

A Qualitative Investigation of Parents' Perspectives About Feeding Practices With Siblings Among Racially/Ethnically and Socioeconomically Diverse Households

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Little is known about parent feeding practices with siblings. Because this is a new area of research, qualitative research is needed to understand parents' perspectives about how they make decisions about feeding siblings and whether they adapt their feeding practices dependent on sibling characteristics such as weight status. The main objective of the current study was to describe parent feeding practices with siblings.

Design: Qualitative cross-sectional study with 88 parents with at least 2 siblings.

Setting: Parents were interviewed in their homes in Minneapolis/St Paul Minnesota.

Participants: Parents were from racially/ethnically diverse (64% African American) and low-income households (77% earned < \$35,000/y).

Main Outcome Measure: Parents' perceptions of feeding practices with siblings.

Analysis: Qualitative interviews were coded using a hybrid deductive and inductive content analysis approach.

Results: Parents indicated that they used child food preferences, in-the-moment decisions, and planned meals when deciding how to feed siblings. Additionally, the majority of parents indicated that they managed picky eating by making 1 meal or giving some flexibility/leeway to siblings about having other food options. Furthermore, parents endorsed using different feeding practices (eg, food restriction, portion control, pressure-to-eat, opportunities for healthful eating) with siblings dependent on child weight status or age/developmental stage.

Conclusions and Implications: Findings from the current study may inform future research regarding how to measure parent feeding practices with siblings in the home environment and the development of interventions tailored for families with multiple children in the home. Future quantitative research is needed to confirm these qualitative findings.

Key Words: parent feeding practices, siblings, weight status, childhood obesity, qualitative (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2016;48:496-504.)

Accepted May 6, 2016.

INTRODUCTION

Previous quantitative research on parent feeding practices has shown significant associations between controlling parent feeding practices (ie, restriction; pressure-to-eat) and unhealthy dietary intake and higher weight status in children.¹⁻⁶ However, very little is known about parent feeding practices when there is more than 1 child in the home, even though it is common for school-aged children to have a sibling.⁷ In addition, very few studies (all quantitative) have examined whether parents adapt their feeding practices with siblings dependent on child-specific characteristics

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure: The authors' conflict of interest disclosures can be found online with this article on www.jneb.org.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2016.05.002>

such as weight status (ie, 1 child is healthy weight and 1 child is overweight versus 2 siblings of similar weight status), age, sex, or child temperament.⁸ More evidence in this area, especially qualitative in nature, is necessary for developing future research questions and hypotheses, designing valid parent feeding practices measures, and creating family-based obesity prevention interventions for families with siblings.

Prior quantitative research examining parent feeding practices with siblings has been limited and inconclusive.⁹⁻¹¹ For example, research has indicated that parents use more food restriction feeding practices when they are concerned about the weight/size of 1 sibling, when 1 sibling is a picky eater, or when 1 sibling is heavier than the other sibling.^{9,10,12,13} Additionally, parents use more pressure-to-eat feeding practices with siblings who are less food responsive (ie, do not respond to environmental food cues), thinner, or who eat slower.^{12,13} However, other studies have shown no significant associations between maternal feeding practices (ie, restriction, pressure-to-eat) and sibling overweight and nonoverweight status^{9,14} or that mothers use restrictive feeding practices with both children irrespective of their children's weight status.¹⁵ Qualitative studies are needed to help understand these inconsistent findings. Thus, the main research questions addressed in the current study are (1) How do parents describe their approach to feeding siblings? (2) Do parents engage in different feeding practices with siblings? and (3) Do parents engage in different feeding practices based on child-specific characteristics (eg, weight status, picky eating, age, sex, temperament)?

METHODS

Study Design and Population

Data for the current analysis are from a substudy called *Family Meals, LIVE!: Sibling Edition (SE)*,¹¹ which is linked to a larger study called *Family Meals, LIVE! (FML)*.¹⁶ *FML* is a mixed-methods, cross-sectional, observational study designed to identify key family and home environment factors related to child eating behaviors that increase or minimize the risk for childhood obesity. The *FML* study was guided by Family Systems Theory,¹¹ which recognizes

multiple levels of familial influences (ie, parent, sibling, family level) on a child's eating behaviors. The sample consisted of children 6–12 years old ($n = 120$) and their families from low-income and racially/ethnically diverse households in the Minneapolis/St Paul area (Table 1).

SE followed families 1 year after baseline measures were collected for *FML*. One of the main aims of the *SE* study was to examine whether and how parents tailor their feeding practices in response to the eating behaviors of 2 siblings in the same household. Of the original 120 families who participated in *FML*, 88 families were eligible and consented to participate in *SE*. Eligibility criteria included having a sibling between the ages of 2 and 18 years, the sibling living with the *FML* study child 100% of the time, and the sibling having the same parent/primary caregiver

as the *FML* study child. If a family had more than 2 children living in the same home, the child closest in age to the *FML* study child was classified as “the sibling.” Data collection occurred during a home visit that lasted approximately 2 hours. Family members were consented/assented by trained research staff to participate in the study, and the parent/primary caregiver completed an online survey and an in-depth qualitative interview. Comprehensive study procedures have been previously documented elsewhere.¹⁶ All study protocols were approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board.

Qualitative Interview

A semi-structured interview was created to identify primary caregiver's/parent's perspectives on parent feeding practices

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Parents and Siblings in the Sibling Edition Study

Sociodemographic Characteristics	Parent, n (%) n = 88	Target Child, n (%) n = 88	Sibling, n (%) n = 88
Sex			
Female	83 (94)	41 (47)	49 (56)
Male	5 (6)	47 (53)	39 (44)
Mean (SD) age in years	34 (7)	9 (2)	9 (4)
Weight status ^a			
Overweight (adult ≥ 25 BMI/children ≥ 85 percentile)	72 (82)	46 (52)	36 (42)
Healthy weight (adult < 25 BMI/children < 85 percentile)	15 (17)	42 (48)	50 (58)
Race			
Black/African American	56 (64)	60 (68)	61 (69)
White	16 (18)	8 (9)	8 (9)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	3 (3)	4 (4.5)	4 (4.5)
Asian	4 (5)	4 (4.5)	4 (4.5)
Mixed/other	9 (10)	12 (14)	11 (13)
Employment status			
Full-time	25 (28)	–	–
Part-time	18 (21)	–	–
Stay-at-home caregiver (intentional)	10 (11)	–	–
Unemployed, seeking work	16 (18)	–	–
Not working	9 (22)	–	–
Annual household income			
< \$20,000	45 (52)	–	–
\$20,000 to \$35,000	22 (25)	–	–
\$35,000 to \$50,000	9 (9)	–	–
\$50,000 to \$75,000	9 (9)	–	–
\$75,000+	3 (5)	–	–

^aWeight status is missing for 2 siblings ($n = 2$) and 1 parent ($n = 1$).

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