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**USDA/FNS Formative Messaging
Focus Group Guide (Low-income Mothers)
Division of Feeding Responsibility**

WELCOME AND GROUND RULES

Welcome everyone. My name is _____. I am an independent marketing researcher. Thank you for coming for this discussion. Before we begin, I'd like to explain a few things about how the discussion will work.

1. First of all, I want everyone to know there are **no wrong answers**. (We want to know your opinions and those opinions might differ. This is fine. We want to know what each of you thinks about the topics we will be discussing.)
2. You have probably noticed the microphones in the room. They are here because we are **audiotaping** the discussion. Afterwards, I have to write a report. I want to give you my full attention and not have to take a lot of notes. Also, because we are taping, it is important that you try to **speak one at a time**. I may occasionally interrupt you when two or more people are talking at once in order to be sure everyone gets a chance to talk and that responses are accurately recorded.
3. Behind me is a one-way mirror. Some of the people working on this project are observing this discussion so that they can hear your opinions directly from you. However, your identity and anything you personally say here will remain confidential. Your names, addresses, and phone numbers will not be given to anyone, and no one will contact you after this group is over. When I write my report, I will not refer to anyone by name.
4. Please turn off your **beepers & cell phones**. The group will last only 90 minutes. Should you need to go to the restroom during the discussion, please feel free to leave, but we'd appreciate it if you would go one at a time.
5. Feel free to say what is on your mind. If you have something negative to say, it is all right. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. We just want to hear your opinions.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Now, first let's spend a little time getting to know one another. Let's go around the table and introduce each of ourselves. Please tell me:
 - First name, and
 - What local area you live in,
 - Who you live with (ages of children), pets, plants, etc., and
 - A little bit about yourself—such as what you do for a living or a favorite hobby.

[MODERATOR: Instruct respondents that when questions in the guide refer to their pre-K (2-5 year-old) child/ren. REMIND THEM OF THIS THROUGHOUT SESSION.]

II. GLIMPSE OF SCHEDULE

1. We are going to begin our discussion this evening by learning a bit more about you.
 - a. Take a moment and walk me through what a typical day is like for you.
[MODERATOR: Get a sense of the time crunch respondents feel during their days.]
 - b. Thank you for those answers. Now, again thinking about a typical day, what is the first word or phrase that comes to mind if I asked you to describe mealtime with your family?
 - i. Why that word/phrase?
 - ii. Is that all mealtimes or one in particular? Which one(s)?

III. MEALTIMES

1. Let's talk a bit more about mealtimes. Again, thinking about a typical day,
 - a. Does everyone in your family eat breakfast together?
 - i. How often would you say you eat breakfast as a family, if at all?
 - ii. [PROBE: Weekdays, weekends]
 - b. What about lunch? Does everyone in your family eat lunch together?
 - i. How often would you say you eat lunch as a family, if at all?
 - ii. [PROBE: Weekdays, weekends]
 - c. What about dinner?
 - i. How often would you say you eat dinner as a family, if at all?
 - ii. [PROBE: Weekdays, weekends]
 - iii. For typical dinners, does your 2-5 year old eat separately or with the family?
2. Let's talk a bit more about dinner.
 - a. What are the types of foods you make for your 2-5 year old to eat at dinner time?

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- b. Does your 2-5 year old typically eat the same foods the rest of the family eats at dinner?
 - i. [AS APPROPRIATE:] What foods are the same? What foods are different?
 - ii. How often would you say your 2-5 year old child eats something different than everyone else?
 - iii. [AS APPROPRIATE:] What are some of the reasons why your 2-5 year old eats different foods from the rest of the family
 - 1. [PROBE: likes/dislikes, nutrition needs]
- c. Now, when it is dinner time, who usually puts food on everyone's plate?
 - i. [PROBE: serving family style vs. placing food on plates]
 - ii. Do you let your 2-5 year old serve him/herself?
 - 1. [IF YES:] How often do you let him/her serve him/herself? When did you start letting him/her do so?
 - 2. [IF NO:] Why not?
 - 3. [IF NO:] When do you think children are old enough to serve themselves?
 - 4. [IF NO:] What do you think would happen if you let your 2-5 year old child serve themselves?
- d. How do you decide how much to serve your child?
 - i. [PROBE:] Do you ask your 2-5 year old how much he/she wants before you serve him/her? What makes you say that?
 - ii. [PROBE:] Does it depend on what the meal is? How so?

IV. EATING WHAT IS SERVED

- 1. Are there times when your 2-5 year old does not eat what you serve him/her?
 - a. How do you feel when he/she does not eat what you serve him/her?
- 2. Let me change the question a bit. How often, if at all, does your 2-5 year old not eat "enough" for dinner?
 - a. First, what do you define as "enough"?
 - b. What do you do in these situations? What, if anything, do you do to try to get him/her to eat more?
 - c. [IF APPROPRIATE] Is that more of everything, or more of just certain foods?
 - d. [IF APPROPRIATE] Let's pretend that I was at your home during a typical meal, and you were trying to get your 2-5 year old child to eat more of something. Before we talk about what the conversation would be like, I want you to complete a handout [DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 1]. It has a picture of a child sitting at a table with the

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statement, “But I don’t want to eat this, Mom,” in the speech bubble. Let’s pretend the picture of the mom represents you. Take a moment and write down what your typical response would be.

- i. [GO AROUND THE TABLE:] What did you write?
 - ii. So, in your house, what are these conversations like?
 - iii. [PROBE: Do you ever offer a reward? If so, what kind?]
 - iv. [PROBE: Do you ever tell your child that they will lose a privilege if they don’t eat something? If so, what type of privilege do you tell them you will take away? [PROBE: no dessert, no TV]
 - e. Does it matter where you are? For instance, are you more likely to make your 2-5 year old child eat more of dinner served at home compared to at a restaurant? What makes you say that? [PROBE: public embarrassment, child more likely to enjoy what he/she eats at a restaurant, mom spent a lot of time preparing meal/ made a special effort to make what the child likes, cost of food at restaurant]
3. What if it is a new food, one your child has not eaten before? How hard is it to try to get your 2-5 year old child to eat a new food? What makes you say that?
- a. What sort of things do you try to get your 2-5 year old child to eat a new food?
 - b. Are these tactics similar to or different from when you are just trying to get your child to eat “enough” at dinner? How so?
4. Are there any foods that you do not allow your 2-5 year old child to eat or restrict the amount that she/he can eat? What are they? Why do you limit the amount of these foods?
5. During a typical day, who are the individuals who may give your 2-5 year old meals and snacks? [PROBE: Mom, dad, grandparents, childcare provider, older siblings]
- a. Would you say that some/any of these individuals have more/better luck than you at getting your 2-5 year old to eat “enough” or to eat a new food? Who?
 - b. What makes you say that?

V. MEAL CHOICES – PAST AND FUTURE

1. We just spent a lot of time talking about mealtimes with your family. Are mealtimes with your family similar to or different from the mealtimes you remember when growing up?
 - a. How are they similar?
 - b. How are they different?
2. I am going to ask you a few questions, and I want you to answer them using a scale. If a “1” means you disagree completely and a “10” means you agree completely, which number would you use to answer the following questions:
 - a. Do you think that **what** you feed your child today will affect what foods your child will like/dislike in the future? [GO AROUND ROOM AND TAKE HAND COUNT] Why did you select that number?

- b. Do you think **how** you feed your child today will affect what foods your child will like/dislike when they are older? In other words, do you think that making your child eat something today will affect how he/she eats when they are older? [GO AROUND ROOM AND TAKE HAND COUNT] Why did you select that number? [PROBE: affects what they like/dislike, in a positive way/negative way]

VI. STRATEGIC MESSAGES

- 1. Now we are going to shift gears for a moment and take a look at some messages.

Each message is written on a card. I would like you to sort these cards.

Read all of the cards and place the card with the message that you **agree with the most** on top. Put the one that you agree with the second-most underneath that one, and so on and so forth, until you get to the card with the message that you agree with the least (which should be on the bottom).

After you have done that, you will notice that each card has a letter in the lower right-hand corner. On Handout A, please write the letters of the cards in the order in which you have stacked them. Then, we'll talk about it. [DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 2]

[NOTE TO MODERATOR: To the extent possible, try to get respondents to ignore issues with grammar and/or word choice. The key is to have them focus on the concepts.]

Concept Statements:

T: Teach your child to enjoy many different foods. Try to offer a variety of foods, encourage your children to taste them, and let them decide how much to eat.
L: Let your child listen to their body and tell you when they're full. It's something they'll use for life--to keep a healthy weight.
E: How much your child eats may not look like enough, but it probably is. Offer a variety of healthy food choices and let your child decide how much to eat. They'll eat what they need throughout the week.
M: The first time Mary had spinach, she pushed it around with her finger. On the 4th try, she put it in her mouth, but spit it out. The 7th time, Mary ate one small bite. The 11th time, Mary asked Mom for more. Offer new foods often. Patience often works better than pressure.
R: Help your child learn to love a variety of foods. Offer and encourage your child to taste foods. Reward them with praise, instead of treats when they try new foods.

- a. [GO AROUND TABLE:] Which one did you agree with the most? Take a moment and explain why you selected that one as your top choice? [PROBE: likes, main idea/takeaway]
 - i. Did this one rise to the top, or were there others that you thought were just about as good as these were? Which others, if any, were close to the top for you? What did you like about them?
 - ii. For the one you placed at the top, how likely are you to do what the card says? What makes you say that?

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- iii. Do you think it would be easy to do what the card says? What makes you say that?
 - b. [GO AROUND TABLE:] Now, let's look at the other side of the coin. Which **ONE** did you agree with the least? [IF NECESSARY:] Which **ONE** card was at the bottom of your stack? Please explain why you placed this one at the bottom
 - c. Were any of the statements confusing to you? Which one(s)? What about them were confusing?
2. Now, I want to ask a few more questions about these statements.
- a. You will notice that a number of the statements included the idea of letting your child choose how much to eat.
 - i. What was your initial reaction to this idea?
 - ii. Let's think about this idea a bit more. Are there certain meals/certain foods you can serve that make you more likely to agree with this concept? What makes you say that? [PROBE: types of healthy foods vs. other meal/dessert choices]
 - iii. [IF PUSHBACK:] Now I want to show you an additional statement that has been endorsed by pediatricians across the country [DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 3. READ ALONG WITH GROUP]

Parents should keep in mind that while they choose what foods their children should eat, and when and where they are eaten, the child should really be the one to decide whether or not to eat and how much. Parents may be tempted to pressure children to eat and make specific foods "off limits." These practices are not recommended because they lead children to overeating, disliking certain foods, and increasing their interest in 'forbidden' food items

- 1. What do you think about this statement?
- 2. Does this change your opinion at all? What makes you say that?
- 3. What do you think about the last sentence? [REREAD LAST SENTENCE]
 - a. Does that seem realistic?
 - b. How important, if at all, is it to keep that information in mind? What makes you say that?
- b. [IF NECESSARY:] Take another look at Statement E. What did you think about the statement, "They'll eat what they need throughout the week?"
 - i. What was your initial reaction to this statement?
 - ii. Does this statement seem realistic? What makes you say that?
- c. [IF NECESSARY:] Take another look at Statement M.
 - i. Is it realistic? What makes you say that?
 - ii. How likely would you be to repeatedly offer a new food to your 2-5 year old child? What makes you say that?
- d. [IF NECESSARY:] Take another look at Statement R.

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- i. Is it realistic? What makes you say that?
- ii. Think about your household. What types of things do you think you would say that would make a “reward with praise” a good way to get your child to eat new foods?

FALSE CLOSE

1. Tonight we discussed a number of issues. While I step out of the room for a moment to see if I need to cover any additional information, please answer the question on Handout 4.
[DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 4] The question on this handout reads, “Of all of the ideas we talked about this evening, which one would most likely try in your own household?”

Thank you very much for your participation! Have a great evening!