



Research report

Are maternal weight, eating and feeding practices associated with emotional eating in childhood? [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Background: Research concerning children's emotional eating behavior has shown its negative impact on weight-related problems. Taking the model of Birch and Davison (2001) into account, we focus on the role of maternal feeding behavior on the association between emotional eating of the mother and the child. **Methods:** 482 mothers and their children participated in this cross-sectional study. The mothers were asked about their feeding strategies, their children's and their own emotional eating and weight. We tested a structural equation model for different feeding strategies. **Results:** In addition to an expected direct association between the mother's and child's emotional eating, the maternal feeding strategies are related to the child's eating behavior. A higher maternal restriction of food or its monitoring was associated with a higher level of children's emotional eating, while allowing the child more control about their eating was linked to less pronounced emotional eating behavior. **Conclusions:** The results highlight the relevance of maternal feeding behavior on emotional eating in childhood. In terms of preventing weight-related problems, the findings indicate the necessity of training parents in allowing their children more control and avoiding the restriction of food.

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Introduction

Weight-related eating behavior during childhood has gained public attention recently with respect to the growing prevalence of associated physical and mental disorders as well as psychosocial consequences (teasing, stigmatization) (summarizing (Warschburger, Petermann, & Fromme, 2005)). Eating behavior triggered by emotional stimuli is relatively common in obese adults, especially in women (Ouwens, van Strien, van Leeuwe, & van der Staak, 2009; van Strien, Herman, & Verheijden, 2009), as well as in children and adolescents (Braet & Ipema, 1997; Braet et al., 2008; Webber, Hill, Saxton, van Jaarsveld, & Wardle, 2008). This so-called emotional eating behavior occurs when individuals are not able to identify whether they are hungry or suffering from other discomfort and overeat in response to any emotional arousal (Bruch, 1964; Heatherton, Herman, & Polivy, 1991; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1957; Slochower, 1983). Furthermore, emotional eating is supposed to be associated with the increased consumption of sweets and snack

foods (Contento, Zybert, & Williams, 2005; Elfhag, Tholin, & Rasmussen, 2008; Nguyen-Michel, Unger, & Spruijt-Metz, 2007; Oliver, Wardle, & Gibson, 2000; van Strien, Herman, Anschutz, Engels, & Weerth, 2012), time spent in front of TV or PC (Snoek, van Strien, Janssens, & Engels, 2006; Striegel-Moore et al., 1999; van Strien & Oosterveld, 2008), overeating and bingeing (Munsch et al., 2007; Ouwens et al., 2009; Stice, Presnell, & Spangler, 2002). Studies indicate that emotional eating already appears in young children (Carper, Fisher, & Birch, 2000; Kröller & Warschburger, 2011; van Strien & Oosterveld, 2008). Whereas parents of children younger than 7 years rather report undereating as a response to emotional arousal for their children instead of emotional overeating (Carnell & Wardle, 2007), overeating when emotionally aroused increases when children get older (Ashcroft, Semmler, Carnell, van Jaarsveld, & Wardle, 2008; Lluch, Herbeth, Mejean, & Siest, 2000; Wardle et al., 1992).

While the occurrence of emotional eating and its association with overeating and weight gain during middle childhood is verified, empirically established knowledge about the factors that promote the development of children's emotional eating behavior is lacking. Several studies highlight the role of parents (Brown & Ogden, 2004). Taking the model of Birch and Davison (2001) (see Fig. 1) into account, the development of the children's eating behavior is influenced by parental factors including, in addition to direct genetic aspects of weight status, intermediary behavioral aspects of parenting and eating behavior. This

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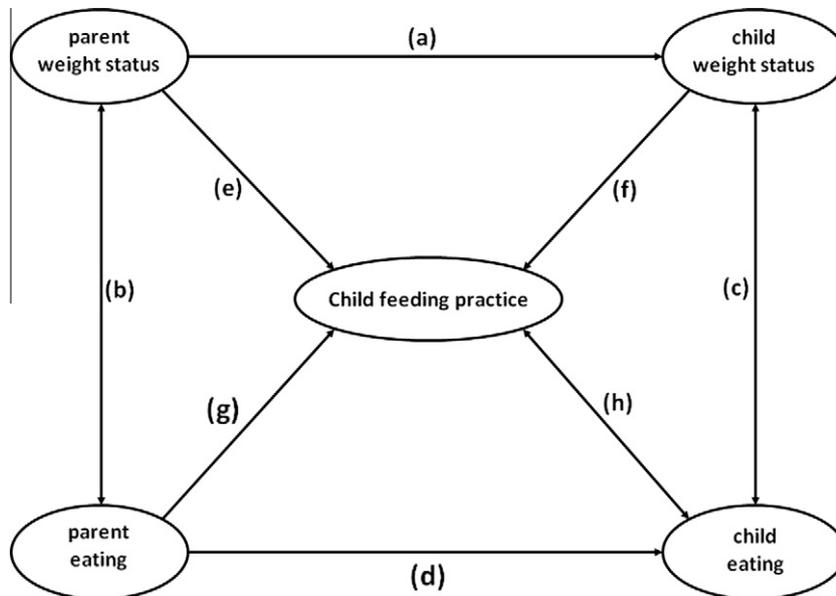


Fig. 1. Behavioral mediators of family resemblances in eating and weight status (adapted by Birch and Davison (2001)).

model (Fig. 1) assumes a direct relation between the weight status of the parent and the child (path a) as well as between their eating behavior (path d). Birch and Davison also illustrated relevant intermediary behavioral factors through the aspects of parenting, specifically the use of feeding strategies. Such strategies (like restricting food, rewarding with food or monitoring the child's food intake) are an intentional way for parents to influence their child's eating. Within the model of Birch and Davison, the parental feeding practices are proposed to be affected by all the integrated factors: parental (path e) and child's weight status (path f) as well the parental (path g) and child's eating behavior (path h). However, the feeding behavior itself also seems to affect the child's eating behavior (path h) – a relation which, if supported by evidence, could be focused on for preventive and intervention measures.

According to Birch and Davison (2001), parents' eating and feeding behavior are linked to children's weight status and eating behavior. There are few studies indicating a positive association between emotional eating of parents and of children and adolescents (Brown & Ogden, 2004; de Lauzon-Guillain et al., 2009; Elfhag, Tynelius, & Rasmussen, 2010; Francis, Ventura, Marini, & Birch, 2007; Snoek, Engels, Janssens, & van Strien, 2007a; Zocca et al., 2011). Regarding parental feeding, prior research predominantly focused on its influence on children's food intake and weight (Clark, Goyder, Bissell, Blank, & Peters, 2007; Faith, Scanlon, Birch, Francis, & Sherry, 2004), but there are also results concerning the effects of parental eating behavior on their feeding practices. For example, in preschool-aged children, mothers who scored higher on emotional eating reported higher levels of emotional feeding, but this effect was not associated with maternal or children's BMI (Wardle, Sanderson, Guthrie, Rapoport, & Plomin, 2002). The relation between parental feeding practices and children's emotional eating was also surveyed in a laboratory setting (Blissett, Haycraft, & Farrow, 2010). For preschool-aged children, the maternal use of food in order to regulate the emotions of their child was the only feeding strategy that was linked to the child's emotional eating behavior, operationalized as a higher consumption of sweet foods in the absence of hunger. The emotional eating of children whose mothers used food for emotional regulation could be enhanced using the experimental induction of negative mood (Blissett et al., 2010).

Regarding the relation between emotional eating in childhood and parental strategies, conclusions can also be drawn from a few studies which consider the relation between emotional eating in childhood and general parenting. In a German sample of primary-school-aged children, higher deviant eating behavior was associated with higher parental control and higher parental rejection independent of children's body weight. Emotional eating was most prevalent in so-called "disregarded" children (low parental care, low parental control, lack of limitations, low conflict) (Schuetzmann, Richter-Appelt, Schulte-Markwort, & Schimmelmann, 2008). Topham et al. (2011) indicated that emotional eating behavior in 6–8-year-old children was negatively related to an authoritative parenting style, open expression of affection and emotion in the family as well as positively related to the parents minimizing the response to the child's negative emotion. As far as we know, only one study considered both the emotional eating of parents and children as well as the parental behavior during the eating situation: Examining the adolescent's report of parenting and eating behavior, Snoek et al. (2007) could find positive associations between emotional eating of parents and their adolescent children as well as between adolescent's reports of low maternal support and their emotional eating. These findings confirm the association between emotional eating behavior and weight-related problems, familial resemblances of emotional eating behavior as well as the link between general parenting respectively feeding strategies and children's emotional eating. However, little is known about the role of parental feeding strategies in the complex relation between parent's and children's emotional eating behavior and weight status according to the model of Birch and Davison (2001). With regard to the familial transmission of emotional eating behavior and weight status, parental feeding strategies are assumed as potential associated factors for the development of children's overweight.

The aim of the present study was to examine the role of different maternal feeding strategies in the context of both mother's and child's weight as well as their emotional eating behavior in the model of Birch and Davison (2001). Consistent with current findings, we hypothesized that (1) maternal weight is directly associated with maternal emotional eating and the child's weight, (2) maternal emotional eating is directly associated with the child's emotional eating, (3) the child's emotional eating is in turn related

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