



Effects of maternal socialization strategies on children's nutrition knowledge and behavior

Jennifer Hays^a, Thomas G. Power^{b,*}, Norma Olvera^c

^a*Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX, USA*

^b*Department of Human Development, Washington State University, P.O. Box 646236, 301C Hulbert Hall, Pullman, WA 99164-6236, USA*

^c*University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA*

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between maternal socialization strategies and children's nutrition knowledge and behavior. It was hypothesized that children of mothers who used strategies that promote the internalization of healthful eating practices would demonstrate greater understanding of the relationship between nutrition and health. Seventy-nine low-income, immigrant Mexican American mothers and their children (ages 4 to 8) participated. Measures of maternal strategies and child eating behavior were obtained through observations of mother–child interactions during a meal in the home and through a structured interview. Children's knowledge and awareness of the relationship between nutrition and health were assessed in a structured play session. Results indicated that after controlling for child age, mothers' use of reasoning, verbal nondirectiveness, and their provision of opportunities for children to participate in food decisions were positively related to children's knowledge and awareness, whereas the use of commands was negatively related. The use of commands, however, was positively associated with children's compliance to maternal eating directives. Mothers who were overweight, who discouraged unhealthy eating, and who used nutrition rationales had children who gave more physical appearance or weight responses. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-509-335-8478; fax: +1-509-335-2456.

E-mail address: tompower@wsu.edu (T.G. Power).

1. Introduction

An important aspect of childhood is the development of attitudes and behaviors that promote health and prevent disease. Parental influence plays a major role in the socialization of children's health behaviors, even though it is not the only determinant (Sallis & Nader, 1990). Parents influence the child's health behaviors, skills, or cognitions through modeling, labeling, persuading, or rewarding desired behaviors and by ignoring or punishing undesirable behavior. Parents also affect children's health behavior by providing children with the information and skills that enable them to assume increasing responsibility for their own behavior, including the ability to make their own health choices (Roberts, Maddux, & Wright, 1984). In addition, parents influence the child's environment by serving as gatekeepers of opportunities and barriers to health-enhancing behaviors (Baranowski, 1997). Parental influences on the child's health behavior are not unidirectional; children can affect the parents' health-related behavior, skills, and cognitions as well (Baranowski, 1997).

The role of parental influence on the child's diet is an area of research that has generated substantial interest because diet is a major contributor to the development of obesity (Baranowski, 1997). Findings have indicated that parental socialization strategies can affect a child's food-related knowledge, preferences, and consumption. Parents who offered nutrition explanations or talked more specifically about nutrition had children who reported greater nutrition knowledge (Anliker, Laus, Samonds, & Beal, 1990). Parental use of direct control strategies to encourage eating has been associated positively with the amount of time the child spends eating and the child's relative weight (Klesges et al., 1983). Anliker, Laus, Samonds, and Beal (1992) reported that mothers who selected foods for their preschool children to consume based on healthful considerations rather than on taste had more nutrition knowledge and had children who ate more healthful diets (fewer "empty" calories, lower fat, and more vitamin A). Similarly, Contento et al. (1993) found that mothers who were more likely to choose foods for healthful reasons had children whose diets were significantly lower in calories, fat, saturated fat, and sucrose, and higher in fiber and vitamin A.

Although the parental influence on a child's eating behavior is well-documented in white, middle-class, North American children, little is known about the socialization strategies used by parents in other cultural and ethnic groups to influence their child's eating practices. Identifying parental socialization strategies that help children to develop healthy eating practices in the Mexican American population is critical given that Mexican American children are at greater risk for obesity than European American children (Kumanyika et al., 1990; Malina, Zavaleta, & Little, 1987; Martorell, Mendoza, & Castillo 1989). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to assess the socialization strategies used by Mexican American mothers to help their 4–8-year-olds develop healthful eating practices.

The influence of culture on eating practices is widely recognized (Sanjur, 1995). Culture influences what is defined as food (e.g., insects, horses), what is a delicacy or what is disgusting (Rozin, 1996; Rozin & Fallon, 1987), how food is prepared (e.g., serving beef rare vs. well-done), what combination of foods is healthy vs. unhealthy (e.g., the hot–cold dichotomy in many Latino diets — Goyan-Kittler & Sucher, 1989; Sanjur, 1995), along

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