. Both children also enjoyed playing chase and they were often able to start an impromptu game of chase tag by running up to a child tagging them with a quick touch of the hand and running away. Jimmy and Anna often played chase with the younger children, even though both were in the oldest groups. The special needs children were excluded from the normal back and forth trading of pencils, candy, gum and toys that the other children engaged in. The belongings of these two children were considered off-limits. Both children routinely brought extra snacks from home in their lunch bags. The snacks would have been appealing to the other children. On one day, while I was sitting with Jimmy, onto the cafeteria
table he laid out a peanut butter sandwich cut in half, a bag of pretzels, a Little Debbie snack cake, a box of raisins, a water bottle and a single pack of Sweet Tarts [2-3 sweet-sour candy in a pack] from his lunch bag. As usual he slowly nibbled on the snacks, eating a little of this or that. Kimmy walked over to say hi to us and picked up Jimmy’s candy from the table. She put it back down almost immediately. While the children didn’t trade with Anna or Jimmy, they also did not take advantage of them either by taking their snacks. There was an understanding that trading with them would not be fair. This would not have been tolerated by the staff. It also would have gone against an expectation of fairness in social exchanges, and signified their peripheral status at the edge of the peer group. Exchanges were used to maintain the group, and fairness played a part in the balance of exchange.

**Gaining Status through Sharing**

In comparison to requesting snacks in exchanges, sharing snacks and candy was a means to gain favor with other children, especially children of a higher status. This tactic was used successfully in several observed instances. In one case, Bridgette was eating Halloween candy and Michael started asking her for some. “I want some. I want one.” She gave him some candy. Michael then said, “I give you so much candy and you won’t give me more.” Bridgette replied “I gave you three of them.” He retorted, “only three of them. I give you so much, that’s not fair. Miss Stephanie make her give me more.” I said “that’s between you two.” Bridgette finally said, “no, this is all I have.” At this Taylor, a third grader, interjected, “I have some.” She took out a bag of gummy lifesavers candy, two Hersey’s kisses and one chocolate foil wrapped eyeball from her bag. Michael said “oh, give me, I want it, I want it.” Bridgette said, “no, only if you meet my expectations and follow her rules do you get candy.” Then Taylor started playing a game that drew the attention of Michael and Amy. She took out a Halloween gummy candy [the candies were in the shapes of a moon, cat, and witch) held it in her hand so they couldn’t see it and said “guess what kind it is.” She quickly placed it in front of them in the air and then pulled it away quickly so they could not touch it or see it carefully. They guessed, “moon, cat…” She would say yes or no. If they
got it right they could have the candy. She went through this process with three or four pieces of the candy. Through all of this Michael kept asking for a green candy. “Give me a green one.” Bridgette told him no. Then Taylor told him “no, you have to guess and follow the rules.” He played along. After that she played a math game with a Hershey’s kiss as the prize. She gave the group math problems and whoever figured out the problem got the candy. Bridgette got the chocolate eyeball. Michael and Amy each won a chocolate candy. The interesting aspects of this scene was the social dynamics of the players. Taylor was a quiet loner who rarely was included in the other children’s games, much less as the center of attention. Bridgette, Michael and Amy were all older and more popular than Taylor. They didn’t hang-out with her, and rarely spoke to her. Yet on this day Taylor was part of their group, at least for a little while.

In another scenario, George brought an entire package of chocolate chip and M&M candy cookies to Middlewood during summer camp. At the end of lunch, he began handing out cookies to all of the children in the fourth through fifth grade group. I walked by and smiled at him and he asked me if I wanted a cookie, and I said sure, so he gave me a cookie. We introduced ourselves and I thanked him. As I was eating my cookie, David, the site director, walked by and I commented that “George is popular today” as I watched children line up in front of him to receive a cookie. He replied, “yeah, everybody wants cookies, huh”? While I continued to stand there, a boy walked up to George and said hi. The boy sitting next to George said, "he just wants a cookie." The boy asked George for a cookie and received one.

Sharing snacks and candy was used to gain attention by both children in these examples.

Cooperation

Another way that friends worked together to share snacks was by pooling money in order to purchase items from the vending machines. One child may not have enough money to purchase a snack item, so he/she would often “go in together” with a friend. They pooled their money in order to afford a snack that they both decided on and shared equally, or one would buy a soda while another bought a snack which they shared. The negotiations between Amari and Renee at Middlewood were “what are you
gonna get?” “I don’t know. Get what you like.” “We both like Doritos, let’s get that.” This tactic was also performed by a small group in order to afford a few items such as a soda, chips and candy purchase from the vending machine. After coming to a consensus for the purchase, they equally divided up the booty. Children also cooperated in order to have access to the vending machines by asking for permission from staff together and serving as a “buddy” to accompany a friend.

On one occasion, Tim, a fourth grader, had money for the vending machine; however, the Middlewood staff member told him that he needed a “buddy” to go to the other room where the machine was located. Tim asked if Brian, a fellow fourth grader, would go with him. He said “yeah, but.... He didn't finish the sentence and seemed to imply that that he would go if Tim shared with him or bought him something. They went to the snack machine and the soda machine. Later I saw Tim drinking a diet coke, and Brian was eating something out of his pocket after lunch. I asked him if they were sunflower seeds. He said no, and he pulled the bag out of his pocket and it was trail mix that Tim had bought him from the vending machine. Tim bought it specifically for Brian for serving as a “buddy”. I asked him if he bought it and he said, "well sort of." I asked if Tim had purchased it for him, and he said yeah. I said "oh, that's nice." He hesitated to tell me because he was afraid that he would get in trouble. A few minutes later he walked by and offered me a peanut. I declined telling him that I didn't like peanuts. Then he said maybe you want... and he pulled out another peanut from the bag, he kept digging in the bag. Then he took out a M&M candy, and said “do you want a M&M” and I said yeah and he ate one at the same time. At Soto I observed Trinity give a dollar bill to Kiara. They then asked Ms. Monique if they could get something out of the vending machine. She consented. As they were walking to the teacher’s lounge, Alyssa asked if she could go as well in order to pop a bag of popcorn in the microwave. Kiara purchased a bottle of Pepsi with the dollar from Trinity, and she purchased a package of chocolate cupcakes. All three girls returned to the table and shared the food and soda amongst themselves.

The cooperation benefited all of those involved. They were able to eat snacks and do so together. In this sense sharing snacks and purchasing snacks from the vending machine was something the children could do together. Snack time was a social event for the children. Their commensal daily rituals were fun
because they were eating and playing and talking with peers. These daily experiences reinforced their social connections and allowed the children to express what it meant to be a child. From the kinds of foods to the ways they talked about food, the children used food to express child culture and their position within the peer group. As we have seen, even trading candy and snacks reflected the norms of the group and their social ranking of individual children within the group. Food exchanges are not simple trades or gifts. Tactually reflect complex rules engrained in children’s culture.

**Summation**

In the above section, I describe the findings from participant observation concerning children’s social networks and interactions. The children are grouped within the afterschool site based on grade level. Within these peer groups they further self-divide by gender. Children in this study displayed gendered behavior. For example, boys more often played sports and demonstrated aggressive or competitive behavior with peers. Girls tended to bring more objects to play with and share with friends. Girls were also more cooperative in their interactions. During the fieldwork I identified patterns of social organization and determined that mostly a loose structure formed comprised of dyads or triads of close friends grouped together in peer groups. The peer groups were generally led by informal leaders who were more popular children who were friendly with all in the peer group and exerted influence over the group’s activities. Within friendship sub-groups and peer groups, children routinely exchanged objects like snacks, candy, pencils, toys, paper and video games. The exchanges of goods and of social support and shared experiences served as mechanisms to express friendship. The children took special care to maintain equal status with friends by ensuring that their exchanges were equal in value and frequency. Food, in particular kids’ food or snack foods, played a particular role in the afterschool sites. Daily snack time involved the consumption of snacks and became a routine way to socialize with peers. The children shared, traded and bartered snacks that the program staff provided and snacks brought from home or purchased in vending machines. Children not only ate the snacks, they also used the snacks to play with
as entertainment of friends. The topic of food also entered conversations, songs they children sang, and books they read. The children seemed to enjoy talking about foods and using boasts about what they have eaten to impress friends.
CHAPTER FIVE

Children’s Perception of Healthy Foods and Kids’ Foods

The rules children follow about eating come from multiple sources. Of course much of what children consume is based on access including affordability of food, nevertheless much of food choice stems from ideas of what children should eat. Tactic messages come from parents, media, schools and children’s peers. Some considerations of children’s food choices may be based on the perceived health needs of children and others reflect assumptions of taste preferences. The result is a domain comprised of children’ foods and foods deemed appropriate for children to eat by adults and by children themselves. In the previous chapter accounts of food consumption by children show how children use kids’ food in peer interactions. The foods children eat during afterschool programs reflect the notion of children’ foods as snack foods and candy. This was observed during fieldwork and is exemplified in two scenarios.

In one scenario, I sat with Taylor at a long cafeteria table as she showed me her shoe box Diorama. The interior was decorated with colored paper dinosaurs. Propped inside next to a dinosaur was a watermelon Airhead candy. I asked if that was what her dinosaurs ate and she replied that “dinosaurs eat meat and children eat that” (pointing to the candy). Candy was clearly described as being part of the kids’ food domain. Snack foods were also clearly part of the category as well. What other kinds of foods do children believe to be a part of their dietary repertoire and how does this reflect their ideas of what adults eat as a comparison, and considerations about the healthful qualities of foods? These questions were explored in group interviews with the children.
Findings of the Group Interviews

These questions were addressed in a series of group interviews with a subgroup of forty-three children from each of the two sites where fieldwork was conducted. The follow-up group interviews were conducted in the latter half of the fieldwork time frame. The group interviews were conducted during the summer of 2011 at Middlewood and during the spring of 2012 at Soto. In this sample, one child consented but was unable to participate due to extended absences from the Middlewood site. The semi-structured group discussions were supplemented with the Graffiti Wall technique. The group discussions focused on perceptions of kid foods versus adult foods, healthy foods and motivations to eat healthier. The children were asked to create menus for adults and for children based on foods they believed children and adults would like to eat. They were also asked about healthy foods for children and given the task of developing ideas for commercials in which the purpose was to convince children to eat healthier. The television commercial ideas were discussed and drawn in a storyboard format. Two additional lines of questions were included in the group interviews. These questions revolved around friendship and how participants recognized friendship in others and the fun things they enjoyed doing with friends. The purpose of including the questions on friendship was to confirm observations of sharing during fieldwork. The group interviews were tape recorded with participants’ assent and transcribed. Transcriptions were compared with the Graffiti Wall posters to confirm and clarify responses. The sessions lasted about forty-five minutes each and ranged from thirty-five to fifty minutes long. The interviews were conducted at Soto during the afterschool program.

Participants in the group interviews were divided into twelve groups. The children were divided into groups based on similar age and gender characteristics and considerations of friendship. This was purposely done in order to increase the comfort of the children and decrease reactivity between group members. All except for two groups were single gender groups. At Soto, there were two separate friendship groups that were between boys and girls, otherwise all of the groups were same-gender.
Table 5. Group interview participant characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middlewood YMCA Site</th>
<th>Soto Elementary Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 participants</td>
<td>18 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 groups, 2-5 per group</td>
<td>5 groups, 3-4 per group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 females</td>
<td>10 females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 males</td>
<td>8 males</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The goal of the group discussions was to elicit conversation and consensus among group members on their perceptions of health, healthy foods, children’ foods and relevant motivations to eat healthier foods for children. An underling query of this research is why children consume junk food if they do in fact understand the benefits of consuming healthier foods. The group interviews were useful for exploring these factors.

**Children’ Food Consumption and Influences**

The group interviews began with questions designed to assess the participants’ perceptions of motivations of food choice. The participants were first asked if they liked the snacks the YMCA provided, and the lunches provided by the school cafeteria. This warm-up question resulted in animated discussions about the merits of particular items. Overall, foods brought from home were deemed to be preferable over snacks provided by the YMCA and lunch items provided in the school lunch. When asked about the foods they would rather eat, the examples provided were branded, prepackaged food items like Tasty Cakes, Oreos cookies, Doritos chips, brand-named soda such as Coke and Sprite. The cafeteria food was generally disparaged as “gross,” yet they did describe particular items that were tasty. In four of the groups the children stated that pizza was served on Fridays and they enjoyed eating the school pizza on those days. In a follow-up, individual question (participants were asked to write their response on an individual piece of paper instead of the larger communal poster boards used for the other questions), they
were asked what was the greatest influence on their own food choices between the taste of the food, the cost of the food, the healthful qualities of the food, commercials and ads for foods, their family and their friends. Of the 43 participants, 40 children stated that taste was the primary reason they chose a food. When asked why this was so, a fourth grade boy, responded with incredulity, “it has to taste good to eat it.” The response to this particular question is noteworthy. Other possible considerations, such as family and friends were not selected and since this question was posed and collected individually, the responses reflect their personal beliefs.

**Kid Food versus Adult Food**

The group interviews continued with a Menu Activity in which participants were given large poster boards on which to list foods for separate food items that children and adults eat. Participants were given the parameters of listing foods for children’s breakfast, lunch, dinner, snack, beverage and dinner, and to create parallel lists for adults. This was performed as a group such that each group provided lists based on discussion and consensus agreement.

The menu activity served to highlight the distinctions children make between different foods eaten in different contexts and times of the day, and child foods versus adult foods. As found in the preliminary research described above, and as found in studies conducted by other authors, children make distinctions between foods eaten in meals and snacks (Roos 2002). While they recognize that adults do snack, snacking is seen as the purview of children. Participants provided thirty-four unique snack food items for children, and only ten items as adult snack foods.

While there is overlap between the two sets of menus, the children listed a total of 161 items for children’s menus and only 96 for adults. As was found in the exploratory phase, the key distinction between children and adult lists rested in the snacks. The snacks listed for children were predominately pre-packaged, processed foods like Cheez-its or fruit snacks. Only ten adult snack items were listed and during two groups the participants questioned and debated whether adults do in fact snack. This line of
discussion lead to the consensus that yes, some adults do snack; however, the distinction was made that “they don’t eat the same kinds of snack foods as kids”. Other distinctions described adult food items as healthier, and adults were believed to be more likely to bring food to work to save money. However, adults were also described as more likely to go out to eat at restaurants. Adult lists also included alcoholic beverages, which were clearly described as being for adults only by all participants. Preferred tastes also played a part in the foods children listed as appropriate for children. Snack foods were described as “yummy” and “delicious.” The participants enjoyed discussing the tasty foods they preferred.

**Friendship**

The group interviews also include a line of questions focusing on friendship. The purpose of including these questions was to validate observations made during participant observation. Ways of interacting with friends had been observed, and in the group interview the participants were asked to describe how they knew someone was their friend, or not. How they showed friendship and what friends share? The responses to this question resulted in a list of 93 items. The items comprise four categories: Doing Things Together, Sharing, Positive Emotions and Helping. The largest category was doing things together with 38.7% of items listed (36/93). Examples are going to the mall, going to the park, watching TV and hanging-out. Sharing involved items like candy, toys, money and knowledge like secrets. This category included 25.8% of responses (24/93). Expressing positive emotions by smiling, hugging, being silly and kind were reported as important to showing friendship in 21.5% (20/93) of responses. Helping by giving advice or helping with homework was reported in 13.9% (13/93) of the items.

The most frequently reported responses across all groups was sharing snacks and being nice. Items friends share included: snacks, toys, pencils, paper, money, jewelry, gum, candy, clothes, books, and secrets. The participants’ responses also referred to things friends do together such as: have sleep overs, swim, play games, hang-out, watch TV, talk, go to mall and park together, call and text each other. Playing together was suggested as a key way that friends interact. They play together in many ways, by
playing games, video games, sports, playing with toys, and play fighting [wrestling]. Besides, sharing physical objects and activities, friends also provide social and emotional support to each other. According to the participants, friends acknowledge your status as friends, complement you, help with homework, give hugs, keep your secrets, respect you and are nice and honest. Friends also make you smile and laugh, and are willing to apologize in order to make up. Defining a friend was also described as what friends do not do, such as lie to you, ignore you, and fight with you.

This exercise was not designed to provide an exhaustive listing of all the ways that children show friendship. This open-ended query provides context and validation for the social exchanges and behaviors observed during the fieldwork. Sharing objects and experiences, as well as, social support are key factors in developing friends and children’s interactions.

**Commercials for Healthy Eating**

The final activity of the group interviews involved made-up television commercials designed to capture children’s thoughts on motivations to eat healthier and ideas about what would appeal to other children. The prompt for this activity was: *Pretend your job is to convince other kids like you to eat healthy foods. Let’s make up a TV commercial for it. What would happen in the commercial? Who would the characters be? What would happen? What would the characters say and do?*

The children were asked to describe their ideas for the commercial as a group and decide what factors would need to be part of the commercial in order to catch children’s attention. The children designed story boards of their commercials and discussed what each component meant.

**Marketing Approaches**

The results of this activity were creative and reflect their exposure to commercial marketing and nutritional messages. In reflecting commercial marketing, many of the ideas incorporated celebrities as
spokespersons and actors in the scenes. The suggestion that children would like to see celebrities in the commercial was accompanied with lists of popular celebrities across the groups. Suggestions of popular musicians included Shakira, Chris Brown, Selena Gomez, and Justin Bieber. Athletes such as Dwayne Wade, a professional basketball player, and Venus Williams, a professional tennis player were discussed. Suggested television personalities and actors included Jake and Cody from The Suite Life of Jake and Cody, a Disney sitcom, Disney’s famous character, Mickey Mouse, Mitchel Mosso, an actor who played on the popular series Hannah Montana produced by Disney channel, Tiffany Thorton, who played on “Sonny with a Chance” and “So Random”, both children’s sitcoms produced by Disney. As well as, Skai Jackson, a child actor who plays on Disney shows, and Roshon Fegan, an actor who played in Disney’s “Camp Rock” movie. Other celebrities suggested were Victoria Justice, who is a musician who also played on the Disney sitcom “Victorious” and Cymphonique Miller, who played in Nickelodeon’s “How to Rock”. Besides celebrities, they also suggested that children would like to see “real children” who resembled themselves as live actors or animation.

Three of the commercials also included a branded logo and tag line to accompany the commercial’s message similar to many commercial advertisements. One commercial titled, Food Flight included a double-F logo and “Make Yourself Healthier” commercial’s logo was MyH, and HIFM stood for “Healthy Is For Me” in one commercial.

**Main Themes of the Commercials**

The messages of the commercials revolved around four main themes, the health benefits of eating healthy foods (and less junk food), the personal and social identity associated with being healthy, considerations of taste, and the conflict between healthy foods and unhealthy foods.
**Benefits of Healthy Eating**

The benefits of eating healthy included general messages of good health and strength, as well as, being slim. In “Healthy and Unhealthy” the outcomes of eating too much candy, in particular Hershey’s chocolate was depicted. The two scenes depict a character eating an apple and a carrot, and stating “you should always eat healthy food”. In the second scene, a patient is in the dentist’s chair with mouth wide open. The dentist is standing over the patient and states, “no more sugar for you Mr.” The implication is the negative dental health impact of eating too much sugar. In “Make Yourself Healthier”, the message of the commercial is “don’t eat a lot of JUNK FOOD, get in GOOD Position. To [too] much is BAD for your heart and your decisions!” This commercial was the only one to allude to a particular disease; “heart” was intended to mean heart disease.

![Figure 13. Make yourself healthier commercial storyboard](image)
Other commercials were informative or instructive in nature. In one unnamed commercial, two scenes were depicted, one of “veggies” and the other labeled “fat”. In this storyboard a child is teaching other children that vegetables like broccoli and carrots are healthy. Also depicted in the veggie and healthy category is water. The foods are labeled as being 50 calories. In the scene depicting fats, there are cookies, brownies and soda, which are labeled as “100 sugar”. The purpose of the commercial is to teach children the difference between healthier and unhealthier choices.
Two girls at Middelwood devised two scripts for their suggested commercials. The first script began:

Main character: Hey children!

Group of children: Hey!

MC: Do you know that eating healthy foods is good for you?

Group: No.

MC: Well, there are so many good foods you can eat that are healthy for you.

Group: That’s great!

MC: And here are some of them, fruit, vegetables, water and Nutella and peanut butter.

The benefits of eating healthy were also listed: to stay healthy, to stay skinny, to be strong, to be smart.

The second script stated, “Hey children, I know some of you love junk food? Am I right, I do to [too]. But, we can make a difference eating healthy foods. If you play sports, [eat] fruits and [drink] water is awesome for you, it also helps you win games. And when you eat to [too] much junk food, you have a chance of obesity. And if you eat healthy food you’ll have a slim childhood and adulthood. So make that difference and eat healthy!
An unnamed commercial designed by four boys at Middlewood would include three ideas. The ideas were depicted with drawings.

1. “Don’t stay inside playing video games”.
2. “Eat fruits and healthy things to be strong”
3. “Play outside and be active”.

**Identity and Inspirational Messages**

Identifying with successful people and reaching one’s goals was also used as a tactic to encourage children to eat healthier. In the HIFM (Healthy Is For Me) commercial, it began with the idea of “For Your Safety be Healthy” in order to put your best foot forward. The narrative was:

“If you like Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga or Michael Jackson let’s say you want to sing like one of those talented people you need to be healthy. The healthier you are the more your dream may come true. If you’re healthy you could become wealthy. If you want to be wealthy just be healthy. If not you might become filthy.” While discussing her idea, Leah decided that she wanted to include an image that would show how children could become sick from not being healthy. She added an image of a girl throwing up and the caption, “You may look like this is you are not healthy.” The final message of the commercial would be a logo, HIFM (Healthy Is For Me) and a pledge, “H is for healthy, and healthy is for me”.

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Athletic identity was also used. In one group’s commercial two sets of characters were shown. One set of characters, a female and male, were engaged in sports. The boy had a basketball and the girl was playing with a tennis racket. These characters are compared to an overweight boy and girl with the question, “who could win”?

Healthy Vs. Unhealthy

Another category of messages highlight the conflict children perceived between healthy and unhealthy foods and behaviors. Healthy foods were portrayed as opposite of unhealthy foods, and consuming them was seen as an either or proposition. In “Food Flight” an actual food fight is shown between junk food against health food. The message of the commercial is “If you want to healthy, eat just right! Foods and vegetables are really tight! Be like me and just make foods fight!” A physical altercation was also depicted in a commercial by two boys and a girl at Soto. This commercial showed a conflict
between Big Brother, Trix and little brother, Shorty. Trix eats unhealthy food and Shorty eats healthy food. They fight and Shorty wins. Shorty throws an apple at Trix and wins.

Figure 17. Food fight commercial storyboard

In “Kids’ Choice” the scene followed the scenario of a panel of child judges who would decide if a food should be eaten and give advice. The drawing of the judges depicted three children. One states, “don’t eat that,” another says, “you should eat that,” and the final judge says, “eat that now.” The clear distinction between what should be eaten and not eaten was evident in this commercial; children were instructed to eat healthy foods not junk foods.

Making Healthy Food Enjoyable to Eat

The final category of commercials incorporate children’ desire for tasty, fun foods. In “ABC Gum,” children are motivated to eat healthier by incorporating fruit and vegetables into something children really enjoy, gum. ABC Gum includes apples, bananas and carrots. In this depiction, a picture of the factory in
which ABC Gum would be made was drawn. The group drew factory machines depositing the healthy ingredients directly into the gum on a conveyor belt.

Figure 18. ABC gum commercial storyboard

The results of the group interviews conducted during the ethnographic phase of the study highlight how messages about healthy eating have become absorbed by the children in this study. They described eating healthy foods and physical activity as beneficial activities that promote health. But they also revealed key aspects of how they understand the impact of eating certain foods on the bodies and self-image. The commercial activity revealed that connecting healthy eating with reaching aspirations may be a message that resonates with children. The group interviews also revealed a sophisticated reading of media ads.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

By looking at the daily experiences of children in afterschool programs, I have worked to shed light on often invisible habits that shape childhood (Denzin 1990). This objective is well matched to ethnography. The study adds to the literature on children’s culture and joins a growing cadre of scholarship focused on children’s perspectives of food (Elliott 2011; Ludvigsen and Scott 2009; Nukaga 2008; Roberts 2006; Roos 2002; James 1998). The findings explain the children’s social networks in afterschool settings and how children’s peer culture and social peer interactions influence exchanges and food consumption in afterschool settings. This research provides understanding of a common experience of American children, the afterschool program that has not received as much research attention (Corsaro 2003; Story et al. 2008). This site of cultural construction is a worthwhile site of research that should receive more empirical attention in the future. This study reports on how characteristics of the afterschool space shape daily habits. Within the sites children co-socialize peers to fit into cultural constructs of what it means to be a child and how to express that identity. One way to create social connections was by exchanging items with friends to create obligations and common experiences. A key ingredient in this process is kids’ food. By identifying the symbolic role kids’ food plays in child interactions and identity I have demonstrated that snacks are ritual, social currency and belonging.

In this chapter I describe main themes identified through fieldwork, group interviews and participatory activities. The implications are discussed based on the emerging themes from observed behaviors and the children’s own words. The results reflect the study’s conceptual framework of consumption of kids’ foods as a social experience in children’s peer culture. Given the opportunity for peer interaction, afterschool programs served as an important site for research, especially ethnographic
research that focused on the social interactions that shape peer group formation and identity. In this study, the ethnographic approach was useful for exploring children’s nutritional attitudes, daily food practices and peer group interactions. The result is a deep understanding of children’s peer culture, social networks, and foodways that was supplemented and confirmed by participatory methods in group interviews. I was able to become immersed in the daily practices of children in afterschool care and capture extensive description of their social environment. This is a hallmark and strength of ethnography (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010). Attending the programs over two academic years allowed me to see how social group membership and dynamics changed over time. I was able to notate group networks and observe how groups changed as friendships developed and cliques formed. For example, at Soto I was able to see how the girls’ group morphed into a clique with the arrival of a popular girl and how the resulting changes strained friendships. I was also able to observe how children used foods and other items to negotiate friendships. Without an understanding of their peer relationships and friendships, the norms of child to child exchange may not have been as readily evident in the research. The ethnographic approach served to validate previous research on children’s culture and highlight the complexity of children’s social worlds.

Children’s Peer Culture

Daily practice

The predictability of the children’s daily schedule was one of the first observations I made. Snack time, homework time, free play time followed the clock. Each day was similar with subtle variations. The snacks offered by the YMCA program rotated on a weekly schedule. The topic of Character Development varied each day, but the group discussion format was the same each day. The sameness of the children’s daily experience in afterschool care provided structure for their experiences. It also served to reinforce their position as children and offered many opportunities for cultural practices to become engrained.
The production of children’s peer culture was reinforced by this repetition and daily interactions (Sutton-Smith 1977). Adults created structures (i.e., the schedule and activities of school and afterschool programs) for daily experiences; nonetheless the children modified activities of these spaces. The “way things are done” was quickly learned and spread peer-to-peer to reinforce a distinctive children’s culture. These routines became habits that were valued and taught to new children and to me (Bourdieu 1993). Food was a significant component of children’s cultural production through snack time with prepackaged, processed snack foods reinforcing the idea of appropriate foods for children to consume. Each day the children were provided with foods deemed appropriate for children. As found in other research, the items were mostly processed snack foods high in salt, sugar and fat produced with children in mind (Nestle 2006; Poti, Slining and Popkin 2006). The packages often had cartoon characters printed on them (Schor and Ford 2007). Consuming and playing with these foods became a daily practice. They also symbolized the children’s experience in afterschool and membership in the peer group (MacClancy 1992).

It should be noted that the daily routines were unique to the afterschool space and the purpose of the program. The daily schedules and the physical environment affected what the children could do and thus how they interacted, especially the kinds of foods they were able to consume and share with each other. Prepackaged snack foods were offered to the children and brought from home in part because kitchen facilities were not available to them. Edward’s Soja’s (1996) concepts of first, second and thirdspaces are useful for understanding how the afterschool environment impacted the use of kids’ food. To Soja, firstspace is the material environment, secondspace is interaction with the environment. Thirdspace includes the social norms, values, symbols, and beliefs that are expressed in an environment. Within thirdspace, the physical environment and culture interacts. His idea of thirdspace is useful for thinking of how messages to eat healthier may be contextualized by children. Different spaces have different sets of rules that guide behavior. Afterschool programs fit into a kids’ space category and if children follow unspoken rules about such spaces then general admonitions to eat healthier may be compartmentalized into certain environments. This explanation is underscored by the findings of Sheppard et al. (2006), Norgaard, Hansen and Grunert (2014), and Borra et al. (2003) that children tend to
eat kids’ foods among peers, which is typically in kids’ spaces like recreation centers and playgrounds, while Roos (2002), Benton (2004) and Savage, Fisher and Birch (2014) found that “healthy food” is associated with home and family food practices. It seems that the social group and the environment combine to encourage the consumption of kids’ foods. As was pointed out above the lack of access to kitchen facilities and limited budgets of afterschool programs contribute to an environment that supplies less healthy snack foods, but kids’ food had become embedded in the afterschool experience as well. Opportunities to bring healthier food options were not used by staff on early dismissal days, for example. They served ice cream, pizza, and hot dogs on those special occasions.

**Child agency**

A primary theme underlying this study is the expression of agency. This ethnographic research provided evidence for children’s peer culture as distinctive from adult culture. Children did not passively absorb adult socialization or adult cultural practices wholesale (Sutton-Smith 1977; Corsaro and Rizzo 1988; Kyritzis 2004; Montgomery 2009). As children are learning to become adults, they are also learning to be children in the process. I observed children taking adult cultural ideas and artifacts and molding them for their own purposes. Utilitarian objects became objects of play. Adult behavioral norms were mocked and purposely broken to become entertainment for peers (Corsaro 1986). The children in this study played with food wrappers and snacks. Plastic spoons became jousting sticks, pears became a boxing bags, and oranges became baseballs. They stretched plastic juice bags across their mouths to make silly faces for friends to laugh at. Children made their own versions of recipes like Nerd Soup. Adult eating norms like chewing with one’s mouth closed were purposely broken. In doing these things, the children expressed their identity as belonging to their own peer group by breaking ‘the rules’ of proper behavior given to them by the staff. They actively created norms and reproduced them with their peers as they shared laughs (James and Prout 1990; Hardman 2001).
Social Organization

In this study analyzing exchanges and social networks at the level of the age-grade peer group allowed for other factors affecting exchange to be highlighted. Within the afterschool programs, children were divided into age-grades, such as third through fifth grades. Within the groups a social hierarchy formed between more popular children who led the groups and were instrumental in setting the agenda for play, and less popular children. The popular children often made suggestions and directed games that the other children followed. They seemed to have dynamic interpersonal skills. They were also considered ‘cool’. Their ways of talking, joking and social finesse allowed them to direct less popular children, and younger children (Goodwin 1990; Goodman 1970; Adler and Adler 1998). Age was a factor in popularity. Older children enjoyed higher status within the groups and within the sites overall (Corsaro and Eder 1990).

The impact of social status on exchange was most evident when lower status children offered candy or toys to a higher status child and then enjoyed the benefit of being included. As was the case in the example of Sammie and Jean-Paul who became friends after Jean-Paul offered Sammie a G.I. Joe toy. Essentially, the lower status children exchanged a physical item for the symbolic social capital of the more popular peer. Higher status children also requested a piece of candy or snack from lower status children, also symbolizing their ability to manipulate social capital for their advantage (Hold-Cavell 1996). This dynamic was most common between high status boys and lower status girls. It highlights gender differences within peer groups. More often girls brought extra snacks and candy from home and shared with friends perhaps reflecting the female norm of the gatekeeper of food (Counihan 1999; DeWalt 1994). The boys seemed to take advantage of the girls’ propensity to use items in peer interactions. As adult women are considered the gatekeepers of food within the home, girls in the afterschool setting were more often the providers of snacks, candy and other items. Sharing items was valued within girl groups as it promoted social cohesion and equality (Lancy 2008; Hold-Cavell 1996). This points to the general differences observed in girl and boy peer interactions. Girls tended to stress
maintaining relationships through consensus and talk, and boys tended to express group membership through competitive activities like sports (Berentzen 1984).

**Social Cohesion and Exchange**

Snack food, candy, toys and other items were used as a form of social currency that mediates their peer relationships. Building social capital or “resources that individuals can utilize in their relationships with others” (Coleman 1988:S98) is a basic function of making friends for the children in the study. Sharing and exchanging items like toys, pencils, snacks and candy are a part of the experience of being friends. Exchanging items serve to create, maintain and symbolize friendships (Yan 2005; Roberts 2006). If friendship is thought of as social capital then we see that transferring social capital into other forms of capital as Bourdieu (1986) suggested is a dynamic process between friends or trading partners. As both sides give and take there is an accounting of exchange to maintain equity in the relationship. This was demonstrated in numerous episodes during the fieldwork such as when friends parsed out popcorn pieces or compared chucks of cupcake to ensure each piece was the same size. Understanding exchange in friendship is critical for understanding why kids’ foods are so pervasive. There are two underlying issues. One is that children’s access to forms of capital for exchange with friends are limited by adults (Leonard 2005). Though children, especially tweens represented in this study, have increasing access to disposable income and consumer goods (Linn 2004; Coulter 2005), parents, teachers and authority figures still curtail their access to valuable items. For example, playing with cell phones and hand-held video games was limited in the sites. Children prized these items due to their scarcity and value. The items that were available and affordable were small and inexpensive things like candy. The other factor that is critical to consider is the developmental importance of establishing social connections with peers during middle childhood (Eccles 1999). Kids’ food and other objects play a role in moral and social development. Kruger (1992) proposes that it is the relative equal status of peers compared to the status differences between children and adults that is instrumental in teaching reciprocity.
and fairness. Exchanges needed to be fair, yet the relative value of objects and context of exchange were debated until consensus was achieved. Through the tallying of bites the children co-created a moral code (Konner 2010).

**Friendship and Exchange**

Friendship, as “a long-term relationship of mutual affection and support” (Hruschka 2010:2), fulfills many different purposes. In the United States we focus on the emotional exchanges of friends rather than the material exchanges. Other cultures do not make this distinction. In reality friendships must be cultivated with exchange. Ongoing expressions of care and support must be offered. Gifts are given. The children in this study developed friendships by sharing objects, play, secrets, and time. The psychic and material exchanges provided a context for their relationship. The children’s descriptions of how to be a friend offered in the group interviews reflect the Buddha’s teachings that friends “should be generous, speak kindly, provide care, be equal and be truthful” (Hruschka 2010:5). This research also shows that children value these traits in friends. Friends were described as people whom one did enjoyable activities with, shared things, shared common interests and offered emotional support. The quality and quantity of these factors determined if another child was called a “friend” highlighting the distinction between a friend and a peer.

Therefore, the kinds of exchanges depended on the quality of the relationship and the symbolic value of the item (Katriel 1987). Close friends with a history of interaction were more likely to exchange high status items like branded snacks, money for vending machine purchases, and video games. These preferred items are contrasted with the lower status YMCA snacks that were easily given away without significant consideration of the relationship between the giver and recipient. Also, within friendship relationships great care was taken to maintain an equality of exchange in order to maintain equality within the relationship. Friends freely gave and took candy, snacks and other items, and these exchanges were supplemented with social exchanges like playing together, sharing common interests, supporting each
other and sharing inside jokes. In this way, items of social exchange were one of the mechanisms children use to show and experience friendship.

**Kids’ Food as Identity Expression**

This research raises several factors that impact beliefs about kids’ food and consumption as an exercise of identity. Within peer culture messages about appropriate food choices are relayed and internalized (Salvy et al. 2014). Children hold strong ideas about what is appropriate to eat. Distinctions were made between foods eaten by adults and foods eaten by children (Sheppard 2006; Borra 2003). Children’ foods become associated with identity of childhood (MacClancy 1992; Elliott 2011). It is usually sweet, salty and fatty, which aligns with taste preferences (Jacobson 2005). It is highly marketed toward children in the media. Children absorb the message that kids’ food is for them (Elliott 2011; Ludvigsen and Scott 2009).

Among modern American children, kids' food, including candy, sweets, chips and snack foods, and has come to epitomize the childhood experience. Kids’ food is a loosely described category that is somewhat ambiguous. These foods may include packaged snack foods, or foods like pizza, mac n’ cheese and chicken nuggets that are eaten during meals in and outside of the home. I have used the term to refer to snack foods and candy predominantly as it applies to the kinds of snacks consumed during afterschool. Elliott (2011) suggests that kids’ food is a recent result of product marketing of processed foods to children that began in the 1920s with breakfast cereal advertisements. The rise of marketing children’s products and the commercialization of children during the 20th century (Cook 2004) has allowed for the widespread adoption of kids’ foods. This is a valid point. Marketing plays a tremendous role in the growth of the number of products produced especially for children and in the extensive marketing of these products. I propose that kids’ foods produced and marketed directly to children are tied to a broader category of children’s foods. For American children, kids’ food has become an extension of weaning foods. As Anderson (2005) points out among most cultures the diets of children change from
weaning foods designed to be palatable, easily chewed and digested for young children to being very similar to adult fare by the beginning of the middle childhood stage. Among American children it is common for them to continue eating kids’ foods created specifically for them into adolescence. Allowing and even expecting children to eat different foods from adults is significant since there is no nutritional need for specific classifications of food for children during preadolescence and later (Elliott 2011). These foods are intensely marketed directly to children with an emphasis on the pleasurable and entertaining qualities of the food products (Elliott 2009; Jordan and Robinson 2008). Kids’ foods are also cheap to purchase, profitable to produce, tasty, and convenient to eat. Perhaps most importantly kids’ foods have become tied to children’s self-image and peer culture (Stead et al. 2011; Norgaard et al. 2013). Product marketing messages encourage children to consume “particular foods, not on the basis of their tastiness, or other benefits, but because of their place in a social matrix of meaning” (Schor and Ford 2007:16). The marketing messages are being absorbed by children and adults alike, and are being reinforced on a daily basis as adults provide kids with kids’ foods and children literally embody kids’ foods through consumption.

The accessibility and marketing of kids’ food also emphasizes children’s desire to have fun and play. In fact, children modify adult food behaviors for their own entertainment. This study has highlighted how playing with foods and talking about foods are ways of expressing membership within peer groups and to create a distinction between adults and children. In considering kids’ food and candy as a part of children’s culture, it fits into the notion of lower status foods. For example, candy is ambiguous and anomalous (Douglas 1997). It does not fit into a distinctive food category. It is edible and provides calories, though is not part of a meal structure, nor expensive or rare. As such it takes on the qualities of low status foods like animal parts served to African slaves in the American South (Anderson 2005), but is not even a food item and so cannot really be categorized as such. It is something sweet or sour eaten in-between eating times. Children have a strong taste preference for the sweetness of candy, and take advantage of the accessibility candy offers. It is inexpensive, available in small, pocket-sized packages and requires no preparation or adult assistance to consume (James 1998). It is therefore not surprising that
candy has become so associated with childhood. It is also a counter symbol of childhood. It serves as a marker of not being an adult (Mechling 2000). This was evident in the young boy’s surprise witnessing me eat a piece of candy because “adults don’t eat candy.” As Douglas (1997) pointed out dietary rules of what not to eat are just as importantly what to eat.

In these ways, children’s food, has become a symbol of childhood and an expression of what children should do. It is a form of agency. By consuming these low status foods, children are expressing their power to circumvent adult cultural norms. Consumption becomes a symbolic means of being a child and connecting with other children as a kind of badge of membership. This understanding brings the context of the present study to the forefront. In order to understand the process of being a child and the role kids’ food plays in the cultural and social lives of children one must go to where children are together. This requirement identifies the afterschool program as an environment for study. It also serves to identify the strength of the in-depth ethnography in uncovering taken-for-granted and invisible experiences.

Kids’ food can be understood as an embodiment of what it means to be a child. It is served daily thus becoming a habit of cultural reproduction. The act of eating candy and kids’ food is important for symbolizing one’s self as a child distinct from adults and one’s membership in children’s culture. It becomes important in peer interactions as an expression of children’s culture and as a social lubricant to maneuver among peers and maintain friendships. The desire to fit-in with peers can have a powerful influence on children’s food attitudes and behavior. In research using focus groups with ten through sixteen year old Dannish youth it was reported that peers have influence on their snack choices. The participants in this study reported consuming snacks that aligned with their self-image and group norms when with peers (Norgaard, Hansen and Grunert 2013).
Nutritional Beliefs and Implications

Based on the premise that long term food habits are established in childhood (Birch 1999), the need to better understand children's food choices is evident. The literature provides accounts of the roles that multiple factors play in shaping food choice. Biological factors shape preference for sweet tasting foods and avoidance of new foods (Drewowski 1997; Birch and Fisher 1996). Food systems shape the availability and cost of foods. Corporations develop, package, market and sell foods targeted toward children, based on assumptions of what children should and will eat and what adults will purchase for them (Jordan and Robinson 2008; Albon 2005). Parents socialize children into eating patterns based on their own experiences as a child, availability of foods, family food budgets and convenience (Savage, Fisher and Birch 2014; Rollins et al. 2014. These factors create a complex food system in which manifestand subtle messages intertwine to create the daily menus of American children. Children’s food consumption reflect social expectations and learned behavior (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009).

Children do understand that diet affects health (Stewart et al. 2006) and grasp basic nutritional messages (Noble et al. 2001), but there is a disconnect between knowledge and behavior. De Garine (1979) highlighted this point when he explained that food choices not always rational. They can be arbitrary. We don’t always eat what is nutrition or environmentally adaptive. Further, knowledge of healthier food does not correlate with healthier choices (Noble et al. 2001). Nutritional messages typically are framed from adult-centric perspectives. Messages that are based on considerations of health, weight management and disease prevention, while understood by children, are not relevant for their daily social lives (Roberts 2006; Tinsley 1992; Ludvigsen & Scott 2009). To be effective nutritional messages should incorporate understanding how children use foods with peers and their preference for tasty foods. Marketing healthier food options for children is one critical step; however, to increase the access to healthier and palatable foods for children in afterschool settings the economic and logistical limitations must be addressed.
A key factor involves the role children play in manipulating their own food environments and food choices. The concept of pester power has demonstrated that children are active agents in shaping their own food environments. Children impact adult behavior by easily agreeing to eat foods, refusing to eat certain foods and repetitively requesting certain foods (Marshall, O’Donohoe and Kline 2007). The result is a dynamic process in which children are active agents in shaping their own food choices. Using the frame of the active instead of passive child social actor is useful in understanding child food choice. It is also useful in identifying contexts in which children possess greater agency to shape their food environments. This is a valuable distinction, given the general powerlessness children experience as a being uncompleted adults (Montgomery 2009).

**Critiquing the Notion of Kids’ Food**

If the category of what children *should* eat is broken down it includes nutritious foods such as fruit and vegetables, milk, whole grains, and meat (Rollins et al. 2014; Birch 1999; Roberts 2006; Edwards and Hartwell 2002). These items were a part of the children’s diets according to the research described above. Yet, there was also a collection of food items that fit under the category of kids’ food (Chapman and Maclean 1993; Roos 2002). These items were generally highly processed and often high in salt, fat and sugar (Jacobson 2005; Nestle 2006; Poti, Slining and Popkin 2014).

Critiques of kids’ foods have raised the issue of how much children are eating these “junk foods”. Kids’ food (i.e., junk food) is derided as being nutritionally and ecologically unsound. This is a typical reaction to foods low in nutritional quality in Western societies. If candy and gum are also included in the classification then they may be called non-foods by writers such as Michael Pollen (2008) or Marian Nestle (2006), who both advocate for the consumption of more nutritious, unprocessed foods. These are valid critiques from a nutritional, health and even environmental standpoint. The National Cancer Institute reports that “junk” food constitutes one-third to one-half of American children’s caloric intake (Reedy and Krebs-Smith 2010). American children consume an overabundance of empty calories from
added sugar and fat in the form of sugar-sweetened beverages, grain desserts and high-fat milk. The result is daily consumption of approximately 400 calories from empty calories (Poti, Slining and Popkin 2014). Given the need for nutrients in growing bodies, the large scale consumption of child’s food is raised as factor in childhood obesity rates.

But if kids’ food is considered as more than a reaction to biological hunger, if we accept that eating does not always serve a nutritional purpose and may fulfill social and cultural desires (de Garine 1979), then kids’ food may be viewed as a social and psychological substance. Looking to ethnographic accounts of Yanomami mothers regurgitating food for infants or pica ingestion or ritual ingestion of dirt, accounts of non-food or unhealthy food practices are explained as responses to particular context (Cantarero 2007). Perhaps the use of kids’ food provides a physical connection to childhood and to other children in a way like Goody described when being told to eat a village’s dirt to garner the protection of friends in an African village. Though children certainly do eat glue, dirt, soap, nail polish, and even the children in this study recounted eating such things when they were “babies” and laughed at the folly. They had matured and moved onto Warheads candy, Doritos, and Little Debbie cakes. But they had not yet moved onto the salads and vegetables they described adults eating during the group interviews. While kid’s food is not as extreme as eating a categorical non-food such as pica, it is deemed a lesser status than foods consumed by adults. These items were strongly rooted in the childhood experience, and socially, like pica, kids’ food is “not deemed proper eating” (Cantarero 2007).

A solution to kids’ foods is advocated by Marion Nestle and David Katz in recent commentaries. Both suggest a shift away from feeding children processed, low nourishment, high calorie kids’ food toward more whole, nutritious fare. While children’s diets, especially among young children, may need special consideration for developmental factors such as providing foods that are easily swallowed and in smaller portions (Katz 2013), a healthier diet for children would include less processed food and more whole foods.

From the perspective of the current study, these helpful recommendations must be considered in the context of the economic and logistical constraints of providing food to children in the afterschool
setting, how children manipulate their own food environments and cultural ideas of what children should eat. Afterschool programs often function on limited budgets (Beets et al. 2011) and may not have access to kitchens and food preparation equipment. Prepackaged snacks are appealing because they are inexpensive, convenient, portable and safe. In order to increase access to whole foods, such as fruits, additional funding and food storage is necessary. As I observed during the summer camp at Middlewood, when fresh fruit was available, the children consumed it. The fruit was possible due to additional funding acquired through a grant. These barriers to improving the nutritional quality of snack foods provided to children are not insurmountable. Planning and funding are required.

The second consideration involves a cultural shift around kids’ foods and sensitivity to children’s use of foods in social exchanges. This study re-confirmed the understanding that health is not a strong motivator for children in making food choices (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009). Taste was reported to be a primary factor by the children during group interviews. Taste preferences are impacted by exposure to foods, beliefs and social acceptability (Birch 1999). Moving away from a dichotomous classification of foods as healthy or unhealthy (good or bad) to the idea of moderation would be useful; as would re-framing messages about the benefits of healthier eating as promoting health to promoting an invigorating lifestyle. Health promotion messages often connect healthy eating to avoiding obesity and physical activity. These are laudable and children are absorbing these messages; however, as the commercial activity in this study highlighted, children’s identity and aspirations can be harnessed in health promotion messages. By expanding the connection between healthier foods and physical activity to other forms of children’s identity and aspirations, more children may identify with the messages and connect with them. The idea that eating healthier or eating healthier foods more frequently helps children feel better now in order to do the things they like to do is a powerful message and goes beyond simply making healthy foods “fun” with cartoon characters and celebrities. Health promotion messages should also focus on the social aspects of eating, by showing children that they can enjoy healthier food options together. Seeing other children eating healthier foods normalizes the experience through peer influence. This ties into what we know about tweens and the findings of this study. The degree to which children worked to be a part of the
group was tremendous. By connecting to peers children they accomplish a developmental task, and learn children’s culture. They must be with friends to learn these things. Parents, teachers as adults cannot teach them how to be children. It must come from the kid sitting next to them who says “who wants some?” These are concepts that could be applied to in health promotion.
CHAPTER SEVEN
RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter recommendations are presented for addressing access to healthier food choices in afterschool programs and considerations for applying the findings of this study in developing nutritional interventions and social marketing messages directed to children.

The outcomes of the study raise important considerations for improving child health and nutrition. Childhood obesity rates have increased 11% since 1980 leading to concern for the future of health of American youth. In 2012 16.9% of two through nineteen year olds were obese and one-third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese. While obesity is not a specific health problem, the increased risk for elevated blood pressure, dyslipidemia, insulin resistance, asthma, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, sleep and orthopedic disorders (Deckelbaum and Williams 2001) associated with obesity is concerning. The main factors attributed to overweight and obesity are high “junk food” consumption and low physical activity levels. Growing awareness, media coverage, and interventions focusing on families, schools, and communities are making impacts. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey results, between 2003-2004 and 2009-2010 obesity rates leveled off among children and adults, and even decreased from 13.9% to 8.4% among 2-5 year old children (Ogden et al. 2014).

These positive outcomes are attributed to federal policy changes such as improvements in the nutritional quality of foods covered under Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children benefits provided under the jurisdiction of the US Department of Agriculture, and increased funding for

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14 http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm
state and community level initiatives by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Khan et al. 2009).

At the local level within Florida and Hillsborough county public schools policies have been implemented to promote health. Florida is one of forty-eight states that requires comprehensive health education. Hillsborough county incorporates comprehensive health education into K-5 science education curriculums. The topics covered include nutrition, healthy decision making, basic biological systems and hygiene. Florida also participates in mandatory health screenings and BMI for public school students. In 2014, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services adopted the Smart Snack program thus strengthening school-based policies on acceptable foods sold to students during the school day. The standards increase the content of whole grains, fruit and decrease caffeinated beverages sold to students in K-8. The policy also allows for a pre-determined number of exemptions in which schools can sell foods in fundraisers that do not meet the standards. However, the standards do not cover foods sold or provided afterschool or through vending machines. These exceptions are two of the primary ways children accessed snack foods and so this policy does not impact eating in afterschool programs.

Access

Policy decisions and interventions at the community level and within programs can make a positive effect on access to junk food and increasing access to healthier options. Vending machines provided access to processed snack foods and soda at both sites. The children’s access to the vending machines depended upon the staff’s permission and the location of the vending machines. It is recommended to relocate vending machines from activity rooms the children typically use during afterschool. Also, it is recommended to discourage staff from allowing children to visit the vending

15 http://hillsborough.sdhc.k12.fl.us/doc/1074/elempe-healthed
16 http://stateofobesity.org/states/fl/

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machines, or to limit access to only during snack time. Further, the use of the “buddy system” for children to go to the vending machines without adult direct supervision could be avoided. By making using the vending machines less convenient they may be used less frequently. This was the case the at Soto where the vending machine was located in the Teacher’s Lounge away from the children’s activity spaces. The YMCA program could further curtail vending machine use by establishing a policy that children may only use the vending machine during predetermined snack times or on select days like Fridays. Then the main district office would need to hold sites accountable for following the policy. The main office does monitor many aspects of the program through daily and weekly reports, and unannounced site visits, so there is already is an organizational structure to support this proposed policy. Further, requests could be made of administration to stock the vending machines with healthier snack options and to ensure that the soda machine was stocked with bottled water options. These are small changes that could be made without additional costs to the programs, and may yield beneficial results in decreasing consumption of snack foods laden with sugar, salt and fat (Rozin et al. 2011).

Suggestions concerning access also deal with increasing the availability of fruit and vegetables and decreasing access to vending machine foods and soda during the afterschool hours. Despite the overall limited availability of fresh fruits and vegetables as snacks in the afterschool program, when fresh fruits were available the children ate them and enjoyed eating them. There are financial and environmental limitations to providing more fresh produce for the afterschool programs. These items are costly and with limited budgets the feasibility of providing fresh produce is limited. In the case of Middlewood, a grant allowed the director to offer fruit more often during the school year. Seeking additional grant funding is a mechanism for increasing access.

Programs could also follow the lead of effective interventions. Examples of successful programs aimed at increasing healthier snack options should be investigated. For example, the Better Bites: Snack Strong program targeted tweens to increase consumption of healthy snacks in public recreation centers, public parks, summer camps, youth sports organizations, YMCAs and afterschool programs. A community coalition using social marketing worked with programs and local food producers to make
affordable foods available to tweens at sites where they play and congregate. The result was an increase in concession sales of the healthy snacks from 10% to 31% over the two year intervention (Bryant et al. 2014).

Another suggestion is to establish a gardening project on site in which children can grow and eat the produce from their garden. Teaching children about how food is grown has been shown to improve perceptions about fruits and vegetables, and increase consumption as children are able to eat what they grow and then request more fruits and vegetables from parents (Herman et al. 2006; Langellotto and Gupta 2012). Projects such as The Edible School Yard and the Junior Master Gardener programs have been successful in teaching children about growing food using established curriculums.\(^{18}\)

Access also relates to issues of food insecurity. Though socio-economic status was not objectively measured in this study, the findings point to possible food insecurity or at least perceived food insecurity among the children and staff. The problem was addressed differently based on the site. At Middlewood, which was a predominately Caucasian group of children, the staff discouraged sharing or the children requesting snacks from peers. It was voiced that parents were responsible for bringing extra snacks. This may not be possible for all children. In the case of Scott, this was not possible. He explained to me that his family could not afford it. There seemed to be less concern for this issue by staff than at Soto where more families were on scholarship based on income and where the site director voiced concern that some of the children may not have enough to eat at home all the time. Her response was to ensure that the children were fed extra food on early dismissal days, though the foods were not healthy.

Given the possibility of food insecurity among the children in these programs, I suggest staff training on how to recognize hunger and food insecurity among families, and to sensitively respond to children’s request for extra food. This issue also presents an opportunity for assessing possible “hidden” food insecurity among working class and middle class families and for raising awareness of in the local area.

\(^{18}\) http://edibleschoolyard.org/
**Nutrition Education**

Education about healthier food choices, moderation in eating and how to prepare healthy foods is a first step in promoting health. Nutrition education can play a part in moving away from the use of dichotomous food categories. In this research and in previous studies, children categorized food as healthy or unhealthy, good or bad, and adult food or kids’ food. Since children believe that kids’ foods are supposed to be eaten by children and these foods are predominantly highly processed snack foods, soda and candy, and therefore “junk”, then the logic follows that children eat unhealthy foods while adults eat healthy foods. This limits understanding of the nutritional qualities of foods and reinforces the engrained meanings of kids’ foods. An alternative is to promote moderation of junk food instead of prohibiting junk food which could make it more appealing to children. The Traffic Light Eating concept\(^\text{19}\) (The Red Light, Yellow Light Green Light or “Go, Slow, Whoa”) teaches children about moderation by categorizing foods based on how frequently they should be consumed.\(^\text{20}\) In this way, foods are not taken off the table, only limited.

Providing education on healthy food choices to the families of the children is another way of encouraging healthier eating by building awareness and skills among parents. Group sessions of parents and their children directed by a nutritionist could be hosted at the afterschool sites. The sessions should be brief, scheduled during the late afternoon when parents are normally picking up their children, provide food for the families to take home, and focus on simple, convenient and inexpensive shopping and meal and snack preparation ideas (Zizza 2014). Supplemental materials could be produced to include easy recipes and healthy and inexpensive snacks.

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\(^{19}\) [https://www.ncfamilieseatingbetter.org/EFNEP/participants/tips/red-light-green-light/](https://www.ncfamilieseatingbetter.org/EFNEP/participants/tips/red-light-green-light/)

Developing Messages

When developing messages for health and nutrition promotion interventions several considerations should be made for the children in this age range. Presenting nutrition information should be done in a hands-on manner that is enjoyable for the children. The participatory methods used in this research are examples of activities that children can engage in. Preadolescents want to have fun with peers. Promoting the pleasure and enjoyment of eating healthier foods is important. In the current research, the children spoke of foods they enjoy eating with emotion and creativity. Tapping into that enthusiasm by introducing new and tasty foods is critical for overcoming neophobic attitudes, especially about vegetables. Albon states that, “an understanding of children’s popular culture needs to be incorporated into any strategy that aims to encourage a decrease in sweet eating and the adoption of healthier eating options” (2005:414).

When crafting nutrition promotion messages it is recommended that health professionals take a note from commercial food marketers and the results of this research to frame healthy food choices as a social experience. When creating messages for children as a target audience, refrain from using “healthy foods” terminology, or prompt children to eat better for their health. Re-framing healthy eating as a social experience instead of an individual decision could be a valuable tactic in shifting attitudes. Two well-designed health education programs highlight the lack of consideration given to commensality in nutritional messages. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s BAM! (Body and Mind) website for tweens ages 9-13 provides interactive information on a variety of topics including diseases, personal safety, bullying, smoking prevention, handing stress and interpersonal conflicts. The site is colorful, interactive and fun. The nutrition page provides practical suggestions for eating healthier like drinking

21 http://www.cdc.gov/bam/nutrition/index.html
water instead of soda, avoiding unhealthy trans fats in commercial baked goods and eating breakfast. Clearly, the website is designed for the individual child. There are no references to parents, siblings or friends. The site could be enhanced with recommendations for navigating social situations when peers are eating unhealthy foods or modeling healthier eating with friends. Fun &Food After School is a curriculum developed by the Harvard School of Public Health Prevention Research Center on Nutrition and Physical Activity in partnership with YMCA of the USA. The curriculum includes 11 units on nutrition and physical activity with resources for afterschool staff, children and parents. The core of the curriculum is to advance the Environmental Health Standards for Nutrition and Physical Activity in Out-of-School Time. The standards are: to not serve sugar-sweetened beverages, serve water every day, serve a fruit and/or vegetable at every meal and snack, do not serve foods with transfat, when serving grains, serve whole grains, eliminate broadcast and cable TV, limit screen time to less than 1 hour per day, provide all children with at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day and offer 20 minutes of vigorous activity at least 3 times per week. While the curriculum is well-developed it does not address social eating cues, mindless eating and peer pressure. Incorporating these topics is important because eating is a social experience. Rarely do children eat alone, and others influence what we eat and how much.

Children enjoy eating together and tying healthy eating to friendship is a powerful message. One of the strengths of the Better Bites program described above is that the healthy snack items were served in portable containers and made available where children and youth play such as public parks, pools, recreation centers and YMCAs. This tactic opened up the opportunity for sharing healthy snacks and for peer modeling of this behavior. Interventions should also take advantage of peer social networks and group leaders who contribute greatly to group norms. Popular and slightly older children are savvy in directing group think among peers. They could be identified and tasked with modeling healthier choices. Further, messages from children to children should be used. Children are perceptive enough to understand that adults create products and images for them, though they enjoy hearing from other kids like them.

22 http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/prc/projects/food-fun/
Celebrity endorsement is appealing, but preferred celebrities can quickly be replaced by fickle children. Interventions and campaigns should have the sophistication found in commercial marketing. Generic curriculum or images need to be replaced with tailored messages focusing on narrow age ranges and gender. Lastly, health goals should not be the primary focus of promotion messages. Preventing future health problems is too distant. Children in middle childhood are concerned about their immediate present, their lives and their friends. They want to feel connected and competent. Showing children that making healthier food choices can help them do their best at their favorite activities and hobbies would be a powerful message. Healthy eating is often attributed to athletes, and many children aspire to be sports stars, but many others also want to be singers, artists, and scientists. A key message is that healthy choices can help you be the best at whatever you want to do. Vegetables are not just for jocks. The emotional, social and symbolic factors of food are often not included in health promotion messages (Stead et al. 2011). In order to design effective interventions, cultural practices must be accounted for.

Children repeatedly stated that friends had little influence, yet on a daily basis snack foods and candy were eaten, shared and traded among friends. The kinds of foods the children ate were processed snack foods. For children there are norms of appropriate foods and how to eat them. This is a key outcome of this study because it provides a more complete picture of food in children’s culture, and because it is useful for public health messages.

Critiques of nutritional messages highlight the fact that most are framed in adult-centric terms. Focusing on an individual’s health is not particularly useful. While a subset of children who identify with health through sports, healthy eating can be reframed in terms of social eating. Based on this study, appealing to children with messages that fruits and vegetables are cool is not sufficient. Changing perceptions of the product is a useful step. Presenting healthy foods as those consumed by cool people, athletes, attractive people are valuable, but depend upon children self-identifying as someone who plays sports or is physically active. This was inherently part of the children’s recommendations for commercials promoting healthy foods. Explaining that multiple characters representing many kinds of identifies from athlete to singer to artist to comic book artist to video game player.
The results of this study point to positive outcomes for the larger effort to improve child nutrition. The children in the preliminary study understood basic nutritional guidelines. This points to the success of health education and the proliferation of healthy eating messages in school and the media. They understood the value of eating fruits and vegetables and other healthier foods. They also contradicted themselves in study discussions. While they understood what they “should” eat to promote their health, in reality other foods were much more appealing. As the children confessed, “I know what I should be eating, but junk food taste better”. Depending solely on the children’s responses to questions concerning healthy eating or motivations by their food choice would have provided only part of the story. The drives and context in which children eat is complex. In order to address food choice, we need to better understand the full context. For children like adults pleasures in eating is no small consideration, nor are the social uses of food. There are many factors that influence food choice and lifestyle. Based on this research, I advocate for incorporating the norms of children’s peer culture into health promotional messages is necessary. Professionals charged with encouraging healthier eating need to understand children’s peer culture and the loaded meaning behind kids’ foods in order to reach through the media clutter.

This research has underscored the prevalence of the practice of kids’ food. The concept is established by traditions and beliefs passed down by adults and reinforced by children’s culture. Children are active participants by using food in social context and incorporating kids’ foods into cultural practices. They do not passively accept what is given. They use their influence with parents and other adults to shape the kinds of foods provided to them. The refusal to eat is a powerful tool, as is relentless requests for sugar-coated cereal puffs. Children understand their power in shaping the dynamic exchanges of food from adult to child and continue to use food in exchange with peers. As such kids’ food becomes a key part of how children talk, share and express their identity as children.

While children’s agency is increasingly being highlighted in the literature of childhood, agency and power are still exhibited in relations to adult perceptions of children. Adults dictate children’s activities in most aspects of daily life. However, within the structured lives of American children, they
exert their own control over their own cultural milieu. Recognition of children’s culture is necessary for understanding child agency, and the ways in which children make social structures their own while often borrowing and adapting adult norms and customs to suit their own purposes. This is certainly the case with kids’ food.
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Appendix A

Participant Observation Guide

Observation Time start/stop-
- Site Staff
- Total number of staff
- Total number of students
- Group divisions
- Children
  - Gender
  - Age
  - Grade
  - Ethnicity
  - School
  - Socio-economic
  - Personal interests

Characteristics of Afterschool Program and Staff-
Physical characteristics of sites: Type and description of rooms (cafeteria, multipurpose room, classroom, gym, playground), games and equipment available, wall hangings, physical layout, where do activities/play time happen (outside, inside, playground, sports field, hallway, cafeteria)
Unique differences between sites: physical, logistic, staff
Staff-to-staff interaction
Staff-to-children interaction
Staff-to-parent interaction
Staff control, distribution of kids’ food, access to on-site vending machines
Staff eating and talking about their own food
Structured activities vs. unstructured activities

Space/Object-
General: Type and description of rooms (cafeteria, multipurpose room, classroom, gym, playground), games and equipment available, wall hangings, physical layout, where do activities/play time happen (outside, inside, playground, sports field, hallway, cafeteria), smells, noises
Ongoing: Where did action occur? Changes to physical site or objects in site?

Time-
General: Daily schedule of activities
Ongoing: Sequence of daily events, Any special events? Are staff following the daily schedule?

Actors/Social dynamics-
Who interacted with me? How did we interact?
Peer group characteristics: age, grade, school, gender, ethnicity, interests
Friendship group characteristics: who are friends, frequency of interactions, changes to group, what are their activities
What do groups do during free time? Homework time? Structured activities?
How do they talk, joke, play games?
Do they share food or other objects?
Feelings/Mood-
What was the overall mood of the site? Did any incidents occur today?

Activities-
Ongoing: What activities and games occurred today? New games? What is each peer/friendship group doing during free play?
Conversations with children: topics, where and when, with whom
Conversations with staff
Snack Time: Play with food, food sharing, food talk,
How are snacks consumed? Eaten, not eaten or played with
What are the types of foods provided by YMCA staff and brought from home or purchased?
Generic vs. brand foods
Purchased on-site?
Where does the food come from?
Behaviors with food-Sharing, trading, selling, gift giving, bartering, social bonding, friendship, alliances
What do they exchange? Who are exchange partners? When do they exchange?
How do they talk about food? What do they say?
How do they play with food? Pretend play? Food as reward?
Snack time: contents, procedures, amount of time given, ritualistic aspects, types of foods provided by staff
Food brought from home or left-overs from lunch
Ritual, formal daily activity, repeated procedure and times
Social experience with peers, social expectations
Food given at school or purchased at school; food as reward for good behavior or academic achievement
Food talk: boasting, status foods, food preferences, food stories, food dislikes, hunger talk, begging,
Food and wrapper play; pretend play with food
Food exchange: form of economic exchange, expression of status, exchange for preferred foods
Making messes
Food contamination/disgust
Food sharing/trading
Modeling food behavior to peers
Early dismissal days and special occasion days
Expressed beliefs about food: classification of types of foods, kid food vs. adult food, health and healthy food, body image and dieting. Appropriate foods for kids: what foods do kids eat? What foods are kids supposed to eat?
Beliefs about brand-foods and commercials

Peer Social Groups-
Staff defined groups
Social alliances and friendships
Disagreements/fights
Games, homework time, physical activity
Sharing non-food items: pencils, paper, balls, toys

Media Use-
Use of electronic media by kids: cell phone, DS games
Talk about media, music, TV, movies, commercials, celebrities, computer games

Role of researcher-
playmate, special status adult, friend, staff helper, visitor, parent figure
Conversations with kids or staff
Exchanges with researcher: asking for favors, giving gifts, wanting researcher’s attention, playing together, testing researcher, picking on/criticizing researcher, homework help
Physical contact between researcher and kids: side hugs, holding hands, jumping on researcher
Researcher’s physical appearance and explanation of research
Appendix B

Recruitment Procedures

The study procedure were explained to staff, children and parents using tailored scripts.

Recruitment at Sites

Study Explanation Script for Staff: “I will be interviewing 8-12 year olds. The interviews will be done in small groups and will take about 45 minutes. I will send home parent permission forms for the parents to read and sign. I will also be available to explain the study to parents. Only children with returned permission and consent slips will be able to participate. I will be responsible for bringing all the materials for the study and will hand out and collect permission slips from the children. I ask that if a child returns a permission slip to a staff member please keep them in the Afterschool check-out book and I will be responsible for collecting the forms. Please allow me to take ten minutes to explain the study to the eligible children and to answer questions from parents.”

Study Recruitment Script for students: “Hi! I am Stephanie and I am a college student from USF. I am here to find out what you think. I am conducting a study about what kids and their friends like to eat and what you think about foods. Is everyone 8-12 years old? Raise your hand if you are. Those of you with your hands up are invited to be in a research study that is easy to do. Not only is it easy, but if you get permission to participate from your parents then you can earn prizes. For you to earn a prize you will answer questions and do activities with me in a group of your friends. There are easy steps to follow.

- Take home the permission slip
- Make sure your mom or dad reads and signs it
- Bring back the permission slip and give it to one of your YMCA teachers”

Study Recruitment Script for parents: “I am conducting a voluntary study with the help of YMCA Afterschool programs to learn more about children’s food preferences and beliefs. I am asking you to give permission and consent for your child to participate in a group interview of 2-5 students. The group interview will be conducted here at the afterschool site under the supervision of staff. No children will be interviewed alone. The children will be asked questions by me and asked to do activities with paper and markers as a group. The children will be given a small toy for their participation and the group interview will take up to 45 minutes. A permission and consent form must be returned in order for your child to participate.”
Dear Parent,

My name is Stephanie Melton and I’m a student in the Anthropology Department at the University of South Florida in Tampa. I am conducting a study for my course requirements. The Tampa Metro YMCA has reviewed my research and given me permission to request your permission to allow your child to participate in the study. In this study, I hope to learn more about children’s food preferences, their beliefs about food and friendship groups. For this study I will be attending your child’s afterschool program. I will be helping out and participating with the children and staff. This kind of research is called an ethnography. I want to find out what it is like for kids in afterschool programs. At the end of the study I will write a report. Your child will not be identified in the report.

Why is your child being asked to take part in this study?
Your child to take part in this study because your child is between the age of 8 and 12 years old. Children at this age are developing their own preferences for foods and they are old enough to answer questions about themselves and their peers.

How long will the study last?
I will be attending the program a couple of days a week for the school year. At the end of the year your child will be asked to spend about 45 minutes participating in a group interview during the YMCA Childcare program. You will have to give permission for your child to do the group interview. A permission form will be sent home with your child later in the year for the group interview.

What will happen during this study?
Your child will do his/her normal activities after school. I will be in the site observing the children and interacting with them.

Will you or your child be paid for participation?
If your child participates in the group interview then he/she will be compensated with a small toy.

If you do not want your child to be a part of the observation study then please let me know.

You may have questions this letter does not answer. If you do, Stephanie Melton (XXX-XXX-XXXX) is available and would be more than happy to answer them.

I appreciate the time you have given this letter. We hope your child will be able to participate in this voluntary study!

Sincerely,
Stephanie Melton, M.A., M.P.H.
Appendix D

Example of Photo Elicitation Story Board Activity using a Healthy Food Photo, “Pickles 4, then none”

Your Name

Title of photo

3 words to describe this picture: Juicy, crunchy, and delicious.

Who or What is in this picture?

There is a jar with pickles in it.

What is the picture about or what is happening?

The picture is about my favorite pickles. There is four pickles in the jar. They are crunchy, juicy, and have some good for you. I ate them, they go good with my greens. Then juicy, then crunchy. There aren’t any pickles.

Why did you take this picture?

I took the picture because I like pickles and they are healthy.
Appendix E

Example of Photo Elicitation Story Board Activity using an Unhealthy Food Photo, “Unhealthy Food”

Your Name

Title of photo: unhealthy food

3 words to describe this picture

Who or What is in this picture? It’s a snack mashine

What is the picture about or what is happening? You are eating healthy food

Why did you take this picture? Because that was the director
Appendix F

Group Interview Guide

Individual Food Preferences

- Do you like the snacks that the YMCA teachers give you?
  - Are there foods that you would rather have?
  - Is it better to bring your lunch/snacks from home or to eat the school lunch/YMCA snacks?

a. Food Choice

- How do you decide what you want to eat?

- Rank five potential influences: your friends, your family, the taste, the cost, healthiness of the food, commercials-Which one is the most important and which one is the least important?

Which of these is most important to you when you decide what to eat?

Kid vs. Adult Foods

- What foods are kids’ foods vs. adult foods? Menu activity: Together you will make up a menu for breakfast, lunch, snacks, dinner and drinks. One for kids and another for adults. Write or draw the menus.
  - Why do kids/adults eat these foods? What foods are kids supposed to eat? [List of foods kids are supposed to eat. List of foods kids really eat.]

Friends/Peers

- How do you know someone is your friend? How do you know someone is not your friend?

- What do you like to do with your friends?

- How do you show someone you are their friend?
  - Do you ever share your lunch or snacks?
  - Do you expect them to share with you?

- If your friend came over to your house what would you give them to eat?
• What do you usually eat with your friends?

Commercial idea

• Pretend your job is to convince other kids like you to eat healthy foods. Let’s make up a TV commercial for it. What would happen in the commercial? Who would the characters be? What would happen? What would the characters say and do?
Appendix G

40 Developmental Assets

1. Family Support—Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. Positive Family Communication—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.
3. Other Adult Relationships—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
4. Caring Neighborhood—Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. Caring School Climate—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. Parent Involvement in Schooling—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
7. Community Values—Youth—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
8. Youth as Resources—Young people are given useful roles in the community.
9. Service to Others—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
10. Safety—Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.
11. Family Boundaries—Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.
12. School Boundaries—School provides clear rules and consequences.
14. Adult Role Models—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. Positive Peer Influence—Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.
16. High Expectations—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
17. Creative Activities—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
18. Youth Programs—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
19. Religious Community—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. Time at Home—Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.
21. Achievement Motivation—Young person is motivated to do well in school.
22. School Engagement—Young person is actively engaged in learning.
23. Homework—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
24. Bonding to School—Young person cares about her or his school.
25. Reading for Pleasure—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
26. Caring—Young person places high value on helping other people.
27. Equality and Social Justice—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
28. Integrity—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
29. Honesty—Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."
30. Responsibility—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
31. Restraint—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
32. Planning and Decision Making—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
33. Interpersonal Competence—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
34. Cultural Competence—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
35. Resistance Skills—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
36. Peaceful Conflict Resolution—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.
37. Personal Power—Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me."

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38. Self-Esteem-Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
39. Sense of Purpose-Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."
40. Positive View of Personal Future-Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.
Appendix H

USF Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

June 17, 2011

Stephanie Melton
Anthropology

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review

IRB#: Pro00003283
Title: The Role of Food in Children’s Peer Culture

Dear Stephanie Melton:

On 6/16/2011 the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above referenced protocol. Please note that your approval for this study will expire on 6-16-12.

Approved Items:
Protocol Document(s):

S Melton Proposal
Study involves children and falls under 45 CFR 46.404: Research not involving more than minimal risk.

Consent/Assent Documents:
Name
3283 Parental Permission Consent Form.pdf

You are to use only the watermarked/stamped consent forms found under the “Attachment Tab” in the recruitment of participants for the Parental Permission Consent form.

Child Verbal Assent
It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Please note, the informed consent/assent documents are valid during the period indicated by the official, IRB-Approval stamp located on the form. Valid consent must be documented on a copy of the most recently IRB-approved consent form.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John A. Schinka, Ph.D.

John Schinka, PhD, Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board

Cc: Various Menzel, CCRP
    USF IRB Professional Staff