

About Your Child's Eating: Factor structure and psychometric properties of a feeding relationship measure

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Abstract

Conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis of the About Your Child's Eating (AYCE) inventory with 763 parents. Parent subjects were drawn from a community study of families with physically healthy and chronically ill children between 8 and 16 years of age. Three correlated factors were identified: Child Resistance to Eating, Positive Mealtime Environment, and Parent Aversion to Mealtime. The internal consistency of the factors remained satisfactory across all examined demographic subgroups. Evidence for convergent validity was found by comparing the AYCE factors to higher order factors of the Family Environment Scale. Empirically derived clinical range cut-off scores are presented. Results support the AYCE as a psychometrically sound measure of the parent–child feeding relationship for school-aged children.

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Concerns about eating and weight are a common reason for referral to professionals working with children. The complexity of interactions across the cellular, individual, and family systems make these cases difficult to evaluate (Davies et al., 2006). The complexity of interactions has been demonstrated in families of children with failure-to-thrive (Kessler & Dawson, 1999), cystic fibrosis (Stark & Powers, 2005), cancer (Gerhardt et al., 2006), and physically healthy children (Stanek, Abbott, & Cramer, 1990).

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These cases often benefit from the expertise available in a multidisciplinary evaluation. However, professionals have to make decisions about when such an intensive and expensive step is needed. A psychometrically robust scale to document behavioral and interactional difficulties in the feeding relationship would be valuable.

Satter (1999) defines the feeding relationship as, “the complex of interactions that take place between parent (or primary caregiver) and child as they engage in food selection, ingestion, and regulation.” (p. 122). Disruptions in the feeding relationship are associated with a range of behavioral and emotional difficulties for the relationship between parent and child and/or for each of them individually.

We have few psychometrically stable instruments dealing with mealtime behaviors, and most of the available instruments are focused explicitly on the child’s behavior. The parent-report questionnaire “About Your Child’s Eating” (AYCE; Davies, Noll, Davies, & Bukowski, 1993) included questions asking about the frequency of 15 positive, negative, and neutral parent–child interactions at mealtimes. Scales of Positive and Negative Interactions were constructed which yielded adequate internal consistency.

The present study presents improvements to the AYCE and more intensive exploration of its psychometric properties. The number of interaction items was increased from 15 to 31, and the items were subjected to exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses on separate samples to develop a more refined factor structure. The internal consistency of the new factors is evaluated across a range of child and family variables.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The sample included 763 mothers and co-parents of children (ages 8–16) with chronic illness and physically healthy children taking part in the University of Cincinnati Friendship Study (Noll et al., 1999).

The selection procedure consisted of (1) selection of children with chronic illness from rosters at their treatment center; and (2) a matched-group classroom nomination procedure. Children with chronic illness and their parents who agreed to participate gave us permission to contact the child’s school where physically healthy children matched on gender, race, and age and their parents were asked to participate.

In the resulting sample, 49.6% of the children had a chronic illness; 51.4% were male; 64% were white, with the remaining 36% black. The mean child age was 11.3 years ($SD = 1.99$ years). Parents of children with chronic illness did not differ significantly from parents with physically healthy children in age, race, education, and socioeconomic status.

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. About Your Child’s Eating (AYCE)

The AYCE consists of 31 Likert scale items rated from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*nearly every time*) asking parents about the frequency of child eating behaviors, their mealtime interactions with the child, and their feelings about mealtime. Items were developed by querying dietitians and psychologists familiar with Feeding Relationship theory (Satter, 1999) about common scenarios. Previous research employing the AYCE utilized a factor structure that grouped the negative and positive items into subscales. This factor structure has not been verified through factor analysis.

1.2.2. Family Environment Scale (FES)

The Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1981) is a 90-item true/false questionnaire tapping various family characteristics. The measure contains nine subscales that were empirically combined into three higher order factors: Supportive, Conflicted, and Controlling (Kronenberg & Thompson, 1990). The Supportive factor is scored by summing the Cohesion, Expressiveness, Independence, Active–Recreational Orientation, and Intellectual–Cultural Orientation scales. For the Conflicted factor, the Cohesion and Organization scales are subtracted from the Conflict scale. The Controlling factor is the sum of the Control, Achievement Orientation, and Moral–Religious Emphasis scales minus the Independence scale. A fourth FES construct is the Family Relationships Index (FRI), conceptually derived by Moos and Moos (1981) as the sum of the Cohesion and Expressiveness scales minus the Conflict scale. Studies have found the FES to be a valid instrument for examining family issues, including the family mealtime environment (Davies et al., 1993; Stanek et al., 1990).

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