

Qualitative Analysis of Dietary Behaviors in Picture Book Fiction for 4- to 8-Year-Olds

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Picture books may facilitate parents' efforts to decrease pickiness and other undesirable food habits in children. This study conducted a content analysis of dietary behaviors and feeding strategies featured in fictional picture books compared with those discussed in the research literature.

Design: Several databases were searched for fictional picture books about dietary behavior, published between 2000 and 2016, accessible in the US, available in print format, and designated for 4- to 8-year-olds.

Phenomenon of Interest: Messages about dietary behavior in picture book fiction.

Analysis: Stories were systematically coded using holistic, data-driven, and evaluation coding methods. The final set of codes was examined for themes and patterns.

Results: Of the 104 books, 50% featured a specific eating behavior, 21% lifestyle/eating patterns, 20% food-related sensations and emotions, and 9% table manners.

Conclusions and Implications: Books about dietary behaviors are abundant but the topic coverage is unbalanced. Problem behaviors portrayed in books overlap those discussed in the research literature. However, problem-solving strategies and actions do not align with those endorsed by nutrition professionals. Messages vary in their complexity (in terms of their plot and/or language), ranging from clear and direct to vague, sophisticated, unresolved, conflicting, or controversial. Recommendations for practitioners are discussed.

Key Words: children, picture books, eating habits, pickiness (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2016;48:602-608.)

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INTRODUCTION

Children's attitudes toward food and nutrition are established during the preschool years.¹ Adults are instrumental in children's eating habits not only because they are caregivers who provide food but also because of their influence through behavior modeling, encouragement, rule setting, and communicating nutrition information.^{2,3} It is common knowledge that parents face multiple challenges when it comes to feeding young children. These challenges have been described in the literature as picky eating, food likes and dislikes, food jags, food rejection, eating a

limited variety of food, demands to prepare or serve food in a specific way, food neophobia, food tantrums, parent-child power struggles over feeding, slowness in eating, playing with food, not wanting foods on the plate to touch each other, and difficulty remaining seated at the table or engaging in mealtime conversation.⁴⁻⁶

In 1 study, 46% of 4,018 preschoolers were identified as picky at some point in their childhood.⁷ Although pickiness is transient for most children, it can persist for some time. For parents of a picky eater, feeding a child is a time-consuming task, a test of patience, and a source of ongoing stress owing to the chronic

nature of the problem. Mascola et al⁵ reported that although pickiness declined as children grew older, 40% of picky eaters in their study remained picky for ≥ 2 years.

Feeding problems in childhood may not be entirely preventable but they could be lessened and shortened through nutrition education and certain feeding practices. It is likely, however, that some parents do not devote sufficient time and effort to recommended feeding approaches. Lack of knowledge and experience aside, raising young children and balancing work and home responsibilities can be overwhelming. On the other hand, parents may be more willing to give greater attention to fostering good eating habits if nutrition education is not perceived as an additional burden but instead fits easily and naturally into a daily routine.

Picture books have the potential to be an easy and convenient form of nutrition education at home. Despite the increased presence of technology in the lives of children, reading remains a popular activity. An estimated 80% to 87% of parents read to their young children at least 3 times/wk and 76% prefer print books over

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ebooks.^{8,9} Books can be read slowly and multiple times at parents' convenience. Furthermore, engaging children in book discussion provides an opportunity for children to express their understanding of the story's message and to relate it to personal behavior.

To date, few studies have examined the nutritional content of children's literature. Their focus was largely on the types and frequencies of foods depicted in picture books.¹⁰⁻¹² Dietary behaviors have not been examined. This study conducted content analysis of fictional picture books about dietary behavior that were published in the past decade. The main objectives were to describe dietary behaviors and feeding strategies featured in books and to compare behaviors and strategies depicted in books with those discussed in research literature.

METHODS

Book Sample Selection

This study did not involve human participants and thus did not require approval by the University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board. The researcher initially searched for any books about food, nutrition, and dietary behavior that met the following inclusion criteria: a picture book (in prose or story in rhyme), fiction or nonfiction, published between 2000 and 2016, published or accessible in the US, available in print format, and identified by the publisher as appropriate for children aged 4–8 years. The researcher excluded books that were self-published or available only in electronic format, poetry, cookbooks, and food art books. Books published in the past 15 years were targeted to allow for a meaningful comparison of messages in books and professional guidelines on feeding children available during the same period.

Primary search databases included *The Children's Core Collection*, *Children's Literature Comprehensive Database*, and *Publishers Weekly*. In addition, the researcher searched Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and Goodreads Web sites, which were more likely to be accessed by parents than previously mentioned databases that are typically used by librarians and educators. Three trained undergraduate research assistants searched book databases independently. Each

entered books that met the inclusion criteria into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft Office 2013, Microsoft Excel v15, Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA, 2013). Search words and phrases and their variations included: food, nutrition, meal, family meal, breakfast, lunch, dinner, specific foods (grains, carrots, berries, bread, butter, cheese, yogurt, carrots, cabbage, ice cream, candy, chocolate, cake, cupcake, soup, pizza, meatballs, meat, tomato, greens, pasta, etc), beverages/drinks including specific products (lemonade, juice, milk, water), sweets, fun food, party food, plate, hunger, fullness, eating habits, diet, food likes, food dislikes, food tasting, everyday food, sometimes food, picky/fussy eater, messy eater, slow eater, and trying new food. Upon completion of the search, the 3 Excel spreadsheets were merged. The combined database was checked for redundancies and each book's compliance with the inclusion criteria.

Sample Size

The entire sample included 467 books. This study focused on fictional stories. Thus, 194 nonfiction books were excluded. Of the remaining 273 fiction books, 5 (1.8%) could not be accessed through the local university and public libraries, bookstores, or interlibrary loan, which thus reduced the sample size to 268 books. The coding process revealed 104 books that portrayed dietary behaviors and 164 books with other themes (not discussed in this study) of food-related values and traditions and all about food (history, life cycle, production, purchase, and preparation). This study analyzed the subset of 104 fictional picture books about dietary behaviors (Figure 1).

Methodological Review

All books were read and systematically coded using holistic, provisional, and evaluation coding methods, which are discussed in detail in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*.¹³ In brief, holistic coding attempts to capture the main idea of a story—the big picture—rather than specific aspects of a story. This approach is appropriate for picture books because these books are short (500–1,000 words, a guideline set by book publishers), and a story typically revolves around a single main idea.

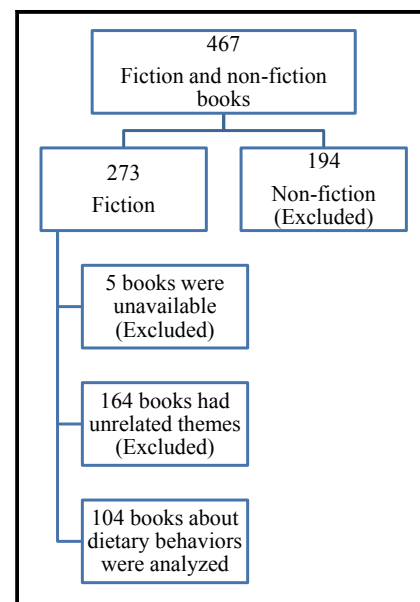


Figure 1. Book search and selection process revealed the final sample of 104 fictional stories about dietary behavior.

Provisional coding uses a predetermined start list of codes generated based on previous research and the study's objectives. For example, this study built on the work of Byrne and Nitzke,¹⁰ who coded foods depicted in a sample of picture books published before 2000. As research progressed, the initial list was revised and new codes were added. Finally, evaluation coding allows researchers to examine data for patterns, interpret significance of findings, and make recommendations.

Content Coding

The book search was completed in spring, 2015. Data coding and analysis took place during summer and fall, 2015. A code book was created to record codes and subcodes, as well as their definitions and descriptions. Data analysis consisted of 2 coding cycles. During the initial cycle, each book was read and assigned a code that reflected the main idea of the story and a subcode that recognized a particular angle of the story. For example, a book could be assigned *lifestyle* as the code and *weight management* as the subcode, or *food preference* as the code and *strategy-gardening* as the subcode. The second cycle entailed revisions and refinement of the first cycle codes.

The final 4 codes emerged within the dietary behavior theme: food preference, lifestyle, table and dining manners, and sensations and emotions.

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