

# Learning to Eat

## Some projects have started to teach people how to eat

In Bolivia, in the high Andes of Northern Potosí nutritionist Yesmina Cruz and colleagues asked young mothers about their farm work, food and children. Yesmina speaks Quechua, the native language, and is a good listener. She discovered that some young mothers avoided nursing their babies for several days after they were born. Many threw away the colostrum. Some put drops of urine in the babies' mouths, or started feeding them solid food before they were ready for it.

### Unable to use new knowledge

So Yesmina and colleagues designed a course on feeding babies and small children. She interviewed the women twice, before and after giving them the course, to study the effects of the training. All of the women learned new information about feeding their children, but some couldn't use it. Some of the young mothers had uncooperative husbands and mothers-in-law, who demanded that the young women spend more time in the fields.

Northern Potosí is the poorest region, in the poorest country in South America. But agricultural yields have steadily climbed since the 1990s, with new potato varieties and fertilizers, plus improved roads that allow more produce to be sold on the open market. As families produce more food and make more money, women's farm labour becomes more valuable. The mothers in the study knew that they should prepare special meals for small children, and feed them five times a day, but at snack time the mother was often miles from home following the sheep up the canyon, with her baby on her back, and was unable to feed the child.



*If women have to work harder to grow more food, childhood malnutrition may increase even as farm yields improve*

### Conclusions

Ironically, as people grew more food, some of the smallest children still suffered from malnutrition, which was partly caused by infectious diseases. If mothers do not have enough time to care for small children, their health may suffer. Higher yielding agriculture often means more work, which takes mothers away from their children.

Training the mothers may be of little help, unless other family members, especially fathers and grandmothers, are also brought on board. Eating is a learned behaviour, and people need help figuring out what makes a proper diet. Just growing more food is not always the answer for malnutrition, and can even be counter-productive. People who develop training courses need to consider the broader social context, including household dynamics, division of labour, and not just what people have to eat, but how they eat it.

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