Beliefs about the Role of Parenting in Feeding and Childhood Obesity among Mothers of Lower Socioeconomic Status

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors of this presentation have documented that they have no relevant financial relationships to disclose or any conflicts of interest to resolve.
Objectives

1. To understand the rationale for taking a qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, approach to some research problems.

2. To understand mothers' reports of negative memories of being fed in childhood.

3. To understand maternal emotional investment in enjoying family mealtime.

4. To understand mothers' reports of attributing obesity in other people's children to inept or neglectful parenting.

5. To understand the implications for practice of these beliefs.
Low income families at mealtime
Why do maternal beliefs about the role of parenting in feeding matter?
Childhood Obesity Prevalence by Race, Sex, and Age, 2009-2010

Ogden et al, JAMA, 2012
Obesity Prevalence in Preschoolers and Poverty

Conceptualizations of Maternal Feeding Styles

• 2 separate domains of prompting versus controlling/restrictive

• 4 parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and indulgent
## Associations between Maternal Feeding Style and Child Weight Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Child Weight Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heavier</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prompting</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>Controlling/Restrictive</td>
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## Parenting Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>High expectations for self-control</th>
<th>Low expectations for self-control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High sensitivity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Authoritative:</strong> Respectful of child’s opinions, but maintains clear boundaries</td>
<td><strong>Permissive:</strong> Indulgent, without discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low sensitivity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Authoritarian:</strong> Strict disciplinarian</td>
<td><strong>Neglectful:</strong> Emotionally uninvolved and does not set rules</td>
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Parenting Styles and Obesity


*Adjusted for income-to-needs ratio and race*
Feeding Styles Differ by Race and Socioeconomic Status

- Hispanic parents self-report more controlling feeding
- African American parents self-report more authoritarian feeding
- Low-income minority mothers self-report
  - greater difficulty feeding their preschoolers
  - pushing their preschool children to eat more
  - less mealtime structure
- Significant predictors of pushing children to eat
  - Minority race/ethnicity
  - Lower maternal education

Baughcum et al, JDBP, 2001; Lumeng et al, AJCN, 2012
Why is taking a qualitative approach valuable?
Limitations of Questionnaires

- Social desirability bias
- Leading questions
- Not clear if all groups interpret questions in the same way (Hispanic groups tend not to use Likert scales as intended)
- Not clear mothers understand questions as researchers intended

Jain et al, Appetite, 2004
Maslow’s Law of the Instrument: When All You Have is a Hammer, Everything Looks Like a Nail

- Most studies examine practices: restriction, pressure/prompting, or the 4 parenting styles (or their dimensions)
- Perhaps these are not the most salient features of parenting relevant to feeding
Tabula Rasa (‘Blank Slate’)  

- Nature v. Nurture in children  
- To develop effective interventions, an appreciation for what the parent “brings to the table” must be included
Beliefs are Important

Mother’s sense of efficacy → Mother’s goals for her child → Parenting practices → Child Outcomes

Brody et al, Child Development, 1999
Beliefs are Important

Gutman et al, Developmental Psychology, 2003
Beliefs and Values are Important

Mother:
“Would you encourage your child to go to college after high school?”

6th grade child:
“Do you plan to go to a four-year college?”

1.5 times more likely to attend college

Eccles et al, Journal of Early Adolescence, 2004
The Present Study
Methods

• Recruitment flyer: “Participate in a study of children’s eating behavior with a parent to help researchers learn more about how mothers feed their children.”

• Inclusion criteria
  • Child 3 to 5 years old
  • English- or Spanish- speaking
  • Self-identified as Hispanic, African American, or white
  • Mother with < 4 year college degree
  • Biological and custodial mother
  • Child healthy and typically developing
Methods

• IRB-approved, written informed consent, $40
• Private, semi-structured interview (45 minutes)
• Conducted in Spanish for Spanish-speaking mothers
Why Semi-Structured Interview Instead of Focus Groups?

- Focus groups of 6 low-income mothers (nearly all mothers and their children were overweight)
- “What causes a child to be overweight?”
  - Genetics
  - Children will “grow into it”
  - Limited mention of role of parents
- “How do you prevent a child from becoming overweight?”
  - Mothers were not empowered

Jain et al, Pediatrics, 2001
Why Semi-Structured Interview Instead of Focus Groups?

- Child overweight is a “loaded” subject
- Mothers may not feel comfortable sharing their actual views in a group setting (particularly with other mothers of overweight children)
Interview Questions

• How do the people in your house usually eat their meals on a typical day?

• What works well and what does not?

• Can you describe yesterday’s dinner?

• How did you feel about it?

• Is there anything that you would change that would make it a better experience from your perspective?
Interview Questions

• What are special foods for you and your child? Why are these special?

• Do you ever worry that your child doesn’t or might not eat enough? What do you worry about? What might happen?

• Do you ever give your child food as a reward or motivation? Can you give an example?

• How do you think it works?
Interview Questions

• How were you fed when you were growing up?

• Do you see similarities or differences to your own way of feeding your kids?

• How do you think your mother felt about the way she fed you?

• How do you feel about your own family’s weight? – The family you grew up with.
Interview Questions

- Was weight ever hard for you?
- What does overweight mean to you?
- What does obese mean to you?
- What causes a child to be overweight?
Sample Characteristics

- 91 mothers
  - Race/ethnicity
    - 32 Hispanic
    - 30 African American
    - 29 non-Hispanic white
  - Maternal education
    - 40% < high school
    - 27% high school diploma only
    - 48% of children were male
Sample Characteristics

• Of 91, 83 attended the second visit where weight and height were measured
  • Maternal weight status
    • 49% obese
    • 26% overweight
    • 26% normal weight
  • Child weight status
    • 21% obese
    • 26% overweight
    • 54% normal weight
Methods

• Interviews digitally recorded, transcribed, translated

• Systematically analyzed using constant comparative method by 3 study team members
  • Researcher reads each transcript, noting possible themes
  • Constantly comparing themes with those identified in prior narratives
  • Begin with large number of themes; some discarded if not salient, others merged as they become integrated
Results

Theme 1: Negative memories of being fed in childhood
• Most mothers reported strong negative feelings about how they were fed when they were growing up

• Many confidently differentiated their own approach to feeding their children from that of their parents

• Mothers expressed pride that they were “doing it better than how it was done for me.”

• Mothers sometimes described their parents as lacking knowledge about how to prepare balanced meals and serving unhealthy foods that promoted weight gain

• Other mothers stated that their parents did not spend enough time preparing foods or implied that their own mothers did not care enough about feeding them
• “My mom never really cooked like lasagna and stuff unless it was like the Stouffer’s . . . I learned how to cook lasagna all by myself now. And it’s so much better than Stouffer’s. But, she tried doin’ the quick and easy stuff.” --- mother and child normal weight

• “Dinner, what it is with me and [my child] is nothing like it was with my family. When I was a kid we didn’t have dinners like that. ‘Here’s a hot dog. Here’s a sandwich. Eat it.’ You know? It’s kinda like that. Not with me and my daughter. I make dinner. I don’t throw a hot dog at her and say, ‘Here you go. Eat that. You’re good.’ No. I don’t do that. I just feel I wasn’t…I wish things would have been different for me, but it wasn’t.” --- mother and child obese
Many mothers described their childhood mealtime experiences as stressful, and described their parents’ feeding style as authoritarian. The mothers implied that they felt that this approach was overly strict and insensitive, and not the appropriate way to parent around food and mealtime.
• “My parents were actually very strict so dinner was somewhat stressful. We were expected to use our manners and, like, we weren’t allowed to drink while we ate. . . We had to clean our plates and it didn’t matter portion size, whatever, you had to eat everything that was on your plate.” --- mother overweight and child normal weight

• “Our step dad was real strict with the ‘eat everything on your plate or you’re not getting down.’ Or he would do, ‘If you’re not gonna eat everything on your plate we’ll wrap it and put it in the fridge—when you get hungry you’re not gettin’ a snack, you get dinner.’” --- mother obese, child overweight
Many mothers also recalled a lack of structured regular meals, and described often needing to just “fend for themselves.” The mothers implied that they valued family meals with their own children and ensured that they were incorporated into the family routine.
• “My dad raised me by himself. Um, and he had a gambling problem. There was a bar just down the road. So, from like, 10 and up, um -- I don’t remember much from 10 and down -- I fed myself.” --- mother obese, child weight status unknown

• “I always make sure my kids have breakfast, lunch, and dinner. My dad never did that, he, just, fend for yourself really, so, that’s, that’s one thing I do. I make sure that they eat and I make sure that we eat together.” --- mother obese, child weight status unknown
Results

Theme 2:
Maternal emotional investment in the child enjoying the meal
• In describing how they feed their children, mothers focused on serving foods that are palatable and pleasing to the child.

• Mothers described being proud of and confident in their ability to meet the child’s food requests and create positive affect around food and mealtime in the home.

• The mothers often described their emotional investment and commitment to feeding their child in a way that was in stark contrast to how they perceived being fed by their own parents.
• “I almost always prepare them things that they like. Yes, because why would I make things that they are not going to eat?” --- *mother obese, child overweight*

• “Whatever they want, Mommy make it.” --- *mother not overweight, child overweight*
Mothers often described buying only foods she knows her child will eat, preparing a second meal for the child if the child does not like what was originally served, or cooking separate meals for different members of the family based on what each person prefers.
• “Well, I usually cook different meals for everybody, because everybody seems to be picky.” --- *mother overweight, child obese*

• “Well in my house we are 4 -- my 2 children and my husband and me -- and the 4 of us eat different meals. So, I cook 4 times at once.” --- *mother obese, child overweight*
• Many mothers voiced being deeply gratified by watching the child eat, and said that they used food to promote positive relationships with their children.
• “You have to give them the best that you can, that is, with that patience because sometimes, [they say] ‘I don’t want this’[or] ‘I...no, not this.’ [And I say to them], ’What do you want, dear? If you didn’t like the food today, what do you want?’” --- mother obese, child overweight
Results

Theme 3:
Attributing obesity in other people’s children to inept or neglectful parenting
• The majority of mothers in this sample believed that when children are overweight, the parents are primarily at fault.

• Some of the strongest views about this issue came from normal weight mothers with normal weight children.

• These mothers tended to hold very strong and unforgiving views about the quality of parenting among other mothers.

• The phrase, “they don’t care” came up repeatedly from multiple mothers.
“I definitely blame overweight children on the parents. One hundred percent . . . I think it’s because they’re not educated, because they don’t know any better, because they’re feeding them things that are making [them] overweight and not giving them a healthy diet. Um, too much fast food. Um, a lot of parents just don’t care. I mean, honestly, there’s a lot of parents that just don’t care... Um, exercise, you know, some, parents, feed their kids fat and let them be lazy in front of the TV all day, every day. Don’t have them participating in sports. Um, I think children are overweight because of parents neglecting to do their jobs the way that they should, and [not] caring about their weight and their health.” ---

*mother and child normal weight*
“There is people that, like the women that work a lot, sometimes can’t take care of their children and when they take care of them, they are not used to making them something to eat. Then they take them to those restaurants and I think that that makes you gain weight a lot.” --- mother and child normal weight
Many mothers voiced the belief that parents of overweight children constantly offer food to their child, or do not set limits on their child’s eating
• “I know a couple of parents who let their children eat anything all day long. And they’ll give them food just to keep them occupied, I guess. And let them eat in front of the TV all the time, so I guess I think that’s what makes them overweight, and eating a lot of fast foods.” --- *mother obese, child weight status unknown*

• “So, I see a lot of kids that have . . . a lot of mothers that have heavy-set kids and they just…just because they’re hungry…they just ate two cheeseburgers…you know, just because they hungry you don’t have to feed them. And they’d say never turn down a child to eat. Yeah, I think you do. You just don’t feed your kid every time they’re hungry.” --- *mother and child normal weight*
• The belief that childhood obesity is due to inept or neglectful parenting was equally common among mothers of obese, overweight and non-overweight children.

• When mothers voiced this belief, however, in every case they were referring to perceived deficits in other people’s parenting.

• They never described their own parenting as being a contributor, even when their own child was obese or overweight:
• “[Children are overweight] if they have a parent that just lets them sit around and eat and watch TV.” --- *mother obese, child obese*

• “The mothers give them Twinkies, candy and ice cream and – everyday, this is an everyday thing -- cookies and, you know, to me that’s what causes a child to be overweight.” --- *mother and child obese*
• Parents of overweight or obese children were often described as modeling unhealthy lifestyles themselves, and it was implied that the parents’ own weight status was due to laziness or lack of self-discipline.

• These perceptions were described equally as often from obese, overweight, and non-overweight mothers, and these mothers never described their own weight status as due to these types of behaviors.
• “I think that that’s really a big thing . . . um, parents don’t eat the right things, and the kids aren’t going to eat the right things if they don’t feed them the right things . . . then they’re not going to know what’s the right thing and what’s the wrong thing.” --- *mother obese, child weight status unknown*

• “Well personally, from, like, I have friends that their kids . . . I always try to get them to be more active, but the parents sleep in ‘til 12, 1 o’clock, and you know…their kids pick up the same habit. When they get up, you know, it’s sit in front of the TV and just loungin’ all day. They don’t get up, they don’t go outside, they don’t do anything…well, if you don’t do anything with your kids and you sit in front of the TV all day, then, you know, you can’t turn around and look at your kids like why aren’t you doing something.” --- *mother overweight, child obese*
Study Limitations

• Loss to follow up (missing child weight status)
• May not be generalizable outside groups similar to the study population
• May have included parents particularly interested in child feeding
• Fathers not included
• Not analyzed in relation to race/ethnicity
Implications for Practice

• Overarching themes
  • Mothers use their childhood feeding experiences as a point of reference, but often wish to distinguish their own feeding styles from those employed in their family of origin.
  • Mothers pridefully described feeding their own child in a manner that pleased the child, and seemed to, by extension, please the mother by indicating that she was a successful, effective, and cherished parent.
  • There was the implication that the child’s response was particularly salient for mothers who did not feel well fed or cared for themselves as children.
Implications for Practice

• Overarching themes
  • Mothers believed that childhood obesity is due to inept or neglectful parenting, even when their own child was overweight or obese
  • Two possible reasons
    • Fundamental attribution error: tendency to attribute problems in oneself to things outside of one’s control, while believing that the same problem in others is due to a character flaw
    • Pervasive societal prejudice
Implications for Practice

- Criticism of their own parents’ feeding style was rooted in a recognition that it was flawed or ineffective, particularly in the context of modern nutrition knowledge.
  - mother could be praised for the ways she is “doing it better”
  - a conversation about feeding style might be opened with the acknowledgement that she has given the issue significant thought, lending credence to the mother’s own opinions and perhaps how they were generated.
Implications for Practice

• Strong affect around the perceived inadequacies of how they were fed growing up may lead to maladaptive feeding practices
  • Less motivation to encourage new foods and expand dietary variety because it generates conflict at the dinner table.
  • In her effort to prevent feeling ineffective or unloved, she may simply avoid the situation altogether by presenting only palatable foods.
Implications for Practice

• Consider suggesting this dynamic to the mother, in empathic, simple and non-threatening terms.
  • Is separating maternal affect from feeding desirable, appropriate, or even achievable?
  • May be best addressed in ongoing relationship with a mental health professional
Implications for Practice

• Mothers’ belief that children are obese due to inept or neglectful parenting
  • May contribute to their rejection of the diagnosis in their own child
  • Mothers may simply not be able to reconcile the idea that their own child could be obese when they view their own parenting as loving, attentive, and competent
Implications for Practice

• Consider discussing with mother
  • In today’s obesity-promoting environment, a higher degree of parental authority is likely now needed
  • Helping mothers to recognize that the causes of obesity in children are multi-factorial, complex, and occurring at levels often outside the scope of an individual mother’s power
  • Release some of her blaming and negativity
Implications for Practice

• Mothers often recalled their own upbringing around food as neglectful or authoritarian, and often described their own approach to feeding their child as indulgent.
  • Praise for sensitivity
  • Introduce idea that one can be sensitive while also providing rules and structure
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