



# “We don't snack”: Attitudes and perceptions about eating in-between meals amongst caregivers of young children



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Little is known about caregiver attitudes and perceptions towards snacking by toddlers and preschool children outside of the U.S. This qualitative study examined caregiver attitudes and perceptions towards the provision of both foods and beverages in-between meals, along with what constitutes a snack, or snacking occasion, amongst Swiss caregivers.

**Study design, setting and participants:** This qualitative study used in-depth interviews (n = 17) conducted with caregivers (16 = female, 3 = male, ages = 20–46y, low to high income). The “Food Choice Process Model” was used as a theoretical framework. Interviews explored experiences, attitudes and perceptions about the provision of foods and beverages to children (1–5y) in-between meals. Interview transcripts underwent a thematic analysis and key themes were developed from the data.

**Results:** Five key themes were identified; 1) Timing is everything 2) Location + food type = snacking 3) Snacks are junk 4) Snacks are small 5) Not in front of the children. The clock-time at which young children were fed, the location, the food type and the portion size delineated how caregivers conceptualised snacking. Feeding children at 10am and 4pm was not viewed as snacking, nor was providing milk before bedtime.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Eating in-between meals and snacking may be perceived by caregivers as different concepts and vary according to geography, contexts, time of day, food type and location. The findings highlight some agreement with similar studies conducted in the U.S. but also provide new insights into how the consumption of foods and beverages in-between meals may vary between geographic settings. The opportunities for better defining “snacking” within nutrition study design, and how this may inform dietary intake data interpretation, are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the years before going to school, the caregiver must make choices about the timing, frequency and amount of food provided. These choices may influence children's dietary behaviours and subsequent risk of overweight/obesity (May & Dietz, 2010; Ventura & Birch, 2008) since food preferences and dietary habits are established early in life and may track through to later childhood and adulthood (Fiorito, Marini, Mitchell, Smiciklas-Wright, & Birch, 2010; Nicklaus, 2016; Nicklaus, Boggio, Chabanet, & Issanchou, 2005; Yang & Huffman, 2013). Dietary intake data indicates that

dietary patterns amongst toddlers, preschool children, school-aged children and adolescents have shifted from “3 meals a day” to meal occasions interspersed with the consumption of food items in-between traditional meal patterns. These between-meal eating occasions contribute more than 25% of children's daily energy intakes among 2–6 year olds in various countries of the world (Duffey, Pereira, & Popkin, 2013; Kerr et al., 2009; Piernas & Popkin, 2010; Rangan, Randall, Hector, Gill, & Webb, 2008; Skinner, Ziegler, Pac, & Devaney, 2004; Wang, Zhai, Zhang, & Popkin, 2012). However, caregivers' perceptions and attitudes towards the provision of foods and/or beverages in-between meals has been under-researched (Davison et al., 2015) with the majority of studies in this area being conducted in the U.S. (Blake et al., 2015; Bleser, Rollins, & Birch, 2014; Fisher et al., 2015; Younginer et al., 2016). New insights from other geographic settings are required to broaden our perspective in this field.

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One challenge in understanding caregivers' experiences about eating in-between meals is the ambiguity in the definition and use of the term “snack” or “snacking” in the literature (Chamontin, Pretzer, & Booth, 2003; Gregori, Foltran, Ghidina, & Berchialla, 2011; Johnson & Anderson, 2010; Wirt & Collins, 2009; Younginger et al., 2016). Researchers have called for urgent attention to be given to the need for a universal snacking definition (Johnson & Anderson, 2010). Indeed, some authors argue that since the nature of the relationship between snacking and overweight/obesity amongst children and adolescents remains equivocal (Kaisari, Yannakoulia, & Panagiotakos, 2013)—a universal snacking definition would assist nutrition researchers in teasing out the nature of the relationship between snacking and outcomes such as nutrient intakes and overweight or obesity (Gregori et al., 2011).

In particular, researcher definitions of snacking may vary according to study design (Briefel et al., 2010; USDA, 2014) or be linked to food group classification systems (Ireland et al., 2002). The increasingly popular nutrient profiling systems, in their various formats, provide largely subjective definitions and classifications for snacking and snack foods (Johnson & Anderson, 2010; Vlassopoulos et al., 2016). It is also plausible that the researcher perspective on snacking may be different to that of the participant in a given study. Caregiver perceptions are particularly important, therefore, since dietary survey methodologies which collect food intake data, particularly those involving caregivers of toddlers and preschool children, often ask the participant to name and define the eating occasions (Briefel et al., 2010).

Culture influences attitudes and perceptions towards foods (Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999) and, therefore, may influence attitudes towards snacking in the diets of young children. Such cultural differences are somewhat exemplified in how dietary guidelines and feeding recommendations, in relation to snacking amongst children, vary from country to country (Afeiche et al., 2016; Janssen et al., 2005; Maier, Chabanet, Schaal, Leathwood, & Issanchou, 2007). For example, guidance about desired feeding behaviours amongst toddlers and preschool children in the U.S. advocates establishing regular mealtime routines around 4–6 eating occasions per day and providing 3 meals and 2 snacks per day in order to meet nutritional requirements (Kleinman, 2014). Dietary recommendations for young children in France, emphasise 3 meals and the “4 o'clock” (*le quatre heures or le goûter*) along with providing practical recommendations for specific vegetables with an emphasis on the “discovery of new tastes, new flavours and new textures” between the ages of 1–3y (Bocquet, Bresson, Briend, Chouraqui, Darmaun, Dupont, Frelut, Ghisolfi, Goulet, et al., 2003a; 2003b). The Swiss Society for Nutrition mentions specific times of the day for feeding young children in-between meals; namely at 10 o'clock (*le dix heures*) and 4 o'clock (*le quatre heures or le goûter*) and provide food-based recommendations for “healthy 10 o'clock and 4 o'clock” eating episodes (SSN, 2015, 2016). The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating refers to “core foods” (foods from the major food groups) and “extra foods” (French fries, confectionery, biscuits, soft drinks etc.) and that their consumption be limited to “sometimes” providing between 5 and 20% of total daily energy intakes (Smith, Schmerlaib & Kellett, 1998). European practices of providing young children with a mid-morning snack have origins in the post-war era of distribution of milk within schools, and in many European cultures, the mid-morning eating episode amongst toddlers and preschoolers persists, although some argue this is now superfluous (Bocquet et al., 2003a; 2003b). It is not known to what extent dietary guidelines around the timing of in-between meal eating episodes influence caregiver attitudes and perceptions about snacking behaviours. Different geographical perspectives in this field are required to broaden our understanding (Gatley, Caraher, & Lang, 2014) and

may help support the evolution of dietary guidelines about snacking.

Despite dietary recommendations about the timing of snacking and healthy snack choices for young children, caregiver attitudes and perceptions about the type of food or beverage that constitutes a snack may also vary across cultures and contexts. For example, snacking episodes are known to feature beverages (Piernas & Popkin, 2010) yet beverages do not have the same satiating properties as solid foods (Mattes, 2006). There is emerging evidence that preschool children consume more energy from beverages when served a larger beverage serving size and do not compensate for the energy from beverages when, for example, fruit juice is provided alongside a solid snack-food (Norton, Poole, & Raynor, 2015). Additionally, questions have been raised about whether beverages should be considered in a universal definition of snacking (Johnson & Anderson, 2010). Dietary intake data from Great Britain and the U.S. express concern over the intakes of sugar-sweetened beverages and fruit juice amongst preschool children (Fulgoni & Quann, 2012; Ng, Mhurchu, Jebb, & Popkin, 2012). However, the caregiver perception of beverages vs. solid foods and their role in snacking has been under-researched.

This study uses qualitative methods to understand caregiver attitudes and perceptions about feeding toddlers and preschool children in-between meals. This research aims to contribute a new perspective about how caregivers conceptualise these eating episodes and improve our understanding of their attitudes and perceptions about the foods and beverages provided in-between meals. Such findings may help support the development of interventions designed to improve caregivers' understanding about the role of snacking in the diets of young children (e.g. to help meet nutrient requirements) and how to select nutritious snacks. These findings may also support the collection and interpretation of dietary intake data and contribute to the debate about snacking definitions.

This analysis was part of a wider qualitative study (and part of a doctoral research thesis) which used in-depth interviews to understand the experience, attitudes and perceptions of caregivers feeding toddlers and preschoolers (Jacquier, Gatrell, & Bingley, 2016). The wider study used in-depth interviews to glean understandings about general feeding behaviours and included a particular focus on the portioning of foods and beverages, along with attitudes and perceptions related to beverages in the diets of young children. The in-depth interview from this study contained a series of questions in relation to the provision of foods and drinks in-between traditional mealtimes. The responses to those questions form the basis of the analysis herein. The Food Choice Process Model (Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996; Sobal, 2006; Sobal & Bisogni, 2009) was used as a theoretical framework. The model acknowledges that choices about food are complex, situational and dynamic; evolving over the life-course. The three major components are: 1) The Life Course 2) Influences and 3) The personal food system. The framework was used to inform the study and to aid the interpretation of findings.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Design

The ontological position of this research is a constructivist perspective, which takes a relativist stance. It assumes an interactive relationship between the researcher and the participant, and aims to reconstruct participants' accounts towards a consensus (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) was used to organise and report results (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

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