

The Relationship between Parental Food Parenting Practices & Child Eating Behavior: A Comparison of Mothers and Fathers

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Abstract

Background: Food parenting practices are recognized as important determinants for child eating behavior. Fathers are underrepresented in studies regarding food parenting and child health, thus, studies are needed that include both mothers and fathers.

Objective: Compare the relationships between food parenting practices and child eating behavior among mothers and fathers of young children.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: This cross-sectional study recruited mothers (n=127) and fathers (n=118) of children (4.2 ± 1.3 years old) to complete surveys (face-to-face and online).

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Each parent completed the Comprehensive Food Parenting Questionnaire, Children's Eating Behavior Questionnaire, and demographic questions. Linear regression was used to compare the relationships between parental food parenting practices (independent variable) and children's eating behaviors (dependent variable). Parent gender was used as a moderator, and child age and gender served as control variables in each regression.

Results: Parent gender was a significant moderator in several relationships between parent food parenting practices and child eating behavior. In the relationship between parental restriction for health ($\beta = -.14, p = .014$) and monitoring ($\beta = -.13, p = .028$) and child slowness in eating, the slope of the interaction was significantly higher for mothers, meaning that when mothers and fathers use the same level of restriction for health and monitoring, child slowness in eating is higher for children of mothers. When mothers and fathers used the same level of restriction for weight, child food responsiveness ($\beta = .13, p = .003$) and emotional overeating ($\beta = .12, p = .046$) was significantly higher for children of fathers.

Conclusion: There may be differences in how mothers and fathers implement food parenting practices and/or differences in how these practices impact children. Specifically, for fathers, it seems that the use of restriction for weight is more detrimental for children's eating behaviors compared to when mothers use the same level of restriction for weight.

Study Rationale & Purpose

Fathers are not equally represented in food parenting studies compared to mothers,¹ even though most fathers eat meals with their children daily.² No consistent differences in food parenting of mothers and fathers have been found. In some studies, fathers use more pressure, restriction, and food as a reward, whereas other studies have found no differences in mother and father food parenting practices.¹ Because food parenting can be affected by child behaviors, it is important to consider how the relationship between food parenting and child eating behaviors differs between mothers and fathers. Thus, the objective of this study was to compare the relationships between food parenting practices and child eating behavior among mothers and fathers of young children.

Methods

Data Collection

- This study was approved by the Illinois State University Institutional Review Board.
- Mothers (n=127) and Fathers (n=118) of children ages 3-10 years old completed select subscales of the Children's Eating Behavior Questionnaire (CEBQ), the Comprehensive Food Practices Questionnaire (CFPQ), and demographic questions.

Data Analysis

- Statistics were calculated using SPSS 21.0
- Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic variables.
- Linear regression was used to compare mother and father food parenting practices based upon child eating behaviors using parent gender as a moderator.
- Child age and gender were used as control variables.

Results

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Mothers and Fathers

Characteristic	Mothers (n=127)	Fathers (n=118)
	mean ± SD	
Parent Age (years)	35.77 ± 4.95	35.44 ± 6.91
Number of children under 18	1.83 ± 0.98	2.30 ± 0.81
Child Age (years)	3.81 ± 1.03	4.67 ± 1.33
	N (%)	
Race		
White or Caucasian	104 (82%)	98 (84%)
Black or African American	9 (7%)	11 (9%)
Asian or Asian American	11 (9%)	2 (2%)
Other	3 (2%)	5 (4%)
Ethnicity (non-Hispanic)	119 (97%)	108 (95%)
Education Level		
Less than high school	0 (0%)	6 (5%)
High school diploma or GED	2 (2%)	10 (8%)
Some college or technical school	18 (14%)	24 (20%)
4-year degree or higher	107 (84%)	78 (66%)
Marital Status (Married)	121 (95%)	85 (72%)
Child Gender	57 (45%)	57 (48%)

Discussion & Conclusions

While some studies have examined differences in food parenting practices between mothers and fathers, it's important to also consider the possible differences when mothers and fathers employ the same food parenting practices. From this study, it seems as though when fathers use restriction for weight at the same level as mothers, it is associated with higher child food responsiveness and emotional overeating, which are not desirable eating behaviors.³ It has been suggested that children cannot discern the differences employed by mothers and fathers if the food parenting practice is the same,⁴ but this may not be the case. This study offers some preliminary evidence that children may respond differently to mothers' and fathers' food parenting practices or mothers and fathers respond differently to child eating behaviors.

References

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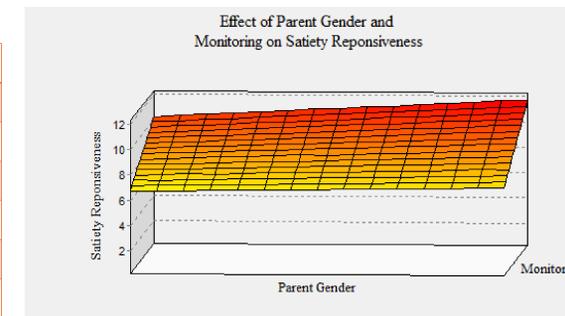


Figure 1. Difference in relationship between monitoring and child satiety responsiveness ($\beta = .28, p = .008$). The slope of the interaction was significantly higher for mothers, meaning that when mothers and fathers use the same level of monitoring, child satiety responsiveness would be higher mothers.

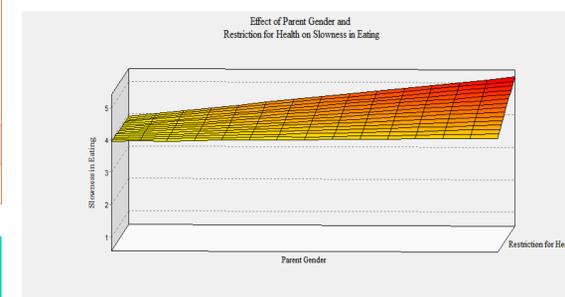


Figure 2. Difference in relationship between monitoring and child slowness in eating ($\beta = .28, p = .028$). The slope of the interaction was significantly higher for mothers, meaning that when mothers and fathers use the same level of monitoring, child slowness of eating would be higher for mothers.

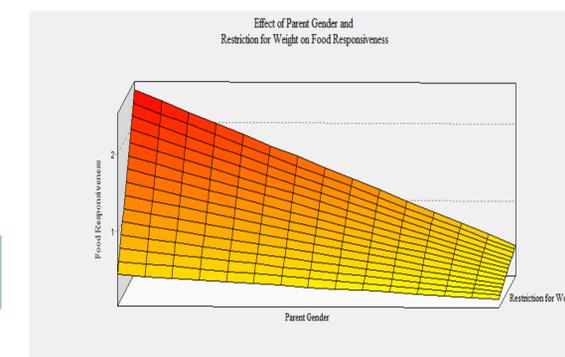


Figure 3. Difference in relationship between restriction for health and child slowness in eating ($\beta = .28, p = .014$). The slope of the interaction was significantly higher for mothers, meaning that when mothers and fathers use the same level of restriction for health, child slowness in eating would be higher mothers.

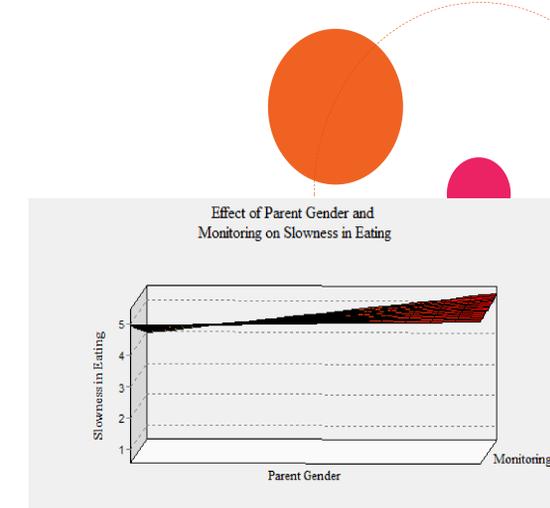


Figure 4. Difference in relationship between restriction for weight and child emotional overeating ($\beta = -.23, p = .046$). The slope of the interaction was significantly higher for fathers, meaning that when mothers and fathers use the same level of restriction for weight, child emotional overeating would be higher fathers.

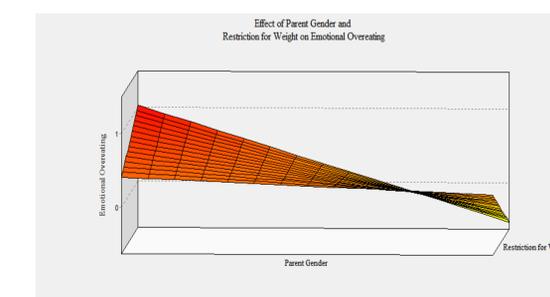


Figure 5. Difference in relationship between restriction for weight and child food responsiveness ($\beta = -.42, p = .003$). The slope of the interaction was significantly higher for fathers, meaning that when mothers and fathers use the same level of restriction for weight, child food responsiveness would be higher fathers.