



General and food-selection specific parenting style in relation to the healthfulness of parent-child choices while grocery shopping



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ABSTRACT

Past research has demonstrated that parenting style is related to children's health and eating patterns, and that parenting can vary across time and context. However, there is little evidence about similarities and differences between general, self-reported parenting style and observed parenting during grocery shopping. The goals of this study were to investigate links between general parenting style, parental warmth and limit setting (important dimensions of parenting style) during grocery shopping, and the healthfulness of foods chosen. Participants were 153 parent (88 mothers) - child (6–9 years old) dyads. Dyads were brought to a laboratory set up like a grocery store aisle and asked to choose two items from each of three categories (cookies/crackers, cereals, chips/snacks). Parents were observed in terms of warmth, responsiveness, autonomy granting, and limit setting; children were observed in terms of resistance and negotiation. Parents reported behaviors related to general parenting. Regression analyses were used to test study hypotheses. Observed parental limit setting was related to general parenting style; observed warmth was not. Observed limit setting (but not observed warmth or self-reported parenting style) was related to the healthfulness of food choices. Limit setting appears to be the dimension of parenting style that is expressed during grocery shopping, and that promotes healthier food choices. Implications are discussed regarding consistencies in parenting style across situations as well as contributions of parenting style to the development of children's healthy eating.

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One of the primary contributors to the recent spike in childhood obesity is unhealthy food choices, which lead to excess consumption and, over time, weight gain (Han, Lawlor, & Kimm, 2010; Jeffery & Harnack, 2007). Therefore, it is important to understand the factors that promote the development of healthier eating patterns. Broadly, the family environment is critical for the etiology and maintenance of eating patterns (Campbell et al., 2007). More specifically, there is consistent evidence that parents who report providing their children with both warmth and structure have children who are healthier in terms of eating- and weight-related outcomes (Berge, 2009). However, the evidence is mixed about whether parents who report engaging in these potentially health-promoting dimensions of parenting style actually display them

(Holden & Miller, 1999); to our knowledge, there is no evidence examining self-reported/general versus observed/situation-specific parenting style in a context that is highly relevant to shaping eating patterns (e.g., grocery shopping). Therefore, the goals of the current study were to examine links between general self-reported parenting style and observed parenting style during grocery shopping, as well as to determine the extent to which both reported and observed parenting are related to the healthfulness of foods selected by parent/child pairs.

1. Authoritative parenting and child health

Classically, parenting styles are determined based on the two orthogonal dimensions of demandingness (i.e., expectations and limit setting) and responsiveness (i.e., warmth) (Baumrind, 1968). Authoritative parents engage in both high levels of demandingness and high levels of warmth. These parents have high explicit expectations for their children but show high levels of warmth and support towards their children as well (Baumrind, 1991). In

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contrast, authoritarian parents have high levels of demandingness but low levels of responsiveness. These parents are considered to be controlling and do not show much support for their children on a day-to-day basis (Baumrind, 1991). Permissive parents have low levels of demandingness and high levels of responsiveness and therefore do not set clear and high expectations for their children but do show them warmth and support (Baumrind, 1991).

In general, parents who balance warmth and appropriate levels of structure and discipline have children who are better able to self-regulate, engage in autonomous decision making, and internalize the behavioral standards of their parents (Grusec & Davidov, 2007, pp. 284–308). Parents who provide appropriate discipline while supporting their children's autonomy have children who engage in higher levels of autonomous self-regulation (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Houck & LeCuyer-Maus, 2004; Lepper, 1983; Mauro & Harris, 2000), as do parents who display positive affect toward their children (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995; Reitman & Gross, 1997). The benefits of these types of parenting for children's self-regulation are evident into adolescence and emerging adulthood (Abar, Carter, & Winsler, 2009; Connell & Francis, 2014; Patock-Peckham, Cheong, Balhorn, & Nagoshi, 2001; Strage, 1998). Furthermore, children raised by parents who are warm and provide discipline display more adaptive decision making skills, particularly autonomous decision making (Bednar & Fisher, 2003; Kandel & Lesser, 1969; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989). Finally, shared parent-child positive affect lays the groundwork for the internalization of parents' values by children (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000; MacDonald, 1997; Rudy & Grusec, 2001).

This body of research suggests that authoritative parents have children who engage in a cluster of behaviors (e.g., self-regulation) that are related to healthy eating patterns (e.g., Anderson, Winett, & Wojcik, 2007). Authoritative parents are also more likely to themselves engage in healthier feeding practices with their children (Hubbs-Tait, Kennedy, Page, Topham, & Harrist, 2008), and are more likely to make healthful and less likely to make unhealthful foods available in the home (Gable & Lutz, 2000; Kremers, Brug, de Vries, & Engels, 2003; Mellin, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002). A general pattern of authoritative parenting is also related to feeding-specific practices that promote healthful eating in children (Blissett & Haycraft, 2008), including providing both structure (e.g., rules, limits) and autonomy support (e.g., education, negotiation) around eating, and avoiding coercive control (e.g., restriction, less pressure to eat) (Vaughn et al., 2015).

Along those lines, researchers have applied the general concept of parenting style to feeding styles. Authoritative parents are those who balance restriction (i.e., authoritarian feeding) and indulgence (i.e., permissive feeding), and those parents tend to have children with more-healthful consumption patterns (Hoerr et al., 2009; Patrick, Nicklas, Hughes, & Morales, 2005) and lower BMI (Hughes et al., 2011; Shloim, Edelson, Martin, & Hetherington, 2015). Although there is some evidence that feeding-specific parenting behavior is more strongly linked with child weight-related outcomes (Blissett & Haycraft, 2008; Vollmer & Mobley, 2013), there is also evidence that parents who display characteristics indicative of a generally authoritative parenting style have children who engage in healthier eating and activity patterns (Arredondo et al., 2006). There is also a large body of literature documenting an association between authoritative parenting and a lower child BMI (Arredondo et al., 2006; Berge, 2009; Gable & Lutz, 2000; Kimiecik & Horn, 2012; Olvera & Power, 2010; Rhee, Lumeng, Appugliese, Kaciroti, & Bradley, 2006); this association is particularly strong in longitudinal studies (Shloim et al., 2015).

1.1. General classifications of parenting style and parent behavior in specific situations

The majority of the work examining links between parenting style and correlates of healthful eating has relied on parents' reports of the typical behaviors they engage in with their children. In part, this choice is motivated by a belief that parenting styles reflect stable personality traits (Roberts, Block, & Block, 1984), and therefore capture general patterns of behavior that do not vary with time or context (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Many theories of parental effects on children assume that parents influence their children through a series of interactions that have continuity in terms of parenting style (Maccoby, 1984; Minuchin, 1985; Patterson, 1982). Assuming parenting style is a trait that is consistent across time and context allows for the measurement of parenting style based on parental reports of general behaviors, and/or assessment of parenting style at one time in one context (Holden & Miller, 1999).

However, treating parenting style as a trait that can be assessed by parental report may be overly simplistic and fail to illuminate the child-rearing processes that shape child behavior. In line with this argument, the existing evidence base suggests weak and/or inconsistent links between general classifications of parenting style from reports of parental behaviors and parents' behaviors in specific situations. Consistent with a trait-based approach to parenting style, there is evidence that parents tend to behave similarly across situations (Holden & Miller, 1999; Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-Yarrow, 1989; Metsapelto, Pulkkinen, & Poikkeus, 2001). However, broadly speaking, there are often inconsistencies between self-endorsed attitudes and observed behaviors (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Not surprisingly, then, there is evidence for differences in parenting at different times, in relation to different children, and across different situations, with the least stability evident across situations (for a review see Holden & Miller, 1999).

In addition, cross-contextual differences in parenting behavior may be an indication of healthy modifications or adjustments to behavior in order to meet the needs of the particular situation. And some types of parents, especially those who are authoritative, may be better able to adapt their socialization practices to a given situation. Associations between general parenting styles and child outcomes are often inconsistent and, even when evident, small (e.g., Abar et al., 2009; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Gray & Steinberg, 1999), perhaps because the effects of a given parent behavior can be dependent upon the specific context and particular child outcome under investigation. Therefore, although there is some stability in the ways that parents interact with their children across time and context, there is a need to better understand differences between general parenting style and parenting in contexts that are particularly relevant to specific outcomes. Given this line of reasoning, we hypothesized that parenting in a healthy-eating relevant situation is more strongly related to the healthfulness of food choices than is parenting style more generally. In the current study, it was our goal to understand parenting style in relation to the healthfulness of food choices made by parents and children together, and we examined both general parental style as well as parenting style during a grocery shopping task designed to be similar to grocery shopping.

1.2. Dimensions of authoritative parenting

Important parenting practices that translate authoritative parenting into child outcomes are responsiveness and warmth, appropriate behavioral control (including reasoning or explaining as a critical part of discipline), effective problem solving, and monitoring (Crouter & Head, 2002, pp. 461–483; Grusec & Davidov,

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