

Short communication

Feeding strategies used by mothers of 3–5-year-old children

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Abstract

Appropriate use of parental feeding strategies could help establish healthy childhood eating practices. Research suggests that repeated taste exposure and modelling may be effective, pressuring and restricting may be counterproductive, and rewards may be effective or counterproductive depending on their use. However, little is known about the extent to which parents employ these strategies and within what contexts. The present study explored this using qualitative interviews with twelve mothers of children aged 3–5 years. Common strategies involved modelling, attempts to influence the child's attitudes and norms, and use of moderate pressure. The results are discussed in relation to the literature.

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Introduction

Establishing healthy eating habits in young children may have long-term benefits for diet and health. One means of influencing children's eating behaviours is via the feeding strategies employed by parents; research suggests that different feeding strategies may have very different outcomes. For example, repeated taste exposure to novel foods has been shown to be an effective means of increasing both liking and subsequent consumption (e.g., Birch & Marlin, 1982; Birch, McPhee, Shoba, Pirok, & Steinberg, 1987; Wardle et al., 2003). Likewise, modelling food consumption via adult, peer and sibling models, especially when paired with enthusiastic comments, has also been shown to be an effective means of encouraging consumption (e.g., Birch, 1980; Harper & Sanders, 1975; Hendy & Raudenbush, 2000).

In contrast, other strategies may have undesirable outcomes. For example, restricting a child's access to a particular food has been shown to enhance both consumption of and liking for that food (Fisher & Birch, 1999) and

to be associated with increased eating and weight status (Faith, Scanlon, Birch, Francis, & Sherry, 2004). Similarly, pressuring a child to eat by requiring them to *finish* their food has been shown to be associated with reduced consumption and an increase in negative comments about the food (Galloway, Fiorito, Francis, & Birch, 2006). Pressuring strategies have also been linked to disinhibited eating later in life as a result of reduced sensitivity to satiety cues (Carper, Orlet Fisher, & Birch, 2000).

However, it is important to note that recent research suggests that some of the associations between children's diets and parent's use of such strategies may be due to underlying associations with children's neophobia rather than any negative consequences of restricting and pressuring (Wardle, Carnell, & Cooke, 2005). Likewise, research by Ogden, Reynolds, and Smith (2006) suggests that parent's use of such strategies may be more varied and subtle than those employed in the experimental literature and that they may in fact be associated with more healthy eating behaviours.

The effects of rewards within the food domain are likely to vary depending upon a range of factors. Using food *as a reward* tends to increase liking for that food (Mikula, 1989) but requiring a child to eat a food *in order to get a reward*

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may have either positive or negative consequences. Specifically, when used in a coercive or negative context, rewards tend to reduce the child's liking for the food (e.g., Birch, Birch, Marlin, & Kramer, 1982; Birch, Marlin, & Rotter, 1984) but when employed in a positive context, for example as indicators of achievement, or paired with praise, they have been shown to enhance both liking and consumption (e.g., Handen, Mandell, & Russo, 1986; Horne et al., 2004; Lowe, Horne, Tapper, Bowdery, & Egerton, 2004). (See Lowe et al., 2004 for further discussion.)

Thus parental feeding strategies may include features of repeated taste exposure, modelling, pressure, restriction and rewards. Although some literature suggests parents commonly employ such strategies (e.g., Birch, 1998, p. 619), little is known about the ways in which they employ them or how they combine or alternate between them. It is possible that parents employ a wider range of techniques than those described above. The present study aimed to explore the feeding strategies used by parents of pre-school children to encourage or discourage consumption of familiar foods and to encourage consumption of novel foods.

Method

A qualitative methodology was adopted due to the exploratory nature of the study. The sample was recruited using a snowballing technique (Bryman, 2001) originating from contacts of the first author. It consisted of twelve mothers with a child aged between 3–5 years who was the target of the interview. Mothers' ages ranged from 31 to 42 years (mean = 36). The target children were 4 girls and 8 boys aged 36–71 months (mean = 51).

The semi-structured interview employed four main questions to prompt participants to recall and talk through their actions during four types of eating occasions. These were when the target child was: (a) reluctant to eat familiar foods; (b) presented with novel foods; (c) discouraged from eating undesirable foods; and (d) when the mother had used strategies that did not involve interacting with the child. Probe questions were used to elicit more detail or to re-focus responses which deviated from the areas of interest, e.g. 'Can you tell me more about what (*target child*) did in response to (*mother's strategy*)'. Care was taken not to influence participants with direct questions about particular strategies unless they failed to mention a strategy or had difficulties freely recalling relevant episodes. They were briefed that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and that those with older children could mention incidents involving them when they were 3–5 years old. The interviews lasted approximately 20 mins and were recorded, transcribed and subjected to concurrent coding and interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Codes were assigned at the 'manifest' level of what the interviewee said and at the 'latent' level where meaning was inferred from the words spoken (Mason, 2002).

Results

All mothers reported using strategies to encourage their child to eat familiar and novel foods and to discourage their child from eating undesirable foods. Mothers tended to draw on a broad range of strategies, with 126 different strategies mentioned and 51 unique to a mother–child pairing. Nevertheless, it was possible to group strategies, either based on characteristics defined in the literature (e.g., modelling), or by identifying common features (e.g., influencing attitudes/norms)—see Table 1.

Modelling was used by all mothers to encourage consumption of familiar foods and by five mothers to introduce novel foods. The most popular strategy was to ensure that the mother, if not the father, ate with the child ($n = 10$). Mothers would ensure that everyone was served the same food ($n = 6$) and eating was often paired with comments about how tasty the food was ($n = 4$). The latter was the most common modelling strategy used when introducing novel foods ($n = 3$).

Moderate pressure was used to encourage consumption of foods ($n = 11$), which was most commonly manifested as assertiveness ($n = 10$), e.g., firmly insisting that the child ate ($n = 6$). Many mothers rejected the use of intense, protracted or non-negotiable pressure ($n = 7$). The strongest forms of pressure were mild threats ($n = 8$) and punishments ($n = 3$), most commonly associated with the removal of rewards used to encourage eating.

Restriction was used to discourage the consumption of 'undesirable' foods. The most popular strategy was not to buy such foods ($n = 7$), which included not taking children to fast food outlets ($n = 3$). Some foods were reserved for 'special' occasions ($n = 2$) such as weekends.

Reward strategies were used to encourage ($n = 7$) and discourage food consumption ($n = 4$) but not to introduce novel foods. When probed directly two mothers rejected their use. To encourage consumption, rewards were usually contingent upon *finishing* the meal ($n = 6$),

Table 1
Types of strategy used to encourage/discourage food consumption

Type of strategy	Total ^a	Encourage ^a		Discourage ^a
		Familiar	Novel	
Modelling	12	12	5	0
Influencing attitudes and family	12	8	11	9
Indirect ^b	11	11	3	0
Pressure to eat	11	11	3	0
Miscellaneous ^c	10	10	1	0
Rewards	9	7	0	4
Restriction	8	0	0	8
Repeated exposure	6	2	6	0

^aNumber of mothers mentioning the strategy, irrespective of frequency or effectiveness.

^bStrategies that do not involve interacting with the child.

^cStrategies with no major common features, e.g., distracting the child, making games out of eating, granting good eaters some autonomy.

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