

Research report

“Just three more bites”: An observational analysis of parents’ socialization of children’s eating at mealtime

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to describe comprehensively the structure and process of the childhood mealtime environment. A socioeconomically diverse sample of 142 families of kindergarteners (52% females) was observed at dinnertime using a focused-narrative observational system. Eighty-five percent of parents tried to get children to eat more, 83% of children ate more than they might otherwise have, with 38% eating moderately to substantially more. Boys were prompted to eat as often as girls and children were prompted to eat as many times in single- as in two-parent households. Children were very rarely restricted in their mealtime intake. High-SES parents used reasoning, praise, and food rewards significantly more often than low-SES families. Mothers used different strategies than fathers: fathers used pressure tactics with boys and mothers praised girls for eating. Future research should examine the meanings children ascribe to their parents’ communications about food intake and how perceived parental messages influence the development of long-term dietary patterns. Interpreted alongside the evidence for children’s energy self-regulation and the risk of disruption of these innate processes, it may be that parents are inadvertently socializing their children to eat past their internal hunger/satiety cues. These data reinforce current recommendations that parents should provide nutritious foods and children, not parents, should decide what and how much of these foods they eat.

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Introduction

Although theorists have posited that lessons learned at mealtime (e.g., “clean your plate”) may influence dietary patterns and weight status throughout the lifespan (e.g., Faith, Scanlon, Birch, Francis, & Sherry, 2004), little

is known about parents’ socialization of their children’s eating in the *mealtime* environment. Undoubtedly, gains have been made in recent years in our understanding of parents’ influences on children’s food environment. An unstructured mealtime environment, for example, is more likely to be characterized by television viewing during meals (Videon & Manning, 2003) and by consumption of foods high in fat and sugar (Coon, Goldberg, Rogers, & Tucker, 2001). In addition, several cross-sectional studies have suggested that the frequency of family meals is positively associated with consumption of healthier foods (e.g., Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry,

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2003). Suggesting the need for further research, however, is a recent study that found no relation between frequency of family meals and 1-year incidence of becoming overweight (Taveras et al., 2005).

Parental strategies to control children's eating behaviors also may be related to children's energy intake and/or weight (Faith et al., 2004). Research has focused largely on two strategies: parental feeding restriction and pressure/prompting to eat. In middle-class, two-parent, European-American families, maternal report of restriction of children's access to snack foods high in fat and sugar was consistently found to be positively associated with children's intake of similar foods in the laboratory setting (e.g., Fisher & Birch, 1999). This finding, however, does not appear to hold for racially/ethnically diverse samples (Robinson, Kiernan, Matheson, & Haydel, 2001; Spruijt-Metz, Lindquist, Birch, Fisher, & Goran, 2002). Notably, the Child Feeding Questionnaire (CFQ; Birch et al., 2001), which was used in these self-report studies, focuses largely on restriction of snack foods and is likely more sensitive to the strategies parents use to influence children's between-meal snacking rather than their mealtime intake. Also of note, the CFQ has not been validated against naturalistic home observations of parenting behavior. The upshot is that we know little about parents' use of restriction as a feeding strategy in the mealtime environment.

Observational studies of the home mealtime environment have been rare, have used small samples, and have focused almost exclusively on the relation between "parental prompts/pressure to eat" and children's intake and/or weight. These studies almost uniformly report positive associations (e.g., Klesges et al., 1983), as do laboratory observations (Drucker, Hammer, Agras, & Bryson, 1999) and questionnaire studies (Spruijt-Metz et al., 2002). These studies, however, make no differentiation among prompts in terms of variation in parents' affective style and/or message content. We know little, therefore, about the specific types of prompts that parents may employ in their management of children's eating and of attendant variations in child eating response. Parenting theory posits that a parenting strategy will vary in its functional significance depending on the affective context of its use (e.g., Grolnick, 2003).

In sum, a close look at what is known about parents' socialization of children's eating in the mealtime environment reveals a rudimentary and fragmented picture, with research accruing piecemeal, compromised by methodological limitations. If we are to investigate the family socialization processes that are implicated in the tracking of childhood dietary habits (e.g., Singer, Moore, Garrahe, & Ellison, 1995), and design effective family interventions to address those eating behaviors that are likely to promote overweight, a necessary prerequisite is a veridical understanding of the social and behavioral phenomena that unfold between parent and child within the home mealtime environment (e.g., Faith, Johnson, & Allison, 1997). Such basic information is central to the formulation of an

empirical model of the development of adaptive and maladaptive eating patterns and would be not only of heuristic value but also of practical value (Hill, Rogers, & Blundell, 1995). The literature currently lacks such information (e.g., Faith et al., 2004).

In the present study, we used naturalistic home observational data of a large sample of families with kindergarten-aged target children to describe comprehensively the childhood mealtime environment and to examine several related issues not previously addressed in the literature. A primary objective was to identify empirically the full range of strategies that parents used in the childhood mealtime environment, and the frequency of use of these strategies.

Of the gaps in this literature, and given known socioeconomic status (SES) and sex differences in prevalence of eating disorders and obesity (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Wang, 2001), it is perhaps most striking that we know so little about the associations among family sociodemographic characteristics, the structural conditions of the mealtime environment, and parent-child processes within that context. As such, we also examined whether there were SES differences in the structure and process of the mealtime environment.

There is also very little research on potential moderators and covariates of parents' socialization of children's eating in the childhood mealtime environment, such as parent/child sex and single parenthood. Research has focused almost exclusively on maternal socialization of children's eating behaviors; and single parenthood, though implicated (Strauss & Knight, 1999), has not been examined directly in relation to child-feeding strategies. In this study, we examined whether fathers and mothers differed in the style and strategies they used to socialize eating behavior in sons relative to daughters. We also examined whether single parenthood was related to the structure of, and processes that operate within, the mealtime environment.

In sum, the primary goals of the present study were to: (1) describe the structure of the childhood mealtime environment; (2) identify empirically the range of strategies that parents use to influence children's eating, the frequency of use of each strategy, and children's eating response; and (3) examine sociodemographic variations in structure and strategy use.

Method

Overview

We used data from the Child Development Project (CDP), a multi-site, longitudinal study designed to develop and test an empirical model of the development of antisocial behavior. Details of the CDP are fully described elsewhere (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). In brief, a diverse community sample of 585 children and their parents were recruited in 1987–1988 when children were approximately age 5. At baseline, a sub-sample of children was selected for

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