

Maternal Parenting Behaviors during Childhood Relate to Weight Status and Fruit and Vegetable Intake of College Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Examine how maternal parenting behaviors in childhood, both general and feeding specific, relate to weight status and fruit and vegetable consumption in college students.

Design: Retrospective surveys on maternal behaviors and assessments on the college-aged child's current anthropometric measures and dietary intakes.

Participants: College students (n = 424; 66% women).

Main Outcome Measures: Students' weight, height, waist circumference, fruit and vegetable intakes, students' reports on mothers' general and feeding-specific parenting behaviors during childhood.

Analysis: Correlation and regression analyses tested how maternal behaviors in childhood related to students' body mass index, waist circumference, and fruit and vegetable intake.

Results: Mothers' psychological control during childhood was associated with higher body mass index and waist circumference in students, and behavioral control was associated with lower waist circumference. Parent-centered feeding behaviors related to lower fruit and vegetable intakes of students, whereas child-centered feeding behaviors related to higher fruit and vegetable intakes.

Conclusions and Implications: Findings suggest that parental use of behavioral control and child-centered feeding practices and minimal use of psychological control and parent-centered feeding practices during childhood may promote a child's healthful weight status and fruit and vegetable consumption in young adulthood, specifically during college.

Key Words: feeding behavior, parenting, maternal behavior, body weights and measures, eating (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2012;44:556-563.)

INTRODUCTION

College is a transitional time of moving away from parental supervision and control. Students must adapt their behavior to the new environment to maintain health and nutritional status. This transition challenges many students, as it does anyone moving away from home for the first time. According to a recent college survey, 35% of students were overweight, and only 5% consumed

the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.¹ If it is true that parenting plays a key role in developing the child's health and nutrition behaviors, then students who experienced desirable parenting behaviors in childhood should be those who have the most desirable weight and dietary intakes in college.

Health- and food-related behaviors develop during childhood within familial environments.² Thus, parents play important roles regarding their

child's weight status and dietary intakes via their parenting behaviors in general and in feeding-specific situations in particular.^{3,4} The Social Cognitive Theory posits that behaviors are learned through individual observation and social experiences with people and the surrounding environment.⁵ As such, this theory is the behavioral framework selected here to study these relationships. Examination of the associations between parenting behaviors and the child's weight and dietary variables would provide additional support to encourage or discourage particular types of parental feeding behaviors during childhood. Little is known, however, about whether and how such parenting behaviors might have "long-term" effects on children. In other words, we know little about how such behaviors in childhood relate to the child's food intake and weight status in the late adolescence of college.

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General Parenting Behaviors

The term *parenting* is defined variously in general parenting research, but the 2 broad constructs are parental *support*, or acceptance of the child, and parental *control*, or demandingness of the child.⁶ Support refers to the affective nature of the parent-child relationship and is shown by acceptance of and involvement with the child.⁷ Control consists of both psychological control (attempt to manipulate the child's emotions and feelings) and behavioral control (attempts to manage or regulate the child's behaviors).⁸ Support and behavioral control have been linked with positive child behaviors, including psychological well-being and academic performance, whereas psychological control alone has been associated with negative child behaviors, such as substance abuse.⁹ Although less research has been conducted in the health and nutrition fields in relation to general parenting, some studies have reported positive relationships between parental support and healthful weight status in children.¹⁰⁻¹² The influence of psychological control and behavioral control on a child's dietary intakes are less clear and need to be studied, especially as relating to child health outcomes in young adulthood, specifically in college.

Feeding-Specific Behaviors

In feeding situations, researchers have studied parent-centered practices most often, in which the parents directly assert control to get the child to eat what the parents want. Researchers have especially focused on practices in which parents restrict food or pressure the child to eat certain types of foods. Such practices have been negatively related in some studies to the child's weight status, food preferences, and food intakes^{3,4,13} but not in others.^{14,15} In contrast, child-centered feeding behaviors have been linked with desirable food intakes in middle-income children,¹⁶⁻¹⁹ wherein parents indirectly control the child by helping and encouraging the child to internalize the goal of eating a healthful diet.²⁰ It is unclear, however, whether and how parenting be-

haviors, both general and feeding specific, during childhood influence health and nutrition outcomes of children in young adulthood, specifically in college.

The objective of this study was to examine whether and to what extent maternal general parenting and feeding-specific behaviors during childhood were associated with college students' weight status, waist circumference (WC), and fruit and vegetable (FV) intake. It was expected that maternal support, behavioral control, and child-centered feeding behaviors during childhood would be associated with more optimal anthropometric measures and dietary intakes in college students, whereas psychological control and parent-centered feeding practices would be associated with less optimal values of these variables.

METHODS

Design and Participants

This was a cross-sectional study using a convenience sample of college students from a multistate intervention (an online 10-lesson weight maintenance program) conducted from Fall 2007 to Fall 2008 at 8 universities in the United States.²¹ To be enrolled in the multistate intervention, students had to be aged 18 to 24 years, non-nutrition and nonexercise majors, have a body mass index (BMI) greater than or equal to 18.5 at baseline and remain enrolled in the same university 15 months after the baseline measurements. A subsample of students ($n = 424$) was recruited for this study from 3 of the 8 universities in Alabama, Michigan, and South Dakota.

Procedures

For the larger multistate intervention, research staff recruited students through fliers, newspaper advertisements, and in-class announcements. Students, who completed an online informed consent and questionnaires, including a FV screener, scheduled an individual anthropometric assessment, at which trained staff measured weight, height, and WC. Immediately after the anthropometric measurements, the research staff in 3 states verbally recruited participants for

this substudy. Students who agreed to participate signed an additional consent form and were given as much time as needed to complete the parenting questionnaires, averaging 5 to 10 minutes, regarding their mothers' parenting behaviors. The entire in-person assessment took 25 to 30 minutes to complete. The same instruments, but reworded for parents, were then mailed to the parents of students who agreed to the additional survey of their parents. The parents rated their own parenting behaviors during the time their child was in elementary school and returned the questionnaires to the researchers. The institutional review boards at all 3 participating universities approved this substudy.

Measurements

Maternal parenting behaviors during childhood. For general parenting, participants completed a 30-item instrument, Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory.²² The instrument was originally developed to assess the child's perception of parents' acceptance, psychological control, and behavioral control in general situations. Items were reworded for the college-age participants to reflect their mothers' behavior while the students were in early elementary school. Maternal acceptance was the degree to which a mother demonstrated support of and involvement with the child (eg, "my mother was a person who made me feel better after talking over my worries with her"). Psychological control was the degree to which a parent attempted to control the child through psychological pressure techniques such as guilt induction (ie, "my mother was a person who told me of all the things she had done for me"). Behavioral control was the degree to which a parent controlled the child's behavior by clear, consistent guidelines (ie, "my mother was a person who believed in having a lot of rules and sticking with them"). Responses were scored with a 3-point Likert scale, in which 1 = "not at all like my mother," 2 = "somewhat like my mother," and 3 = "a lot like my mother," with higher scores indicated greater use of the behaviors. The Cronbach α for acceptance, psychological control, and

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