



Research report

Getting my child to eat the right amount. Mothers' considerations when deciding how much food to offer their child at a meal[☆]Susan L. Johnson^{a,*}, L. Suzanne Goodell^b, Kimberly Williams^a, Thomas G. Power^c, Sheryl O. Hughes^d^a Department of Pediatrics, Section of Nutrition, The University of Colorado Denver – Anschutz Medical Campus, Denver, CO, USA^b Department of Food, Bioprocessing, and Nutrition Sciences, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA^c Department of Human Development, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA^d Baylor College of Medicine, The Children's Nutrition Research Center, Houston, TX, USA

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ABSTRACT

Feeding young children successfully requires parenting skills, parental trust that children will eat, as well as nutrition and child development knowledge to ensure that foods and the amounts offered are developmentally appropriate. Children are responsive to environmental influences like the portion size offered and many children eat more when offered large portions of palatable foods. Mothers of preschoolers are often responsible for determining the amount of food that is offered to their children; however, the influences on mothers' decisions regarding how much food to offer their children – their motivations, goals for feeding and child consumption – have not been investigated. The aim of this study was to gather qualitative data regarding mothers' decisional processes related to preparing a dinner meal plate for her preschool-aged child. Low income mothers (n = 15 African American and n = 15 Latina mothers) were recruited from Head Start centers in the Denver, CO metropolitan area to participate in semi-structured interviews. Mothers were asked to serve a plate as if they were preparing for their preschooler and then were asked about influences on their decisions about portion sizes and their expectations for children's eating. Data were coded by 2 independent coders using a consensus coding process. Coded data were analyzed by investigators and three themes emerged: (1) portion sizes differ for children who are "good" eaters and "picky" eaters; (2) mothers know the "right amounts" to serve their child; and (3) mothers have emotional investments in their children's eating. Some factors influencing mothers' decisions were child-centered (including child's likes and dislikes, "picky" and "good" eaters, and foods previously eaten in the day) and some related to adult expectations and concerns (nutrient content and concerns regarding waste). Opportunities for interventions focusing on portion size exist but may be more effective if they are tailored to the mothers' perceptions regarding her child's eating characteristics.

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Introduction

Mothers report that young children's eating behaviors are challenging and worrisome; both with regard to the nutritive quality

and quantity that children consume, and in terms of children's development and growth. Nearly 1/3 of US preschool children are reported to be overweight or obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012). On the other end of the growth spectrum, the prevalence of growth faltering (below the 5th percentile for BMI) is estimated to be 3.7% (Harper, 2014). Mothers expend a good deal of effort trying to ensure that children eat sufficiently to support healthy growth and that the foods children consume provide adequate nutrition for their rapidly developing child.

It is clear that many children are susceptible to large portions; consuming more food and energy as portions become larger (Fisher, 2007; Fisher, Arreola, Birch, & Rolls, 2007; Fisher & Kral, 2008; Fisher, Liu, Birch, & Rolls, 2007; Fisher, Rolls, & Birch, 2003). These effects have been noted in laboratory and in home settings (Johnson et al., 2014). Anecdotally, some mothers who describe their children as poor eaters report that their children can be overwhelmed

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by larger portions and refuse to eat when faced with large portions.

Very few interventions have been developed with the primary aim of increasing mothers' awareness of developmentally appropriate portions for their young children (Herman, Malhotra, Wright, Fisher, & Whitaker, 2012; Penny et al., 2005; Small, Lane, Vaughan, Melnyk, & McBurnett, 2013; Weber et al., 1999). Some formative research has reported that mothers in the UK reported little concern regarding portion sizes offered to their children and that mothers were uninterested in information regarding appropriate portion size (Crocker, Sweetman, & Cooke, 2009). In a recent qualitative study in Scotland, mothers challenged the notion that anyone could set a guideline for "correct portion size" for children because each child was thought to be different (Small et al., 2013). However, little information exists regarding mothers' decisional processes related to how much food they serve their child at a meal.

One study of low income African American mothers' feeding practices reported that mothers have a sense of "knowing" regarding how much to serve and what their children will and will not eat (Herman et al., 2012). Mothers reported wanting to be responsive to their children and that they allowed children to have input into the amounts that they were served. Given that the size of portions mothers offer is predictive of how much their children consume (Johnson et al., 2014), understanding mothers' goals, motivations and decisions about the portion sizes offered to children at a meal is critical. Such information would help to inform interventions that seek to impact maternal feeding behaviors and children's eating and growth.

There is scant research that examines mothers' processes and rationales behind what, how and how much they decide to serve their young child at a meal. Mothers have unique perspectives and experiences in child-feeding that may not be easily obtained by survey methods that are more conventional for child-feeding studies. Therefore, we conducted a study with the specific aim of identifying the underlying influences on mothers' behaviors when preparing a plate for their child, their motivations and goals for child consumption that related to the amounts they served, and their conceptions of how much was appropriate to be served to their child. Our specific research questions were: (1) how do mothers decide on the portions of food offered to their child at mealtime; and (2) once portions are offered, how much do mothers expect or require their child to eat?

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory informed the design of the study. The social ecological model suggests that the individual child's behaviors are a product of the social/physical environments in which they live, learn and play. In this context, children learn about foods, eating and amounts to be consumed from interactions with their home, school and community environments. For young children, the home environment is a particularly important and powerful environment because parents and the home are primary influencers and the source of consistent and significant influence. Thus, asking mothers to give information regarding their decisional processes for offering their children food and relating it to expectations for child consummatory behavior is well situated within the child's ecological system. We also considered expectancy value theory (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2008) and theorized that mothers' behaviors in offering their children amounts to eat at a meal are a function of their expectancies for how much their children would eat and their goals for what and how much they would want their children to consume.

Methods

A qualitative research design was chosen because of the exploratory nature of the research question and because it was deemed more likely that interviews with mothers could provide detailed in-

formation. Mothers' own words that described their behaviors, motivations and goals could be heard and used to construct theories of why specific feeding behaviors and phenomena occur. A grounded theory approach was adopted in which data were collected and analyzed to construct theories grounded in the mothers' information regarding their process for determining portions offered (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Design and site

The research team consisted of 3 investigators with experience in qualitative research design and conduct and whose primary fields are nutrition, child development and parenting related to child feeding. Two additional researchers whose primary area of research includes social psychology as it relates to parenting and childhood obesity development in low income families contributed to the development of the study design and interview guide. Interviews were designed to ask low income mothers of preschoolers about the thoughts and processes they use to decide what and how much they serve their preschool-aged child at a dinner meal. We were interested in understanding mothers' decisional processes, their strategies, behaviors, and motivations behind the amounts of food that they serve and their goals (expectations) for their children's consumption at a meal. First, mothers were asked to prepare a plate of food as they normally would for their preschooler ("I'd like you to walk me through the process of fixing your child's plate. This is where we will use the think-aloud method. I want you to verbally express and explain every step that you take when preparing your child's plate. While you are fixing your child's plate, tell me the things that you think about."). Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted so that in depth information about individual experiences of mothers could be collected in order to gain insight and understanding of mothers' processes and actions (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013).

All interviews took place at The Children's Eating Laboratory at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. The Children's Eating Lab consists of a kitchen/classroom that has microphones for audiotaping of data collection protocols. All interviews were conducted by one trained researcher (KW) with the feedback and guidance of 2 other investigators (LSG & SLJ). The study and all procedures were approved by the Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board.

Development of interview

The interview guide was developed with the assistance of all investigators and tested with two pilot interviews (one each for African American and Latina mothers). Fifteen open-ended interview questions were designed to gather information about how mothers decide the amount of food to offer overall (total amount; "Can you tell me a little bit about how you decide how much food to put on your child's plate?") as well as the amount of each food they put on their child's plate (meat, fruit, vegetable, starch; "Can you tell me how you decided the amounts of each food to put on the plate?"), how their child's likes and dislikes impact upon how much they offer ("How does your child liking or disliking (preference for) a food help you decide how much you put on the plate?"), their expectations and requirements ("How much of this food would you require your preschool child to eat?") for how much their child would eat of the food that was put on the plate, and how they came to the decision about how much their child should eat. At the end of the interview, mothers were asked to give any additional thoughts about how they offer food to their child and about children's eating.

During the interview, mothers were asked each question in the interview guide and additional probes or follow up questions were asked by the interviewer to clarify the information, as needed. A form for field notes and observations was utilized after each

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