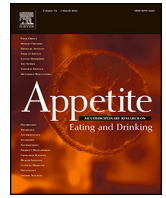




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Research report

The role of family communication and parents' feeding practices in children's food preferences ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study used Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) to explore how family-dinner-related communication takes place and how parents' feeding practices may be associated with children's preferences for dinner meals. The sample consisted of 12 dyads with seven- and eight-year-old Norwegian children and their parents. In-depth photo interviews were used for collecting data. Interview transcripts and photographs were examined through content analysis. Results indicated that most families were conversation oriented, and communication tended to shift from consensual during weekdays to pluralistic at weekends. On weekdays, the dinner menu was often a compromise between children's preferences and parents' intentions to provide quick, healthy dinner options for the family. To a greater extent at weekends, children were allowed to choose dinner alternatives for the entire family. Restriction of unhealthy dinner alternatives was the practice most used to control children's diets and, in fact, might explain children's high preferences for unhealthy dinner alternatives. Results underline the importance of giving children control of what they eat and being responsive to children's preferences while guiding them towards healthy dinner alternatives rather than using force and restriction. From a more theoretical perspective, this study explored how FCPT could be combined with theories about parents' feeding practices to understand meal preferences and choices among young children and their families, and how time and situation (context) influence families' communication patterns and feeding practices in their homes.

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Introduction

According to [The Norwegian Directorate of Health \(2011\)](#), many children's diets contain energy-dense food with too much sugar, salt and saturated fat. The family's food environment plays a major role in a child's food consumption ([Bassett, Chapman, & Beagan, 2008](#); [Birch & Davison, 2001](#); [Kral & Rauh, 2010](#)). Parents determine which foods and how much food children can access, and they serve as models for their children's food choices through their own food attitudes, preferences and behaviours ([Birch, Savage, & Ventura, 2007](#)). Conversely, children influence their parents' food choices by expressing their preferences, negotiating, persuading, making demands and refusing to eat the foods their parents serve ([Bassett et al., 2008](#); [Holsten, Deatrick, Kumanyika, Pinto-Martin, & Compher, 2012](#); [Nørgaard & Brunsø, 2011](#)). Indeed, several studies have shown that

the more influence children have, the less healthy their food choices tend to be ([Papaioannou et al., 2013](#)).

Dinner is normally the day's largest meal, providing more important nutrients than other meals ([Gillman et al., 2000](#)). It is also the activity which parents and children spend most time together ([Bugge & Almås, 2006](#)). Still, surprisingly little research has described how family members influence one another's food consumption in home-dinner contexts ([Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006](#); [Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003](#)), compared with other contexts such as snacking (e.g. [Blissett, 2011](#); [Melbye, Øgaard, & Øverby, 2013](#)). Snacks tend to be more informal and individualistic than collective family meals ([Marshall & O'Donoghue, 2010](#)), which are more often compromises between individual preferences and different goals among family members ([Nørgaard & Brunsø, 2011](#)). We suggest that the process and outcome of family communication and feeding practices might differ between family dinners prepared at home and 'individual food', such as snacks, fruit and drinks, since conflicting interests are more likely to occur for family meals. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how family-dinner-related communication occurs and how parents' feeding practices might be associated with children's food preferences. The study uses Family Communication Pattern Theory (FCPT) ([Koerner & Schrodt, 2014](#)) and constructs from other studies on

Abbreviations: FCPT, Family Communication Theory; NSD, Norwegian Social Science Data Services; SFO, Skole Fritids Ordning.

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parents' feeding practices (Vollmer & Mobley, 2013) as a theoretical foundation to explain children's preferences about food consumed as dinner. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore how parents' feeding practices relate to families' communication orientation. Thus, this study contributes to previous research about how those patterns may interact and influence children's food preferences.

Theoretical framework

A preference is the choice of one item over another and consists of both affective and cognitive associations towards the item (Zeinstra, Koelen, Kok, & de Graaf, 2007). Children tend to express their preferences in emotional terms such as 'love' and 'hate', compared with adults who employ more attitudinal terms such as 'like' and 'don't like' (Wiggins, 2014). At birth, children have innate genetic predispositions which cause them to prefer sweet and salty tastes and to reject sour and bitter tastes (Birch, 1999; Birch & Davison, 2001). Young children have been found to prefer food with soft textures, while older children prefer crispy and hard textures (Zeinstra et al., 2007). Zeinstra et al. (2007) argued that taste, rather than texture, determines food preferences as children become older. Studies on children's preferences in specific dinner dishes are scarce compared with those on fruit and vegetable preferences. Zeinstra et al. (2007) found that most children, aged 4–12, tended to prefer soft, high-energy foods, such as pancakes and French fries, and that older children (7–12 years) tended to add preferences for meat and composite dishes, such as pizza and vegetable pie. Nevertheless, vegetables ranked low in children's choices of food (Zeinstra et al., 2007). Additionally, children's preferences in meals and other foods are also influenced by availability, culture and traditions (Birch et al., 2007).

Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT), as one of the most frequently applied theories of family communication, reflects important values and beliefs families have about themselves and their relationships (Koerner & Schrodt, 2014). According to FCPT, families who tend to focus on objects and discuss how family members conceive them are *conversation orientated*. Families who tend to define objects for their children and emphasise obedience to authority figures are *conformity orientated*. By using median splits between conversation and conformity orientations, four family types have been described: consensual, pluralistic, protective and laissez-faire. *Consensual* families are high in both conversation and conformity orientations. In these families, parents are very interested in what their children have to say on a number of issues, while at the same time, they consider themselves the final decision makers. They resolve disagreements by listening to their children and spend time and effort explaining their values, beliefs and decisions so that their children understand the reasoning behind their decisions. *Pluralistic* families are high in conversation orientation and low in conformity orientation. These parents do not feel a need to be in control of their children, to make decisions for them or to agree with their decisions. Opinions are openly discussed and evaluated based on argumentative support rather than on who promotes the argument. *Protective* families are low on conversation orientation and high on conformity orientation. These families stress obedience to authorities and discuss few matters within the family. Parents tend to make decisions for the children and see little value in explaining their reasons to their children. The final communication type is *laissez-faire*, which is low in both orientations. These families communicate little with one another, and the parents tend to believe that all family members should be able to make their own decisions. In contrast to other families, parents show little interest in their children's decisions; therefore, conflicts are rare (Fig. 1).

Multiple studies have agreed that families with high conversation orientation have children who influence their parents' purchases

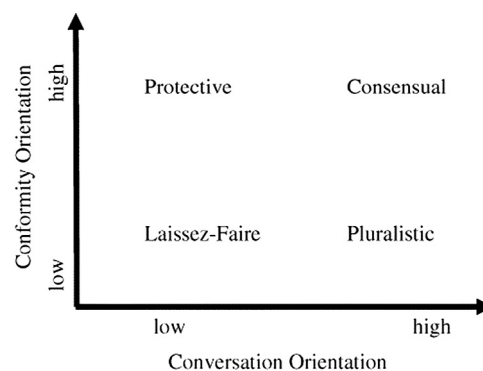


Fig. 1. Four family types created by conversation and conformity orientation (Koerner & Schrodt, 2014).

more and have more independent consumption perspectives, compared to families with high conformity orientation (Bassett et al., 2008; Caruana & Vassallo, 2003; Nørgaard, Brunso, Christensen, & Mikkelsen, 2007; Olsen & Ruiz, 2008). Conversation oriented families are traditionally described as concerned with both *stating* and *explaining* their opinions and actions (Koerner & Schrodt, 2014). A study by Nørgaard and Brunso (2011) challenged this traditional definition in regard to food-related research. Their study showed that most families practised conversational communication by discussing simple food-related issues with one another, for instance, stating preferences and opinions, but rarely explained their motivations for and barriers to their food preferences. Olsen and Ruiz (2008) found that teenagers in conversational families seemed to have greater influence on family dinner decisions, as compared to conformity families, because they often discussed dinner options and health consequences with their parents.

Previous research emphasises that individual food preferences and choices differ across time, situations and context (Marshall & O'Donohoe, 2010; Meiselman, Johnson, Reeve, & Crouch, 2000). Parents' feeding practices are described as goal-directed behaviours with specific content that may reinforce parents' influence on children's diets (Birch et al., 2007; Vollmer & Mobley, 2013). As opposed to FCPT, which presents the family members' static values (Koerner & Schrodt, 2014), feeding practices may change in different contexts (Vollmer & Mobley, 2013). Thus, this study's theoretical approach is to explore if families have different goals in different contexts, and to investigate how this may influence parents' communication patterns and feeding practices. For example, is it possible for parents to practise consensual oriented communication during busy weekdays, but be more pluralistic oriented during the weekends when they have more time for grocery shopping and cooking? Thus, an integration of time, situation or context in our study may open up for a broader understanding of how family communication patterns interact with family feeding practices in children's food preferences or choices.

Some of the most common feeding practices are parents' use of restriction, rules, rewards, pressure, arguments, disguising food and providing a nice atmosphere during meals. *Restricting* children's access to a preferred food is a feeding practice often applied by parents (Rollins, Loken, Savage, & Birch, 2014). Studies have indicated that restriction tends to increase preferences for the restricted food and might lead to overeating behaviour when that food is made available. Parents' use of *rules*, such as finishing everything before a second serving, is often presented as a restrictive strategy (Hart, Bishop, & Truby, 2002). Giving attention and verbal praise or offering non-food rewards such as stickers and toys to *reward* children's positive behaviour is reported to increase their willingness to try unfamiliar foods (Horne et al., 2011). Offering food rewards, such

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