



Research report

Observation of parental functioning at mealtime using a sibling design[☆]

Ellen Moens*, Caroline Braet, Julie Vandewalle

Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology, Ghent University, H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether parental feeding practices are part of the shared environment or responsive to characteristics of different children from the same family. Thirty-six mothers with two children (4–12 y) of which 10 sibling-pairs were discordant for weight status (healthy weight–overweight), were invited to the lab for a standard meal. Maternal responsive and controlling behaviour was observed and coded. Children's weight status and eating behaviour was assessed. Results indicated that in general, mothers show similar levels of responsiveness and controlling behaviour within families. However, the use of mothers' authoritarian and permissive behaviour and her expressions of involvement at mealtime were consequently related to children's amount of food eaten and their restraining eating style. Thus, the amount of food children eat, both observed and assessed by questionnaire, seems related to more maladaptive parenting practices in mothers. This pleads for more tailor-made guidelines when advising parents of children with eating- and weight problems.

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Introduction

Families serve as a model and a principal learning environment for children who need to learn how to regulate their energy intake and how to acquire a varied eating pattern. It is often assumed that parenting practices are part of the shared family environment that influence children's development of eating behaviour. However, following an interactional point of view, children are considered active agents (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and may evoke parental behaviours (Caspi & Moffitt, 1995). Bi-directionality is indeed more likely and involves that parenting practices result from an interaction between parent and child characteristics. Also, in the context of feeding, it is interesting to study within family variability potentially leading to differential outcomes in siblings. The main goal of the article is to examine shared vs. non-shared parental influences on children's eating behaviour.

In the general parenting domain, two major dimensions can be distinguished: (1) demandingness or parental control and (2) responsiveness or parental support (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In the feeding domain, parental control is defined as attempts to monitor the child's eating by restricting the child from eating certain foods or pressuring the child to eat other foods (Birch, 1999). Parental support is generally referred to as affective warmth and acceptance as well as well-modulated parental involvement in dif-

ferent domains of a child's development (e.g. Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), such as the feeding domain.

Research in this domain has mainly focused on specific parental feeding practices reflecting aspects of parental control. Much of the literature in this domain rely on two subscales of the Child Feeding Questionnaire (Johnson & Birch, 1994), namely Restriction and Pressure to Eat, to capture these practices and examine their relationships with children's eating behaviour and weight status. Although it is assumable that a certain amount of parental control is necessary to learn children to cope with the current food environment, controlling practices have been shown to have a detrimental impact on children's eating behaviour. It was evidenced that high parental feeding restriction can lead to selective food preferences in children (Fisher & Birch, 1999) and diminished abilities to self-regulate their energy intake (Johnson & Birch, 1994), which in turn indirectly contributed to the development of overweight as was shown by means of longitudinal research designs (Faith, Scanlon, Birch, Francis, & Sherry, 2004; Francis & Birch, 2005). However, there are also a number of cross-sectional studies reporting no association between parental restriction and children's eating (Moens & Braet, 2007) or child weight (Robinson, Kiernan, Matheson, & Haydel, 2001). This was also confirmed by a longitudinal study showing that lower parental control was associated with higher child BMI-z score after 3 years (Campbell et al., 2010). As such, it seems that parental strategies that reflect permissive feeding practices neither promote a healthy eating nor healthy weight development.

With respect to parental involvement in the feeding domain, there also are conflicting results. The well-known study of Lissau and Sorensen (1994) retrospectively showed that children from

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ellen.moens@ugent.be (E. Moens).

neglectful families are almost 10 times more likely to become overweight in adulthood. And this picture was confirmed by two more studies on this topic that found less positive involvement in mothers of children with overweight (Birch, Marlin, Kramer, & Peyer, 1981; Kinston, Loader, Miller, & Rein, 1988). On the other hand, other studies found no significant differences in parental involvement between families with and without overweight children (Johnson, Brownell, St. Jeor, Brunner, & Worby, 1997; Stradmeijer, Bosch, Koops, & Seidell, 2000).

As such, the literature does not present a consistent picture with respect to the relation between the two main parenting dimensions and children's eating behaviour and weight status. Several explanations can be put forward for this. First, there might be a conceptual problem when defining and applying these two dimensions in the feeding domain. It seems especially difficult to get the concept of parental feeding control clear-cut defined. Until now, studies were directed to the amount of control while also the domain in which parents control their children's food intake matters. Satter (1987) appropriately assigns responsibilities regarding food intake to parents and children. Parents should take responsibility for the timing and for the type of food offered, while children are responsible for the amount of food eaten. Consistent with this view, we want to consider if authoritarian attempts to control the child's eating (with no respect for the child choices on what and how much he or she eats) can be differentiated from permissive (the child can decide on what and how much he or she eats) and from authoritative feeding (the child is offered and encouraged to eat healthy foods, but is given responsibility on the amount of food eaten). Second, there could also be methodological explanations for the found inconsistencies. One should remark that the majority of the studies is limited by its reliance on parental reporting of feeding practice. Although the Child Feeding Questionnaire is widely used and has shown to be internally consistent and reliable over time, this does not tell us whether parents are accurate reporters of their feeding strategies. Especially, when eating is a conflict domain in the family. Moreover, there is no questionnaire that measures parental involvement in feeding situations. An observational study of family functioning in 2007 compared observations during actual mealtime situations with self-report measures of parents with overweight children vs. parents of healthy-weight children (Moens, Braet, & Soetens, 2007). While parents reported more restrictive feeding practices, the observations showed that maladaptive feeding strategies (both authoritarian as permissive feeding) were twice as prevalent in families with overweight children compared to families with children with a healthy weight. In addition, while parents reported an equal amount of parental involvement, observations revealed that parents of overweight children showed less positive involvement during mealtime. This stresses the importance of a multi-method multi informant design in this domain.

Finally, the majority of former studies have used data from one child per family. Research suggests that parents may report using different controlling feeding practices in response to characteristics of each sibling. There are a few studies that addressed parental behaviour in relation to children's weight status and eating behaviour using a sibling design. This seems an interesting methodology to include in research on the influence of parental feeding behaviour as is can better control for environmental factors that may impact child eating behaviour or weight status (e.g. family SES, parental education, snack foods at home; Faith, 2005). Already in 2000, Saelens, Ernst and Epstein included sibling pairs discordant for obesity, and found more between-family variability in maternal control towards children than within-family variability. Other studies found that differences in mother's feeding practices corresponded to differences in children's BMI z-scores (Keller, Pietrobelli, Johnson, & Faith, 2006) and to sibling differences in eating

behaviours (Farrow, Galloway, & Fraser, 2009). Horn and colleagues investigated the role of a child's temperament in the feeding interaction with parents. They found that parents reported more food restriction for the more distractible child and reported more responsibility towards the child with a more negative mood (Horn, Galloway, Webb, & Gagnon, 2011). These three latter sibling studies suggest that parental control would be part of the non-shared environment. To the best of our knowledge there are no studies that use observation methodologies to study within family variability in parental feeding control and parental involvement.

In sum, inconsistencies with regard to parental control and involvement in the feeding domain could be due to conceptual differences and measurement issues when reporting about feeding strategies. The current study aims to observe mothers' behaviour during mealtime. In doing that, according to recent insights, both involvement and parental feeding control will be refined. By including sibling pairs, it will be possible to examine whether mothers show different feeding behaviour within their family. Moreover, we will investigate whether within family differences in parental behaviour are related to differences in child body weight and eating behaviour of siblings. It is hypothesized that while parental involvement would be part of the shared environment, parental control is part of the non-shared environment and as such responsive to specific characteristics of the child.

Method

Subject recruitment

A total of 36 mothers of at least two sibling children ($n = 72$) between 4 and 12 years old participated in this study and visited the lab to consume a standard meal together. Families were drawn from a questionnaire study on parental feeding practices and children's eating behaviour which includes 60 families with at least two siblings from the region of Flanders. Thirty-six families agreed to participate in the current observational mealtime study (response rate 60%). Next to the age criterion (at least two children between 4 and 12 years old), no further in-or exclusion criteria were described. The protocol was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University.

Procedure

Observations were conducted at the laboratory by trainees in psychology guided by standardized instructions and under direct supervision of two researchers. In the lab, the video camera was installed, the table was set and three chairs were present. While information was given, the informed consent was obtained and weight and length of mother and the two children were measured. We took several precautions to avoid that behavioural patterns would emerge as part of the family's reaction to the presence of the camera. First, mothers were told that the aim of the study was to study children's eating behaviour and differences between children within families. In that way, mothers were not aware of the fact that their behaviour would be observed. After the meal, we debriefed the mothers. Second, all family members had the opportunity to habituate to the camera before the start of the recordings. Finally, the mother received the instruction that the mealtime should occur in the most typical conditions (as it occurs at home). After the meal, we asked her to rate the typicality of the dinner on a scale from '1' (very untypical meal) to '10' (very typical meal). The mean score was 7.86 ($SD = 1.14$).

The dinner consisted of a weighed portion of spaghetti bolognese; a jug of water and grated cheese were available on the table. Before the start of the videotaped meal, the observer left the room.

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