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The influence of parents on childhood weight status: relation with eating behaviour

Joanna Klosowska¹, Stefaan De Henauw¹, Sandra Verbeken², Caroline Braet²,
Kathleen Wijnant¹ and Nathalie Michels¹

¹Ghent University, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Ghent, Belgium and

²Ghent University, Department of Developmental, Personality, and Social Psychology, Ghent, Belgium

Abstract

Proper dietary habits and behaviours are at the heart of maintaining an appropriate nutritional status, an adequate body mass and, as such, avoiding obesity and/ or its comorbidities. A child's diet is highly influenced by the home food environment and upbringing. The aim of the current study was to explore if and how parental feeding practices and eating behaviour are associated with child's eating behaviour and body mass index (BMI).

In 226 Belgian adolescents (10–17y, 51% girls, 10% overweight and 14% underweight) and their parents, eating behaviour was assessed through the Dutch Eating Behaviour Questionnaire. Information on the parental feeding practices was obtained through the Child Feeding Questionnaire and the Comprehensive Feeding Practices Questionnaire. BMI was calculated based on standardised measurements of body height and body weight. Linear regression results, adjusted for age, sex and socioeconomic status, are described below.

Regarding parental eating behaviour, parental external eating enhanced the child's external eating ($\beta = 0.155, p = 0.022$), parental restrained eating was associated negatively with the child's emotional ($\beta = -0.214, p = 0.001$) and external eating ($\beta = -0.154, p = 0.022$), but positively with its restrained eating ($\beta = 0.149, p = 0.022$) and BMI ($\beta = 0.183, p = 0.005$), while parental emotional eating had no influence. Concerning feeding practices, restriction of the child's access to food and food consumption monitoring, stimulated child's emotional ($\beta = 0.174, p = 0.011$; $\beta = 0.173, p = 0.010$) and restrained ($\beta = 0.137, p = 0.041$; $\beta = 0.159, p = 0.015$) eating, and showed a positive association with its BMI ($\beta = 0.143, p = 0.033$; $\beta = 0.149, p = 0.023$), while allowing the child to make own food choices reduced its external eating ($\beta = -0.169, p = 0.012$). Parental pressure to eat (mainly at mealtimes) decreased the child's restrained eating ($\beta = -0.231, p < 0.001$) and was negatively associated with its BMI ($\beta = -0.340, p < 0.001$). Moreover, child's BMI was inversely related to its external eating ($\beta = -0.207, p = 0.002$), but positively to its restrained eating ($\beta = 0.0483, p < 0.001$) and to parental healthy modelling ($\beta = 0.192, p = 0.003$), involving the child ($\beta = 0.223, p = 0.001$) and creating a favourable food environment ($\beta = 0.162, p = 0.013$).

Our results confirm the parents' crucial role in the development of their offspring's dietary habits. Mainly parental external eating, restriction and monitoring of the child's access to food have an unfavourable effect, while allowing child's own food choices and parental restrained eating seem beneficial. Rather unexpected associations between healthy food environment, modelling and child involvement with child's BMI might lie in causal dependencies. A longitudinal investigation could further elucidate the reasons for these observations. We recommend that policies and educational programmes on healthy diet and eating behaviour target not only schools and children, but also parents.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest