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**FOOD SAFETY RESEARCH IN  
CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS**

# FOOD SAFETY PRACTICES IN SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS: BEHAVIORAL FACTORS THAT AFFECT EMPLOYEES' PERFORMANCE

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## Introduction

- Child nutrition programs provide over 10 million breakfasts and 31 million lunches to children daily. Given the large volume of food and children served, reducing the risks associated with foodborne outbreaks is paramount.
- Employee knowledge and attitudes are important factors that impact the food safety practices used to protect children from foodborne illness outbreaks.
- Enhancing employees' food safety knowledge only provides a partial impact on workplace behaviors (Howes, McEwen, Griffiths, and Harris, 1996; Roberts et al., 2008).
- According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TpB), perceived attitudes, social pressures, and behavioral controls influence employee behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991).

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## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess employees' attitudes, social pressures, and behavioral controls to perform various food safety practices in school nutrition programs.

## Methodology

- A convenience sample of school nutrition employees from three different states was selected for this study.
- Focus groups were conducted to determine behavioral factors that affect employees' behavior and may prevent them from applying their knowledge to follow ideal food safety practices.
- Food safety practices were related to:
  - proper handling of food and work surfaces
  - proper handwashing, and
  - using a thermometer to check food temperatures.
- Questions related to the likelihood of employees following the three practices were asked.
- Factors explored, included:
  - attitudes,
  - social pressures, and
  - behavioral control.

## Results

- A total of 43 school nutrition employees participated in the focus groups.
- Employees' attitudes associated with a sense of pride for their job and having a commitment to doing their job correctly.
- Employees' perceived social pressure to engage or not in the behavior related to obeying state food safety regulations and the importance of keeping students, teachers, and staff healthy and safe.
- Employees' behavioral controls to perform the practice associated with ensuring food quality and taking time to implement the practice.

## Applications

- This study informs child nutrition professionals about three behavioral factors that could affect employees' performance related to food safety practices.
- Results from this study serve as a reference for training initiatives that target specific food handling behaviors in order to encourage employees to follow safe food practices in schools.