



## Research report

## Child and parent characteristics related to parental feeding practices. A cross-cultural examination in the US and France

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## ABSTRACT

Although cross-cultural research between France and the United States has contributed to our understanding of adult eating habits, no research to date has considered differences in the way that French and American parents feed their children. American mothers ( $n = 59$ ) and fathers ( $n = 38$ ) and French mothers ( $n = 72$ ) and fathers ( $n = 50$ ) provided information about the feeding practices that they use with their children. U.S. parents reported higher levels of non-nutritive feeding practices and child control over feeding, whereas French parents reported greater monitoring and restriction of their child's food intake for weight reasons. Feeding practices were linked to child Body Mass Index (BMI) in both socio-cultural contexts.

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## Introduction

A parent's feeding practices and the way a child responds to these practices are a central and complex part of the daily interaction within the dyad (Satter, 1999). Research finds that parental feeding practices can be related to child eating behaviors (Birch & Davison, 2001; Swarr & Richards, 1996) and child weight status (Faith, Scanlon, Birch, Francis, & Sherry, 2004). Furthermore, given the relative stability of weight status from childhood into adulthood (Serdula et al., 1993), a focus on early experiences that are related to eating behaviors is especially useful.

In an effort to understand individual differences in eating behaviors, some research has considered socio-cultural factors that are related to this domain. Of this research, studies of differences between the US and France vis à vis eating habits and attitudes have been especially noteworthy (e.g., Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999). For example, cross-cultural work has established that compared to American adults, French samples have: smaller portion sizes (Rozin, Kabnick, Pete, Fischler, & Shields, 2003), increased consumption of certain foods (e.g., red wine, Renaud & de Lorgeril, 1992), and consumption of a greater variety of foods (Drewnowski et al., 1996), all of which have been

connected to healthier eating and weight outcomes in France than in the United States. Furthermore, Rozin et al. (1999) have established that considerable differences exist between French and American adults in their attitudes toward food. In general, French participants report taking more pleasure in food, and being less concerned about the negative health consequences of food than American participants. Rozin suggests that the reduced stress associated with eating in this socio-cultural context may convey health benefits to the French eater.

In contrast to this work with adults' eating behaviors and attitudes, relatively little is known about socio-cultural differences in how parents feed their children. Indeed, although some studies have compared feeding practices among various subgroups within the United States (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006; Anderson, Hughes, Fisher, & Nicklas, 2005), comparative research on this topic between the U.S. and other countries has been non-existent.

There are at least two lines of research that suggest that this may be an important oversight. First, evidence is accumulating to support the role of parental feeding practices in later eating and weight outcomes. For example, in a review of 22 studies on the topic, Faith et al. (2002) found that maternal restrictive feeding was related to child eating and weight outcomes [e.g., energy intake, child Body Mass Index (BMI)] in the majority of the reviewed studies. Given the relationships between feeding practices and child outcomes, an examination of socio-cultural underpinnings may be useful.

Second, differences in rates of childhood obesity between countries such as the US and France also support the view that

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comparative research on how parents feed their children might be fruitful. In 2000, 6.4% of 6–9 year old French children were obese (95th percentile for weight) and 20.6% were overweight (85th percentile; Rolland-Cachera et al., 2002). In contrast, using the same standards, 15.3% of 6–11 year old children in the United States were obese and 30.3% were overweight (Ogden, Flegal, Carroll, & Johnson, 2002). The large discrepancy in rates of childhood overweight between the US and France further highlights the need for an understanding of how parents in these two countries differ in their approaches to feeding.

Thus, the current study had two primary goals. The first was to examine socio-cultural differences between the U.S. and France in levels of various feeding practices. Some previous research on parental feeding practices has focused on just a few practices such as restrictive feeding and pressure to eat, which are typically measured with the Child Feeding Questionnaire (CFPQ, e.g., Francis, Scott, & Birch, 2001). But, other research has suggested that additional feeding practices, such as using food as a reward and modeling healthy eating behaviors, can be measured in parents (using the Comprehensive Feeding Practices Questionnaire) and might impact child outcomes (e.g., Musher-Eizenman & Holub, 2007). So, in the current study, nine subscales of the CFPQ were included to assess socio-cultural differences on a wide range of feeding practices. Because the CFPQ has not been used with a French sample, an assessment of the validity of this measure in the French sample was conducted prior to other analyses.

The second goal of this study was to explore the relationships between parent and child characteristics and parental feeding practices in both cultural contexts. Some research had linked parent demographic characteristics such as family income, parents' education, and parents' BMI and child characteristics (e.g., sex, age, and BMI) to the feeding practices that parents employ with their children (e.g., Baughcum et al., 2001; Jain et al., 2001; Spruijt-Metz, Lindquist, Birch, Fisher, & Goran, 2002). However, findings have been mixed and no one study has examined both a wide range of parent and child characteristics and a wide range of feeding practices. The cross-cultural nature of the sample in this study allows for an examination of which parent and child characteristics may be related to feeding practices consistently across cultures and which relationships may be culturally specific.

## Method

### Participants

Two samples of parents (US and French) were included in the current study. Attempts were made to recruit from schools in the two countries that were similar on a range of demographic variables, detailed below. The first sample (US) was recruited from day cares and preschools in a mid-sized Midwestern city and the surrounding towns during the period between May 2004 and August 2004. The second sample (France) was recruited from schools in a large city and a small town in the Ile-de-France and Picardy regions of France between October 2005 and January 2006. In both the US and France about half of the sample was made up of rural/suburban families and the other half was urban families. Details about the demographic characteristics of both samples can be found in Table 1.

### Procedure

In both countries, schools gave consent to participate. Parents of all children in the target age range were invited to complete the questionnaire. Parents also consented for their child to be weighed

**Table 1**

Demographic characteristics of the U.S. and French samples

Variable	U.S.	France
Sample size ( <i>n</i> )	59 mothers 38 fathers	72 mothers 50 fathers
Median Income (mother's report)	\$75,000–90,000	60,000–70,000€ <sup>a</sup>
Median education (mother's report)	College diploma	College diploma
Ethnicity/race	97% Caucasian	89% born in France 78% parents born in France
Children's age (years)	3.7–6.8	4.0–6.8
Range/mean	5.0	5.5
Children's sex	40% boys	49% boys

<sup>a</sup> At the time of data collection 60,000€ was equal to \$75,000.

and measured at school. Mothers and fathers were instructed to complete the questionnaires independently and to return them to the schools in sealed envelopes. The participation rate in the US was 47% of mothers and 30% of fathers; for the French mothers and fathers, the response rate was 42% and 29%, respectively. The appropriate Human Subjects Review Board approved each data collection.

### Measures

Parents in each of the samples completed an almost identical packet of questionnaires. All questionnaires that were not available in French were translated and then back translated into English (by a third party) to ensure that the meaning of the items had been retained.

### Demographic information

Parents provided information about their birth date, their child's birth date, their ethnicity (or in France, the country of origin of themselves and their parents), their household income, their level of education, their height and weight. Children were weighed and measured at their schools by a trained experimenter.

### Comprehensive Feeding Practices Questionnaire

Nine aspects of parental feeding behavior were measured by the Comprehensive Feeding Practices Questionnaire (CFPQ; Musher-Eizenman & Holub, 2007). These were monitoring the child's food intake (3 items), using food to regulate the child's emotions (3 items), using food as a reward (3 items), child control over feeding (5 items), teaching about nutrition (3 items), encouraging balance and variety (3 items), restricting child's food intake for weight reasons (8 items), restricting child's intake for health reasons (4 items), and modeling healthy eating (4 items). The psychometric properties of this measure have been demonstrated in US samples (Musher-Eizenman & Holub, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

### Psychometric analysis procedure

To test the internal validity of the CFPQ in the French sample, we performed a multi-trait/multi-item analysis. The aim of the analysis was to verify that items were correlated with their assigned scales (convergent validity) and more correlated with their assigned scale than with the other eight scales (discriminant validity).

To examine socio-cultural differences in the extent to which parents reported use of the various feeding practices, differences

<sup>1</sup> A copy of the complete measure in English or in French can be obtained from the first author.

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