



Self-reported and observed feeding practices of Rhode Island Head Start teachers: Knowing what not to do



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Through their feeding practices, adult caregivers play an important role in shaping children's eating behaviors. However, the feeding practices of child care teachers have received little attention. The purpose of this study was to compare child care teachers' self-reported feeding practices and observed feeding practices during a preschool meal.

Methods: Rhode Island Head Start teachers ($n = 85$) were observed during breakfast and lunch where feeding practices were coded using a tool adapted from the Environmental Policy Assessment and Observation (EPAO) tool. Teachers completed a questionnaire adapted from the EPAO Self-Report to capture self-reported feeding practices. Agreement between reported and observed was compared by percent agreement.

Results: Teachers were predominantly White (89%) and female (98%). There was a higher level of agreement among self-reported and observed controlling feeding practices (78.8–97.6% agreement) compared to healthful feeding practices (11.8–20.0% agreement).

Conclusions: Although self-report measures are typically used to capture feeding practices, there are inconsistencies between self-report and observation measures. The inconsistencies found among healthful self-reported and observed feeding practices have implications for future research protocols, measurement refinement, and training of child care teachers.

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1. Introduction

Childhood obesity is a serious public health issue. Early prevention efforts targeting preschool-age children is of particular importance given that taste preference and eating behaviors develop early in life (Birch & Fisher, 1998; Davison & Birch, 2001; Grimm, Kim, Yaroch, & Scanlon, 2014; Skinner, Carruth, Bounds, & Ziegler, 2002), and often persist into adulthood (Kelder, Perry, Klepp, & Lytle, 1994). Mothers have been considered the primary caregivers during this critical period (McBride & Mills, 1993; Nicklas et al., 2001), and their feeding practices during meals

have been shown to influence a child's dietary intake (Hoerr et al., 2009; Papaioannou et al., 2013; Park, Li, & Birch, 2015; Vereecken, Rovner, & Maes, 2010) and weight status (Cardel et al., 2012; Hughes, Shewchuk, Baskin, Nicklas, & Qu, 2008; Lumeng et al., 2012). However, an increase in the annual enrollment of full day child care programs from 34 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016) suggests a need to examine the feeding practices of child care teachers (Dev, McBride, & STRONG Kids Research Team, 2013; Larson, Ward, Neelon, & Story, 2011). In order to do this, appropriate measurement tools that capture feeding practices of teachers are needed.

Measuring feeding practices of teachers is a nascent area and of the few studies that have done this, most have used self-report measures, which can be easy to use and have less participant burden (Dev et al., 2013; Dev, McBride, Speirs, Donovan, & Cho, 2014; Hendy & Raudenbush, 2000; Hendy, 2002; Larson et al., 2011). Major limitations of using self-report measures (e.g.,

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surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, interviews), however, include response bias, such as social desirability, as well as problems with memory, judgments and generalizations (Hughes et al., 2013; Lanigan, 2012; Lumeng, Kaplan-Sanoff, Shuman, & Kannan, 2008; Mita, Li, & Goodell, 2013; Sharma et al., 2013). Rather than capturing actual feeding practices that occur, self-report measures may instead be tapping into a teacher's perception of what feeding practices they think they are using during meals (Hughes et al., 2007). Few studies have used observation to capture teacher feeding practices, which may provide valuable information beyond self-reported data.

Given that most of the feeding practice literature has been conducted with parents, this research helps inform the measurement of teacher feeding practices. For example, several studies with mothers and their children are novel in that they have directly observed the caregiver-child feeding relationship in naturalistic environments (Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015; Gardner, 2000; Hughes et al., 2013; Edelson, Mokdad, & Martin, 2016; Fries, Martin, & van der Horst, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Pesch et al., 2016). In particular, observations are effective in providing insight to the verbal and nonverbal contexts that occur during feeding (Hughes et al., 2013). Of the studies completed with parents, most focus only on measuring the feeding environment in one setting at one given time, rather than examining whether feeding practices are stable across environments with other influential caregivers such as child care teachers (Hughes et al., 2013).

Combined, mixed-method approaches utilizing both self-report and observation provide the opportunity to draw on the strengths of each methodology, enabling a more rigorous study to draw stronger inferences than either method alone (Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015; Hughes et al., 2013; Zoellner & Harris, 2017). For example, mixed-method approaches have been utilized to evaluate mother-child mealtime behaviors (Haycraft & Blissett, 2008; Sacco, Bentley, Carby-Shields, Borja, & Goldman, 2007). However, a systematic review by Bergmeier, Skouteris, and Hetherington (2015) found no significant relationships between self-reported and observed maternal feeding practices (Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015). This review also found the most widely used measure of self-reported parent feeding practices, the Child Feeding Questionnaire, was not always significantly associated with observational measures of parent feeding practices (Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015; Lewis & Worobey, 2011). Although one would not expect the two measures to be identical, one would expect that the observational coding system would capture similar constructs as the traditional and validated self-report instrument chosen for their study (Hughes et al., 2013; Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015; Vaughn, Tabak, Bryant, & Ward, 2013). In contrast to the home environment, teacher feeding practices in a child care setting have shown moderate congruency between observed and self-reported assessments of feeding practices (Hughes et al., 2007). Given the more structured feeding environment of a child care center compared to a home, other external factors that influence feeding behaviors may come into play. For example, child care environments that enforce nutrition policies and programs may influence the feeding practices of teachers during meal times (Dev et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2007).

Given the mixed results of the caregiver-child feeding practice literature and the limited research with child care teachers in particular, it is important to further evaluate the agreement between self-reported and observed measures with child care teachers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to compare self-reported and observed feeding practices in a group of Rhode

Island (RI) Head Start teachers. Given the more structured environment of Head Start centers, we hypothesized that self-reported and observed feeding practices among child care teachers would be higher in agreement, compared to a home environment.

2. Materials and methods

Data utilized for this paper are from a larger study that examined the relationship between teacher nutrition knowledge, attitudes, diet and mealtime behaviors in Head Start classrooms (Holloran, 2016). Head Start is a United States federally funded, comprehensive child development program that serves low-income children from ages 3 to 5. Federal regulations require most Head Start centers to participate in other federal programs, such as the Child Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) (Food and Nutrition Service, 2016), and employ a diverse set of mealtime policies that contribute to the development and socialization of children during meals (Office of Head Start, 2015).

2.1. Recruitment and procedures

All RI Head Start centers were eligible and encouraged to participate in this study. In order to recruit Head Start teachers, the RI Department of Education CACFP Division Director notified all RI Head Start directors about the study. Center directors indicated their interest by signing an approval letter and inviting all Head Start teachers at their center to participate. Once an interested teacher contacted the researcher, the study purpose – to examine the nutrition attitudes and beliefs of Head Start teachers – and protocol was described before scheduling a time and date for observation at either breakfast or lunch. Teachers were told the details of the self-report measure (questions about their health, job, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors toward nutrition), but were not told what researchers were specifically coding for during mealtime observations. Consent forms were signed before the scheduled observation. Following the observation, Head Start teachers completed a self-administered survey (described below). Those who participated in a classroom observation and completed all questionnaires were given a \$35 gift card as a compensation for their time and effort. The study was approved by the University of Rhode Island Institutional Review Board for research involving human subjects.

2.2. Observation measure

The Environment and Policy Assessment and Observation (EPAO) tool captures nutrition and physical activity environments in child care settings (Smith et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2008), and includes three general components for both the nutrition and physical activity sections (i.e., provisions, practices, policies). For the purpose of this study, only the nutrition practice-related items were used and expanded to examine staff feeding practices (EPAO-Expanded Feeding Practices or EPAO-EFP). Previous research has shown adequate reliability and validity of the EPAO tool with preschool-aged children in child care settings (Benjamin et al., 2007; Bower et al., 2008; Gubbels et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2008; Ward, Mazzucca, McWilliams, & Hales, 2015).

The EPAO-EFP is an observational checklist that captures mealtime behaviors – some items capture relative frequency of a behavior (No/1–2 times/3 + times) and other items capture the occurrence of a behavior (Yes/No). Before observations were conducted in the classroom, observers were trained to code for teacher feeding practices. During their training and actual mealtime observations with recruited teachers, observers utilized the *Staff Mealtime Behaviors Training Manual*, adapted from the EPAO, as a

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