

# Identifying the Attitudes and Preferences of Parents and Children for Seafood: Summary of Focus Group Results<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Seafood contains high-quality protein, vitamins, and minerals that have many health benefits. The omega-3 fatty acids found in fish and other seafood can reduce the risk of heart disease and aid in the development of the brain, nerves, and eyes in children (Seafood Health Facts. 2015). Seafood can also potentially help reduce obesity in adults and children by providing a leaner alternative to red meat that has fewer calories and less saturated fat (US HHS, 2015).

Despite the clear benefits associated with eating seafood, the average family's consumption of seafood in the United States remains below levels recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). To begin to understand how to raise consumption levels, the study described in this publication focused on parents and how their seafood consumption habits may be influencing their children. Parents' seafood purchases affect the entire household. Conducting a focus group with parents about their children's seafood habits could provide key insights on current and future patterns of seafood consumption in the United States.



While previous studies examined the seafood preferences of the general population and senior population (Florida Sea Grant website, 2016; Wysocki et al., 2009), few studies have targeted the seafood preferences of parents raising children. Children's food preferences are usually developed by age five (Kluger, 2010) and are closely tied to those of their parents. Understanding how parents view seafood is important in finding the motivation behind the seafood-eating habits of their children. To better understand these relationships, the authors held a series of focus groups in Jacksonville, Florida, and Atlanta, Georgia, during which participants discussed their seafood consumption habits, concerns, and preferences. We conducted separate discussions with

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minor-aged children and their parents. The results from the focus group will help the seafood industry understand what influences a parent's purchasing approach, and how to better market to this consumer group.

## Methodology

Focus groups are used to identify the motivation behind the purchasing patterns of a particular target group. The goal of this focus group was to find the missing links between how parents' preferences influence their children's preferences for seafood. An in-depth discussion of the preferences of each parent and child toward seafood will show the differences between what children really want and what parents believe their children want. Because the purpose of focus group discussions is to gain in-depth insights, they typically have small sample sizes. A follow-up study on 1000 consumers was conducted online based on the insights from the focus group discussions.

The researchers held four focus groups consisting of parents and their minor-age children ages 10 to 14 years old in Jacksonville, Florida, and in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 7 to March 8, 2011. Each focus group lasted about 90 minutes and consisted of eight to ten parents along with their children who were not allergic to seafood products. Each parent brought one child to the focus group session. At each location, there were two focus groups: (1) parents and children who consume seafood frequently and (2) parents and children who do not consume seafood frequently. For the remainder of this report, the two groups are referred to as consumers and light-consumers, respectively.

## Parents' Discussion of Seafood

In this section of the focus group session, the parent groups discussed their households' seafood consumption habits. There was a stark difference in the consumption habits of consumers and light-consumers. Consumers tended to purchase a wider range of seafood and to buy seafood more frequently than light-consumers. Consumers also preferred fresh seafood, while light-consumers preferred mostly canned tuna or frozen fillets.

In Jacksonville, both consumer groups were concerned about the bones/scales in fresh-caught fish, which is why they preferred to buy filleted fish. They were less worried about safety issues than the Atlanta groups and more concerned about the preparation time involved in cooking seafood (compared to other meats). In Atlanta, the parent groups preferred fish fillets as well, especially the individually sealed frozen packs of fillets. They were concerned

about the freshness and place of origin when purchasing seafood.

Most light-consumers did not like the smell of fish and found cooking fish to be a difficult task. These light-consumers did not cook seafood at home, but would sometimes eat seafood at restaurants. Light-consumers preferred fast-food seafood chains, while consumers preferred local seafood restaurants. Most light-consumer parents disregarded the nutritional benefits of seafood because of their dislike of seafood in general.

When the parent groups were asked what worried them about serving children seafood, both groups mentioned the dangers of swallowing bones. Light-consumers went even further, saying that their children might not like the smell of seafood, or that they were unfamiliar with it altogether.

## Children's Discussion of Seafood

Eighty-eight percent of consumers' children liked seafood, while only 56 percent of light-consumers' children liked seafood. This result is in keeping with results in other studies showing that children's food preferences often mirror those of their parents.

Fifty percent of the children of seafood consumers said that they like seafood because it represents a healthy diet. The children in the consumer group had a better knowledge of the different species and the tastes of seafood. This consumer group liked the taste of seafood and ate it because they wanted variety in their daily diet. Interestingly, many children reported that they liked fish because of the taste, the fact that their parents eat it, and its nutritional value, but only four percent of parents mentioned nutritional value as a reason their children liked fish. This may indicate a gap between parent's perception and children's perception of consuming seafood.

The most frequent answer from children asked why they did not like seafood was the taste, followed by smell and texture. This was the same for consumers and light-consumers.

## Factors That Hinder Seafood Purchases and Consumption

One of the major limits on seafood consumption by both parents and their children is their lack of familiarity with the product. Consumers unfamiliar with seafood are likely to be more resistant to the idea of increasing their seafood consumption, and they are unlikely to try new types of

seafood. We find that children grow up accustomed to their parents' preferences for certain types of seafood over others, and their eventual food preferences usually end up similar to their parents' preferences during the children's formative years.

Light-consumers tend to consume more seafood when it is readily available. They prefer to eat seafood in fast-food restaurants more often than in full-service restaurants. Consumers, on the other hand, prefer to eat at local seafood restaurants when dining out.

Prepping fish is a concern for light-consumers who want a simple way to cook and eat seafood. While consumers are less picky about the smell and texture of seafood, light-consumers will follow past experiences and habits rather than try new types of seafood.

Parents reported that the worst worry they associate with feeding their children fish is that the children might choke on the bones. For this reason, both consumers and light-consumers prefer to buy fish with no bones such as fish fillets or canned tuna.

## Conclusions

From the qualitative analysis of these focus groups, the difference between consumers and light-consumers is substantial. Consumers who frequently eat seafood have a positive attitude toward seafood, and are willing to try new products and preparation styles. Light-consumers, on the other hand, tend to stick to what they know and are very hesitant to try new types of seafood. In our study, the children of these two groups followed in their parents' footsteps.

To gain more access to this target group of parents with minor-aged children, the seafood industry should accommodate for this difference in preference by these consumers. For frequent consumers, the industry should market more toward an authentic experience, providing new and fun ways of cooking seafood to get this group to consume more. For light-consumers, the industry should consider ready-to-eat varieties, keeping the preparation and cook time short and simple for parents. Additionally, since parents of both consumer and light-consumer groups are concerned about children choking on bones, the seafood industry may consider marketing fish fillets that are kid-friendly.

Furthermore, there is potential to improve consumer's knowledge of the nutritional values of seafood. On the one hand, parents unfamiliar with the nutritional value of seafood are more concerned about the taste and their children's acceptance of eating seafood. On the other hand, children familiar with the nutrition are more willing to try a variety of seafood. We followed up the focus group with a large-scale online survey of 1,000 consumers. We found that providing nutritional information similar to the nutrition facts panel on raw seafood could increase consumers' willingness to pay for seafood (Bi et al. 2016). Thus, the industry should consider providing information about the nutrition of fresh/raw seafood to parents with minor-aged children.

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