



Factors influencing mothers' decisions on whether to provide seafood during early years' feeding: A qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

The first year of a child's life is a key period of transition from an exclusive milk diet to solid foods to meet growing nutritional demands. An increased requirement for nutrients includes the introduction of protein-rich solid foods, such as seafood, which additionally provides valuable omega-3 fatty acids. However, consumption of seafood is low in the British child population. The aim of this study was to identify maternal perceptions of the factors that can influence the decision on whether to provide seafood during early years' feeding using a multi-method qualitative study design. A total of 26 discussions posted by mothers on parenting websites; Mumknowsbest, Mumsnet and Netmums, accessed July 2013, together with discussions from six focus groups (February–July 2014) in the North East of Scotland were included for thematic qualitative analysis. Discussions on the inclusion of seafood during the early years were centred across four interrelating themes; - food-related attributes, mother-centred aspects, family-centred aspects, and external information sources. Concerns regarding safety and mothers' limited knowledge and skills on seafood were apparent from discussions; however, the practicalities of providing a cost effective family meal were also issues raised by mothers. An understanding of the numerous and sometimes contradictory influences on mothers' decisions to include seafood during early years' period could be used to develop strategies to help increase regular seafood consumption. In particular, ensuring formal information and guidance clearly addresses the safety concerns of mothers and the development of practical education schemes to encourage and teach cooking skills should be considered.

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1. Introduction

During the early years the nutritional needs of infants markedly increase to meet the physiological demands for growth and development (World Health Organization, 2009). This key life period involves the transition from an exclusive milk diet to the introduction of solid, complementary foods which provides essential nutrients to meet growing demands (World Health Organization, 2009). This complementary feeding phase, also known as weaning, is a period in a parent's life when dietary views and behaviours may change and when parents receive a wide range of advice and information on feeding practices (Bloomingdale et al.,

2010). Parents both actively seek and passively gain advice and information on infant feeding from a variety of sources, such as health professionals, family and friends, and varying forms of media (Carruth & Skinner, 2001; Hoddinott, Craig, Britten, & McInnes, 2010, 2012; Horodyski et al., 2007; Pridham, 1990; Sylvester & Wade, 2004). Evidence suggests that mothers often use multiple and concurrent sources of information over time (Carruth & Skinner, 2001); however, infant feeding decisions may also be influenced by parents' socioeconomic backgrounds, with mothers of differing socioeconomic status relying on advice from different sources (Carruth & Skinner, 2001; Gildea & Sloan, 2009; Heinig et al., 2009). Amongst these resources, the rise of the internet has provided an expansive source of information and guidance for parents. Commercial and parenting websites have become an appealing method for parents in finding direction and advice in

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regards to many different aspects of early years' feeding, such as the timing of introducing solid foods (Hoddinott et al., 2010; Horodyski et al., 2007; Porter & Ispa, 2013). Interactive discussions, where there is an opportunity to share experiences with other parents, are described as vital resources and provide a forum for parents to anonymously ask questions they may deem as embarrassing or trivial (Hoddinott et al., 2010).

A healthy, varied diet is recommended for all age groups and should include a variety of protein sources (Pan American Health Organization and World Health Organization, 2003, World Health Organization, 2005, Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and FSA in Northern Ireland 2016). Seafood provides essential nutrients and omega-3 fatty acids and the regular consumption of oil-rich fish is recommended to confer cardiovascular benefits (World Health Organization/FAO, 2003; Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, 2004; World Health Organization, 2009) and plays an important role during complementary feeding (World Health Organization, 2009) due to the role of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) in the development and function of the nervous system (Innis, 2007; Innis, Gilley, & Werker, 2001; McCann & Ames, 2005). However, current UK consumption rates fail to meet the once a week oil-rich fish recommendations (Public Health England and Food Standards Agency, 2014; Scottish Government 2015) and we see a lower seafood intake compared to other meat types, such as red meat and meat products, in young children aged 4–18 months (Department of Health, 2011). Despite a vast expanse of literature discussing the influences on seafood consumption in adult consumers (Birch & Lawley, 2014; Bloomingdale et al., 2010; Leek, Maddock, & Foxall, 2000; Myrland, Trondsen, Johnston, & Lund, 2000; Olsen, 2003, 2004; Olsen, Scholderer, Brunsø, & Verbeke, 2007; Pieniak, Verbeke, & Scholderer, 2010; Vardeman & Aldoory, 2008; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005), there is a clear gap in evidence on the influencing factors on seafood consumption during the early years period within the UK. The aim of this study was to explore the factors that mothers perceive influence their decisions on whether to provide seafood during early years' feeding. To investigate this aim a qualitative approach was employed.

2. Material and methods

Focus group discussions with mothers of young children from the North East (NE) of Scotland and parenting internet discussion forums were used to explore the factors influencing their decisions on whether to provide seafood during the early years. The exploratory nature of this study demanded a qualitative approach to identify a broad range of factors that mothers perceived to influence their decision-making, thus focus group discussions were employed (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). However, with evidence indicating mothers commonly use parenting websites for information and advice (Hoddinott et al., 2010; Skea, Entwistle, Watt, & Russell, 2008), this study also included online discussions. The natural discussions allowed a clear view of seafood-related discussions by mothers without the presence of the researcher possibly influencing the discussions (Tiene, 2000). A lack of detail regarding the characteristics and demographics of the mothers engaging with online discussions however meant this method could not solely be used. The multiple methods permitted a broad scope of factors to be identified and thus saturation of themes could additionally be validated.

2.1. Data collection

2.1.1. Internet discussions on parenting websites

The range of parenting websites and online social networking

sites reviewed was identified from previous research which identified commonly used and cited websites by UK mothers (Hoddinott et al., 2010; Skea et al., 2008) and comprised; Netmums, Mumsnet, Facebook (Emma's Diary), Ask a Mum, Mumknowsbest, and Mumszone. We deemed publicly open discussions as ethically sound to include in this study. Websites were thus reviewed for their inclusion of a publicly open discussion forum or chat room where users and readers can search for topical information or post questions without requiring a membership. One website, Facebook (Emma's Diary), was excluded from the survey due to the membership required to access the discussions.

Discussion threads were identified from the full website using the search terms; "fish" OR "seafood" AND "weaning" OR "toddler" OR "feeding" OR "introduction of foods". Thirteen discussion threads including fish/seafood within the thread title were identified from the search in July 2013 and 13 further threads on general foods to give during weaning, which included discussions of seafood inclusion, were included for analysis. A total of 26 discussion threads from Mumknowsbest, Mumsnet, and Netmums were extracted for data analysis (Mumsnet $n = 17$, Netmums $n = 8$, Mumknowsbest $n = 1$). Discussions were copied and pasted into Microsoft Word documents, citing the source, date of search and terms searched, where they were later cleaned of names and slang terms. Further details on the dates of discussion threads and the number of responses within these threads are provided in Appendix 1.

2.1.2. Focus group discussions

Six focus group discussions (FGD) were held in pre-existing baby/toddler groups across the NE of Scotland ($n = 29$ participants) where parents meet to gain support and allow children to play and take part in activities (February–July 2014). Groups were identified through internet searches (www.google.co.uk) and through Netmums.com 'Local to You' (www.netmums.com/local-to-you) group searches. The target population was mothers of children aged six months to four years across various socio-demographic variables, including groups in areas of; the least and most deprivation (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Scottish Government 2012)); urban and rural areas (Scottish Government 2012); and fishing and non-fishing communities (Scottish Sea Fisheries Statistics (Scottish Government 2011)). The recruited groups achieved a selection of the socio-demographic variables (Table 1); however, due to the lack of rural areas classified within the most deprived quintiles equal numbers for each variable was not achieved. Two fathers were present at two separate discussion groups; however, their data was excluded to provide a single gender perspective.

Potential focus group participants were provided with an information sheet via a visit arranged with the organisers of the parent and child groups. A follow-up visit or telephone call was conducted with the group organiser to determine if the members of the group wished to participate. Written consent was obtained from each participant prior to the start of the FGD.

A topic guide (Appendix 2) was developed and piloted to guide the discussion. This topic guide was developed from the literature with a focus on the research question - to explore the perceived influences to mothers' decision-making regarding seafood provision or exclusion. A single researcher (SC) facilitated each of the discussion groups to ensure consistency, whilst a trained observer (KK/LC) noted group dynamics. Each FGD took place at the pre-existing baby/toddler group at the group's normal scheduled time and location. Qualified childcare was provided by the research team to allow the parents to take part in the discussion whilst the child continued in the normal group session. FGD were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants for accuracy of

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