



An exploration of the role that the peers of parents play in the decision making of parents feeding young children

Harry Gray¹

About the research

It has been well documented that healthy diet and good nutrition at a young age is crucial in the physical and mental development of young children. However, in contemporary times, many scholars and health professionals have noted the 'obesogenic environment' where children around the globe are increasingly being diagnosed as clinically obese. As the WHO reports, in 2020 there were 39 million children aged 0-5 around the world who have been clinically diagnosed as obese and this number is expected to rise in the coming decade. Therefore, research into how and why this is happening is crucial in improving the overall health of infants and children.

Much literature focuses on the important role that parents can play in influencing the diet of young children, and suggest that outside of genetic dispositions, parents have been found to be the most important influence on a child's diet. It follows naturally then that research into the factors that influence a parent's decision making is equally as important. With this being noted, this systematic review seeks to establish and evaluate the role that the peers of parents play in the decision-making process of parents feeding young children. It is hypothesised that friends of parents, regardless of age and socio-economic background, will have a significant impact on the decision making of parents feeding young children. The review also collates and evaluates existing literature on the subject to provide an overview for future researchers who may wish to conduct research in this field.

Implications

- Low-income parents and parents who are less educated will more likely seek advice from a friend or peer than a parent who is more educated and has a higher income. Targeted interventions involving peers in specific socio-economic groups may provide a good opportunity to improve public health.
- The transition from exclusive breastfeeding to introducing complementary foods is a stage in the upbringing of a child that is highly likely to be influenced by the peers of parents. Specific research focus on this stage of parenting is therefore critical in encouraging positive dietary change.
- In contemporary times, mothers are more likely to rely on 'online peers' through social media and online forums. This can encourage mothers to make healthier dietary decisions for their children, however, it also establishes a platform for the unregulated spread of misinformation which is potentially detrimental to a parent's decision making when feeding young children. Therefore, there is need for policy makers to intervene to regulate these forums and applications to reduce the spread of misinformation.



1. Harry Gray is a student based at the University of Bristol who participated in the SPHR Summer Internship programme in 2021.



Key findings

The research concludes that less educated mothers from a lower socio-economic background are more likely to be influenced by friends or seek advice from friends. Therefore, friends of these mothers are a specific section of the population that could be targeted to improve infant diet and health. What is notable from this result as well is that the advice received from friends can be both positive and negative, in other words, friends can provide a source of support and confidence for parents making feeding decisions but also, they may share misinformation, or feeding practices that do not lead to healthy food choices being made.

The research also highlighted that that the transition from exclusively breastfeeding to introducing complementary foods and decisions around commencement of breastfeeding are two phases in a mother's life where her decisions regarding her child's diet will likely be influenced by peers, therefore this is the optimum time to intervene with community programmes or staged interventions.

Other results noted the importance in recent years of social media platforms and online communities and friends in influencing parents' decision-making regarding feeding. This therefore may be an important place for future research to occur and interventions to take place to tackle conflicting messages posted online and prevent misinformation spreading from online communities and friends.



Further information

Carruth BR, Ziegler PJ, Gordon A, Hendricks K. [Developmental milestones and self-feeding behaviors in infants and toddlers.](#) J Am Diet Assoc 2004; 104: 51–6.

Kirk, S.F., Penney, T.L. and McHugh, T.L., 2010. [Characterizing the obesogenic environment: the state of the evidence with directions for future research.](#) Obesity reviews, 11(2), pp.109-117.

Birch, L.L. and Davison, K.K., (2001). [Family environmental factors influencing the developing behavioral controls of food intake and childhood overweight.](#) Pediatric Clinics, 48(4), pp.893-907.

About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

Contact the researcher

To discuss this research, please contact sphr.comms@newcastle.ac.uk.

NIHR School for Public Health Research

Website: sphr.nihr.ac.uk

Twitter: @NIHRSPHR

Email: sphr@ncl.ac.uk

Telephone: +44 (0)191 208 3829