

# An Exploratory Analysis of Child Feeding Beliefs and Behaviors Included in Food Blogs Written by Mothers of Preschool-Aged Children

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study analyzed child feeding beliefs and behaviors, types of recipes, and their associations in blogs focused on child feeding.

**Design:** The authors selected 13 blogs using purposive snowball sampling, from which 158 blog posts were sampled and coded using directed qualitative content analysis.

**Variables Measured:** Child feeding beliefs and behaviors and types of recipes were coded using schemes developed from existing literature.

**Analysis:** Code frequencies were calculated. Chi-square tests for independence examined associations between child feeding and recipe codes. Bonferroni corrections were applied:  $P < .05/(n \text{ tests})$ .

**Results:** Child feeding beliefs and behaviors were coded in 78% and 49% of posts, respectively. Beliefs about children's food preferences (48% of posts) and involving children in food preparation (27% of posts) were the most frequent codes. Recipes were included in 66% of posts. Most recipes were for mixed dishes (32% of recipes), followed by sweets and desserts (19% of recipes). Vegetable recipes were more likely in posts that included behavior encouraging balance and variety ( $\chi^2 [1, n = 104] = 18.54; P < .001$ ).

**Conclusions and Implications:** Blog posts contained information that may influence readers' child feeding practices. Future research should explore how mothers use blogs to learn about child feeding.

**Key Words:** blogs, child feeding practices, recipes, social media, mothers (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2015; ■:1-11.)

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2011–2012, nearly 1 in 4 preschool-aged children were overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> To reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity, more research is needed regarding the risk and protective factors that can be modified during infancy and early childhood.<sup>2</sup> Child feeding practices are one such modifiable influence<sup>3,4</sup> and include

decisions about what to feed children (ie, types and portion sizes of food and beverages) and more nuanced beliefs and behaviors about how to feed children (eg, amount of control exerted over children's eating behavior, whether food is used to soothe or reward, and establishing mealtime/snack routines).<sup>5</sup> Mothers' child feeding practices in particular may influence childhood obesity risk because

mothers tend to spend the most time on child feeding tasks such as purchasing groceries, preparing food, and eating with children.<sup>6</sup> Overtly restrictive or indulgent (ie, highly permissive, child-controlled) feeding practices are likely to promote childhood obesity,<sup>7-9</sup> whereas responsive feeding practices that are prompt, contingent on children's hunger and fullness cues, and developmentally appropriate may promote children's self-regulatory skills and reduce childhood obesity risk.<sup>10,11</sup>

Associations between child feeding practices and childhood obesity may be partially mediated by the foods that mothers offer and children consume.<sup>12</sup> Data from the 2008 Feeding Infants and Toddlers Study revealed that 86% of 2- to 3-year-old children consumed foods of little nutritional value (eg, sweetened beverages, sweets, salty snacks) whereas < 15% consumed highly nutritious foods such as dark green or deep yellow vegetables in a day.<sup>13</sup> Among preschool-aged children, indulgent feeding practices have been associated with higher fat

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consumption<sup>8</sup> and lower vegetable, fruit, and dairy consumption.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, responsive feeding practices have been associated with lower sweetened beverage consumption,<sup>8</sup> higher home availability of vegetables and fruits, and higher consumption of vegetables and dairy.<sup>15</sup> More research is needed on how child feeding beliefs and behaviors influence the types of foods that mothers offer to their children.

Despite their potentially important role in childhood obesity prevention, there is limited evidence on how mothers acquire their child feeding practices.<sup>16</sup> Existing research has primarily focused on maternal factors including demographic characteristics (eg, income, education), mental health (eg, depression, eating pathology), and maternal weight status,<sup>17-20</sup> or on child factors including child weight status, appetitive traits, and temperament.<sup>21-24</sup> Few studies have examined how broader contextual influences such as peers and media (eg, magazines, television, Web sites) influence child feeding practices. Social norms that are transmitted through peers and media may influence maternal beliefs about child feeding (eg, expectations about children's food preferences), child feeding behaviors (eg, involving children in food preparation), and the types of foods that mothers offer.<sup>16,25-27</sup>

The Internet has created new media contexts that may convey information and social norms related to child feeding practices. In 2014, 91% of parents used the Internet and over 80% of online mothers used a social media platform such as Facebook (81%), Pinterest (40%), or Instagram (30%).<sup>28</sup> One study of primarily white college-educated mothers found that 75% read blogs, which suggests that blogs are also highly accessed by some mothers.<sup>29</sup> Previous studies found that mothers from diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds use Web sites and social media to obtain general parenting information and social support.<sup>28,30,31</sup> Because of the potential reach of information shared on Internet-based media such as blogs, research is needed on the information about child feeding practices that mothers are likely to consume.

Blogs are generally defined as publicly available, chronologically orga-

nized, frequently updated Web pages that focus on specific topics. Blog posts are individual dated entries that contain digital content such as text, photos, videos, and/or hyperlinks to other Web pages. Many blogs have social networking features that promote communication and community among bloggers and blog readers who may not know each other offline (eg, comment threads). Food blogs typically include text about food culture, cooking, and eating, food photography, and recipes.<sup>32,33</sup> The purpose of the current study was to describe information conveyed in food blogs focused on child feeding that were written by mothers of preschool-aged children, to begin to explore how these media may influence readers' child feeding practices. Specifically, the first aim was to describe the child feeding beliefs and behaviors that bloggers endorsed and/or modeled in their blog post text. The second aim was to identify the types of recipes that were included in blog posts, because recipes may convey social norms about the foods and beverages that mothers offer to their children. The third aim was to explore the associations between child feeding beliefs and behaviors and the types of recipes.

## METHODS

This study was reviewed by the Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board and was classified as exempt. Consistent with the guidelines presented by the Association of Internet Researchers,<sup>34</sup> this article does not disclose inherently identifying information (eg, blog names, Web addressees) in an effort to protect the privacy of bloggers whose content was included in this observational study. Specific demographic characteristics of the bloggers and their children (eg, race and ethnicity, family size) are also not disclosed; combined with the small sample size and highly specific sampling criteria, this information may lead to identification of the blogs included in this study.

### Sampling Procedure

The researchers used purposive snowball sampling<sup>35</sup> to identify blogs. The

Figure displays the results of the sampling procedure. Blogs were eligible for study inclusion if they satisfied the following criteria: (1) the blog was publicly available and updated within the past month; (2) blog content represented the views of the blogger, not those of a business or other organization; (3) the blog description stated or implied that its primary focus was on child and/or family feeding; (4) the blogger was parenting at least 1 preschool-aged child (approximately aged 2-5 years) in 2013; and (5) a minimum of 25% of blog posts were relevant to child feeding during each quarter of the study period: March 1, 2013 to February 28, 2014.

To identify an initial sample of blogs that were relevant to the study aims and could be accessed easily by mothers through a general Web search, the first author entered the phrase *food blogs for moms* into multiple Web search engines (ie, Google, Yahoo, DuckDuckGo) in May, 2013. An article entitled "The Top 100 Mom Food Blogs of 2013!" published in April, 2013 by a parenting Web site, *Babble*,<sup>36</sup> was among the top search results across search engines. The 100 blogs included in this article were selected as the initial sample. Similar to a previous study of health-related blogs,<sup>37</sup> the hyperlinked lists of blog recommendations (ie, blog rolls) included in eligible blogs from the initial sample were used to identify a snowball sample. Six of 16 eligible blogs from the initial sample included blog rolls, which yielded 168 unique blogs for the snowball sample. A total of 24 blogs from the initial and snowball samples satisfied the first 4 inclusion criteria. These blogs had a mean of 98 posts during the study period (range, 11-247; SD, 61; median, 82).

To determine whether blogs satisfied the fifth inclusion criteria, the study team developed a coding manual that included descriptions and examples of blog posts that were relevant or not to child feeding. Posts that mentioned topics related to child feeding (eg, children's food preferences, recipe suggestions for children, managing mealtime behaviors) at least once were coded as relevant. Coders (ie, the first author and a research assistant) trained by

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