



Exploring child-feeding style in childcare settings: How might nursery practitioners affect child eating style and weight?



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ABSTRACT

Although considerable research has explored the role of parents in affecting child eating habits and weight, there has been little consideration of the impact of other key care providers in the early years. A controlling maternal child-feeding style (e.g. use of pressure to eat or restricting certain foods) has been associated with over consumption, fussy eating and weight issue. Conversely, responsive child-feeding styles whereby children are allowed to regulate their own intake but encouraged to eat a range of foods and try new tastes are associated with healthier eating styles and weight. Increasing numbers of preschool children now spend time in day care settings, many for up to fifty hours a week but interactions with caregivers during mealtimes remain unexplored. The aim of the current study was to begin to explore child-feeding styles of nursery practitioners working with children aged 0–5 years. Sixty three nursery practitioners completed an adapted version of the Child Feeding Questionnaire to examine their interactions with children during mealtimes. Themes included pressure to eat, encouragement to eat and use of reward. Typically practitioners reported responsive child-feeding styles with low levels of pressure to eat but high levels of encouragement to try new foods. Use of reward to eat certain foods or as a bribe to modify behaviour was however more common. The findings have important implications for understanding the role of childcare providers in affecting child eating habits and weight.

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1. Background

Considerable research has explored the role of maternal child-feeding style upon child weight and eating behaviours. Children have a natural ability to regulate their intake of energy, which is important in maintaining a healthy weight (Birch & Deysher, 1985). However, a high level of maternal control such as pressurising intake or restricting palatable foods can breakdown the child's ability to regulate their own appetite and increase risk of over consumption, fussy eating and in some cases subsequent overweight (Ventura & Birch, 2008).

Despite these links, research has typically focussed on maternal child-feeding style and has not considered how the feeding style of other carers (e.g. grandparents and childcare workers) could affect a child's diet. The early years are critical to the establishment of eating habits (Savage, Fisher, & Birch, 2007) and with increasing numbers of mothers returning to work (Hawkins, Cole, & Law, 2009) many children

under the age of five spend significant time in the care of professional child carers (Nicklas et al., 2001).

Research exploring the role of childcare in influencing child-eating behaviour for preschool children is sparse. Children of working mothers are more likely to be overweight (Hawkins et al., 2009) and limited studies examine the diet offered in private childcare settings (Mwatsama, 2006; Parker, Lloyd-Williams, Weston, Macklin, & McFadden, 2011). However, child-feeding style has not been considered. Given the importance of maternal child feeding style upon child weight and eating style, it is important to understand how practitioners within these nursery settings interact with children during mealtimes.

The aim of the current research was to begin to explore the feeding style in nursery practitioners, considering what feeding behaviours might be relevant and appropriate to measure in childcare settings.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Sixty-three nursery practitioners completed a questionnaire examining their feeding style for children in their care. All participants were

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aged over 18 and were currently employed within a nursery setting for children aged 0–5 and had responsibility for supervising child meal times. All participants gave informed consent prior to inclusion in the study. A University Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval.

2.2. Measures

The questionnaire explored what child-feeding behaviours may be relevant in childcare settings with the aim of developing larger scale research. Items were based on themes in the current child feeding style literature and modelled on themes present in the Child Feeding Questionnaire [CFQ] (Birch et al., 2001) which assesses primary carer involvement and control over the child's diet, targeting behaviours such as restriction, pressure to eat, using food as a reward and monitoring.

Eleven items were used (Table 1). Questions explored issues such as pressurising the child to eat when they were full, encouraging the child to try food, using food as a reward and monitoring. Questions did not target restriction (see the Discussion section). Response options were via a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree or always to never. The questionnaire was piloted before distribution.

3. Procedure

Nurseries in the Swansea and Plymouth area were sent information packs regarding the research. Interested nursery managers returned a consent form for further contact from the researcher. Questionnaires were distributed to nursery practitioners via the manager. Information regarding consent, withdrawal and confidentiality was included within the information sheet alongside content details for the researcher if further information was needed. Completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher via the nursery manager.

4. Data analysis

Data was analysed using SPSS version 19. Items in the questionnaire were grouped into four main themes: pressure to eat, encouragement to eat or try new foods, use of food as a reward and importance of child diet in the nursery (Table 1). Descriptive statistics were computed to explore responses.

5. Results

Sixty-three nursery nurses from eleven different settings completed the questionnaire. Results are shown in Table 1. Typically, practitioners reported positive child-feeding styles. All participants believed it was important that children ate a varied diet in the nursery and few did not pay attention to what foods were served.

For pressure to eat, the majority of participants gave neutral or negative responses with around 10% reporting this behaviour. However, approximately half of participants agreed that they allowed children to

decide whether they want to have a snack or not. Conversely, encouragement to try new foods or some of a meal was high with almost all participants agreeing that they did so.

Use of food as a reward provided split responses. Participants tended to either strongly agree or strongly disagree with this practice, although only a fifth typically agreed with this behaviour.

6. Discussion

This paper presents an initial exploration of the child-feeding style of nursery practitioners working in childcare settings. The findings showed that practitioners regularly used techniques such as monitoring and encouragement to get children to eat food but reported lower levels of bribery and pressure to eat.

Drawing from the literature exploring maternal child-feeding style, the healthiest feeding patterns emerge from providing a healthy nutritious diet whilst allowing the child to regulate their intake (Benton, 2004). With increasing numbers of children attending childcare settings (OFSTED, 2012), it is important to consider the feeding style of those who care for children for significant periods of time. Overall, practitioners reported positive, responsive feeding styles, monitoring and promoting intake of nutrients but allowing children to self regulate.

Participants believed child diet during nursery to be important and were aware of what the children were eating. Monitoring of unhealthy foods and providing access to nutrient dense options may help foster healthy eating patterns in children (Ogden, Reynolds, & Smith, 2006) and is associated with a lower risk of overweight and increased nutrient intake (Brown & Ogden, 2004). This suggests that practitioners are aware of the importance of healthy eating which may be a positive facilitator for child weight and eating style.

Monitoring intake of food can be associated with increased use of restrictive or pressurising feeding practices which can lead to child fussy eating, over consumption and potential weight gain due to a breakdown in the child's ability to regulate their intake of food (Ventura & Birch, 2008). However for the majority of participants use of pressure to eat was low with practitioners preferring to promote consumption through encouraging children to try foods, eat a little of their meal or praise; tools which have been linked to increased nutrient consumption (Blissett, 2011). One question did contradict these findings, with half of participants agreeing with 'I allow children to decide whether they want a snack or not'. Although designed to explore pressure to eat it is possible that it was interpreted as not allowing children free access to snack foods. Further research should delineate between these items more clearly.

These data are in contrast to studies exploring maternal child-feeding style, where maternal use of controlling feeding practices is common (Ventura & Birch, 2008). Potential explanations for this include training surrounding child diet and behaviour, which may affect interaction with children. Childcare workers are professionals trained in how to promote positive behaviour in young children including meal-time behaviour, which may lead to increased positive reactions during

Table 1
Descriptive results for each item.

Theme	Question	Mean score (std dev)	% agree or strongly agree
Monitoring	It is important children in my nursery eat a varied diet.	1.44 (0.5)	100
	I do not always pay attention to what foods are served in nursery. ^a	4.67 (1.31)	12
Pressure to eat	Children should always eat all the food on their plate.	3.51 (0.84)	12
	Children need to be told how much to eat or they will eat too much or too little.	3.52 (0.9)	11
	I allow children to decide whether they want to have a snack or not. ^a	2.63 (0.9)	51
Encouragement to eat	If a child refuses to eat a meal I will try to encourage them to have a small amount.	1.52 (0.56)	98
	I praise children if they eat food without prompting.	1.43 (0.61)	98
	I encourage children to try each of the foods on their plate.	1.57 (0.56)	98
Food as a reward	I offer children sweets as a reward for good behaviour.	4.15 (0.85)	21
	If children do not eat their main meal, I would not give them dessert.	3.33 (1.15)	30
	I use treats as a bribe to get children to eat their main meal.	4.38 (0.92)	21

^a Reverse scored.

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