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Research Report

Parenting style and adolescent fruit consumption

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Abstract

The importance of the social environment for dietary behaviour has been highlighted in the past decade. A type of environmental influence that has received increasing research attention in recent years is the influence that parents can have on their children's dietary behaviour through food-related parenting practices. Much of the work done so far, however, has reported inconsistent findings and poorly understood mechanisms of influence. The present study aimed to explore the possible environmental influence of general parenting style on adolescent food choice patterns. Data were collected at schools ($N = 643$; mean age 16.5 years), using self-administered questionnaires on parenting style, fruit intake behaviour and fruit-specific cognitions. Consistent and theoretically predictable differences were found between adolescents who described their parents as authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent or neglectful. Fruit consumption and fruit-specific cognitions were most favourable among adolescents who were being raised with an authoritative parenting style. Children of parents with indulgent parenting styles consumed more fruit than adolescents from authoritarian or neglectful homes. Consequences of these results for the interpretation of earlier studies on the influence of parenting practices are discussed, and a research model is proposed for future studies of parental influences on adolescent dietary behaviours.

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Introduction

Consumption of fruit has been associated with a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke (Joshipura et al., 1999), some types of cancer (Steinmetz & Potter, 1996; USDHHS, 1998; Willet & Trichopoulos, 1996), diabetes (Ford & Mokdad, 2000) and obesity (McCrorry et al., 1999). Because eating behaviours are initiated in childhood, and may persist into adulthood (Branen & Fletcher, 1999; Lytle, Seifert, Greenstein, & McGovern, 2000), determinants of food intake in childhood and adolescence should be carefully examined in order to identify targets for intervention (Nicklas et al., 2001). However, interventions aimed at modification of adolescent dietary behaviours have yielded disappointing results (CDC, 1996; Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 1999). This may be partly the result of an inadequate understanding of the multiple and interacting factors that influence these behaviours (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2002).

The importance of the social environment on dietary

behaviour has been highlighted in the past decade (Booth et al., 2001; Hill & Peters, 1998), emphasising the need for research that can distinguish salient environmental influences on adolescent food intake (Birch & Davison, 2001; Davison & Birch, 2001; Story et al., 2002). An influential component of the adolescent's immediate environment is the family. Since parents provide food environments for their children's experiences with food and eating, they can influence their children's dietary practices in several ways, for example, by exposing them to certain foods, by actively encouraging them to eat certain foods or by passively allowing certain foods in the regular diet (Nicklas et al., 2001 for a review). Parents may also serve as a role model for their children's eating behaviour, although various studies have shown low family resemblance in food preference (Rozin, 1991), attitudes to foods (Rozin, Fallon, & Mandell, 1984) and in food neophobia (Pliner & Loewen, 1997). The low family resemblance in food preferences has been referred to as the 'family paradox' (Rozin, 1991).

A type of family influence that has received increasing research attention in recent years is the influence that parents may have on their children's dietary behaviour through food-related parenting practices (Birch, 1998;

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Birch & Fisher, 2000; Carper, Fisher, & Birch, 2000; De Bourdeaudhuij, 1997a,b; De Bourdeaudhuij & Van Oost, 1996; Fisher & Birch, 1999a,b; Fisher, Mitchell, SmiciklasWright, & Birch, 2002; Robinson, Kiernan, Matheson, & Haydel, 2001; Saelens, 2000). Parents who are concerned about their children's food intake behaviour may adopt controlling child-feeding practices, for example in an attempt to prevent overweight or negative health consequences (Birch & Davison, 2001; Casey & Rozin, 1989). Unfortunately, research reveals that strict parental control practices may have adverse effects. An impressive series of studies has shown that parental control efforts may increase children's preference for restricted foods (Birch, 1998; Birch, McPhee, & Shoba, 1987; Fisher & Birch, 1999a) as well as their intake of such foods (Birch & Fisher, 2000; Fisher & Birch, 1999a,b), while diminishing self-control in eating (Birch, 1998; Carper et al., 2000). Additionally, a recent study indicated that parental pressure to eat fruit and vegetables discourages intake among young girls (Fisher et al., 2002). On the other hand, studies by De Bourdeaudhuij (De Bourdeaudhuij, 1997a,b; De Bourdeaudhuij & Van Oost, 1996, 2000) have yielded the opposite results. In these studies, adolescents who reported more permissiveness in their family ate more fat and sweet foods and more snacks, and reported less healthy food choices in the family (De Bourdeaudhuij, 1997a,b; De Bourdeaudhuij & Van Oost, 1996), while those who reported more food rules in the family consumed less soft drinks (De Bourdeaudhuij & Van Oost, 2000). Results regarding the influence of child-feeding practices on body weight have also been mixed. While two studies failed to find a relationship between parental control over child feeding and body mass index (Robinson et al., 2001; Saelens, Ernst, & Epstein, 2000), other studies did find a positive correlation between parental restriction and children's body mass (Birch & Fisher, 2000; Lee, Mitchell, Smiciklas-Wright, & Birch, 2001; SpruijtMetz, Lindquist, Birch, Fisher, & Goran, 2002).

Although a substantial body of literature is accumulating on food parenting practices, many issues remain unclear. In a review of family influences on children's fruit, juice and vegetable consumption, for instance, Nicklas and colleagues (2001) concluded that research is needed to clarify the factors influencing the use of various child-feeding practices, i.e. the circumstances under which parental control practices are effective. The present study introduces general parenting style as an environmental context factor that may influence the effectiveness of parental child-feeding practices.

The literature on various parenting styles provides consistent evidence that parental warmth, emotional support, appropriate granting of autonomy, and clear, bidirectional communication lead to positive developmental outcomes in children and adolescents (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). This constellation of parent attributes has come to be known as 'authoritative' parenting, one of several proto-

typic styles of parenting identified by Baumrind (1967, 1971). Youngsters who are raised in authoritative homes have high scores on, for example, social development, self-esteem and mental health (for reviews, see Baumrind, 1989, 1991). In the past decade, parenting style has emerged as a predictive factor for substance use (Jackson, Bee-Gates, & Henriksen, 1994; Jackson, Henriksen, & Foshee, 1998), and recently an authoritative parenting style was found to be related to physical activity levels in girls (Schmitz et al., 2002). To date, no studies have been published on the relationship between parenting style and dietary behaviour. Influential theories of parenting style emphasise the need to consider the joint and interactive effects of various dimensions of parental behaviour, usually combining an index of parental warmth, acceptance or involvement with an index of parental control or strictness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). The combination of these two dimensions results in a fourfold typology of parenting style (Table 1); authoritative (parents who are both firm and supportive/involved), authoritarian (in which parents are strict but less involved), indulgent (in which parents are involved, but not strict), and neglectful (in which parents show relatively low levels of both strictness and involvement).

Parenting style differs from parenting practices (like parental control in child feeding) in that it describes parent-child interactions across a wide range of situations, whereas practices are by definition domain-specific (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). In contrast to parenting practices, a parenting style is independent of the content of the parenting behaviour. Darling and Steinberg (1993) have argued that the efficacy of specific parenting practices is moderated by the general parenting style. In the case of dietary behaviours, controlling child-feeding practices may have different effects in children of parents with different parenting styles. For example, controlling practices regarding foods with child desirable qualities that parents do not want their child to eat may be successful for parents with a general authoritative style and unsuccessful for parents with a different parenting style. Similarly, effects of parental attempts to promote the consumption of healthy foods with child undesirable qualities may be largest for authoritative parents. Thus, the primary process through which parenting style influences the child's eating behaviour may be an indirect, contextual, influence. The present study aimed to explore the possible contextual influence of parenting style on the fruit intake behaviour of adolescents.

Table 1
A two-dimensional classification of parenting styles (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; p. 39)

Strictness, demandingness, control	Involvement, responsiveness	
	High	Low
High	Authoritative	Authoritarian
Low	Indulgent	Neglectful

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