Qualitative Analysis of Dietary Behaviors in Picture Book Fiction for 4 to 8 Year Olds

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Picky eating is common among children. Picture books may facilitate parents’ efforts to overcome feeding challenges. Studies have reported depictions of foods in children’s literature. However, dietary behaviors have not been examined. This study conducted content analysis of dietary behaviors and feeding strategies featured in picture book fiction and compared these behaviors and strategies to those discussed in research literature and professional guidelines.

Study Design: Several databases were searched for books about dietary behavior that also met these criteria: a picture book, fiction, published between 2000 and 2016, accessible in the United States, available in print format, and appropriate for 4-8 year olds.

Outcome Measures and Analysis: Stories were systematically coded using holistic, provisional, and evaluation coding methods. The final set of codes was examined for patterns and themes.

Results: Of the 104 books, 50% featured a specific eating behavior, 21% lifestyle/eating patterns, 20% food-related sensations and emotions, and 9% table manners.

Conclusions and Implications: Books about dietary behaviors are abundant, though the topic coverage is not balanced. There is an overlap between problem behaviors portrayed in books and those discussed in research literature. However, adults’ reaction and problem-solving strategies do not align with those endorsed by nutrition professionals. Messages vary in their complexity. Some are clear and direct. Others are vague, sophisticated, unresolved, conflicting, or controversial (in terms of plot and/or language).

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

• Parents face multiple challenges when it comes to feeding young children.
• 46% of 4,018 preschoolers were picky at some point of their childhood (Bellows et al., J Nutr Educ Behav. 2013;45:362).
• While pickiness declined with age, 40% of picky eaters remained picky for two years or longer (Mascola, Bryson & Agras. Eat Behav. 2010;11:253).
• 80-87% of parents read to their young children at least three times a week (U.S. Department of Education, ECEP:2001 and 2012).
• Picture books have the potential to be an easy and convenient form of nutrition education at home. However, dietary behaviors in picture books have not been examined.
• This study examined dietary behaviors and feeding strategies featured in picture books and compared behaviors and strategies depicted in books to those described in research literature and professional guidelines.

METHODS

Book Sample Inclusion Criteria:
• A picture book about food, nutrition, and food-related behavior
• Fiction (in prose or story in rhyme)
• Published between 2000 and 2016
• Published/accessible in the United States
• Available in print format
• Designed for children 4 to 8 years of age

Databases Searched:
• The Children’s Core Collection
• Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database
• Publishers Weekly
• Amazon.com
• Barnes and Noble
• Goodreads

Sample Size:
273 fictional stories 104 portrayed dietary behaviors and used in analysis

Key Elements of Research Process:
• Codebook development
• Dense description of methodology and data-related observations
• Reflective commentary about emerging patterns
• Consultations with 2 experts
• Two cycles of coding
• Implementation of measures to ensure trustworthiness

ANALYSIS

The content of each book was coded. The coding methods included:

• Holistic coding: captures the main idea of a story.
• Provisional coding: utilizes a predetermined start list of codes that is generated based on previous research and the study’s objectives.
• Evaluation coding: examines data for patterns and leads to recommendations.

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

1) Topic coverage is not balance. Books coded as food preference outnumber books in other codes.

2) Problem behaviors (e.g., pickiness, food jags, meal-time tantrums) featured in picture books largely overlap with behaviors described in research literature. However, strategies to deal with problem behaviors in picture books do not align with professional guidelines.

3) Stories varied considerably in message complexity. Message interpretation may be subject to the child’s maturity level and both the child and adult’s efforts to decipher its meaning.

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