

A Study of Young Children's Eating Behaviour in Relation to Their Mothers

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Abstract

Early childhood is a crucial period for comprehensive physical and mental development, and it is also the best stage for cultivating good eating habits. Only by firmly grasping the educational opportunities during this period can we truly develop proper eating behaviour in young children. Based on this, this study will use literature, observation and interview methods to analyse three aspects of young children's eating speed, picky and partial eating behaviour and snack preference, using three young children and their mothers as research subjects. Finally, the researcher makes several educational suggestions to correct the partial eating, picky eating and poor eating behaviour of young children. It is expected that adults can establish different eating methods to guide preschool children's behaviour when teaching them about eating behaviour, so that they can develop good and healthy eating habits from an early age.

Keywords

Young Children, Eating Behaviour, Maternal Relationships

1. Review of the Literature

The Kindergarten Education Guideline states that children should ensure a quiet and pleasant dining environment during meals, be able to use utensils correctly, wipe their mouths after meals, take the initiative to drink water, chew and swallow slowly, and develop habits such as not being picky about eating, not having leftovers, not throwing away scraps, and cleaning up after meals. This series of goals is a further focus on the development of eating behaviour in young children. In 1998, Ma Guangsheng et al. conducted a large-scale survey on the eating behaviour of primary school students in kindergartens in four cities: Guangzhou, Shanghai, Jinan and Harbin, which became a new starting point for eating

behaviour research in China. In recent years, a number of researchers in various countries have done many studies related to young children's picky eating behaviour and snacking behaviour. In the area of picky and partial eating in young children, studies abroad have found that certain abnormal emotions and behaviours that occur in children are closely related to poor eating behaviours such as picky and partial eating. Picky and partial eating are external behavioural manifestations of young children that are psychologically and behaviourally abnormal due to chronic deficiencies of certain nutrients in the body. If these poor eating behaviours are allowed to develop over time without effective control, they will have an extremely negative impact on the psychological development of young children. It has been shown that children who are picky eaters at the age of three tend to be heavier than their average weight at a younger age and are at a higher risk of obesity than adults who were not picky eaters as children (Taylor, Steer, Hays, & Emmet, 2019).

In the study of snacking behaviour among young children, an earlier study by scholars Cathro and Hilliam (1994), which specifically investigated the snacking behaviour of children in several European countries, including France, the UK and Germany, revealed that children in each country consumed snacks more frequently. In addition, Wolfe and Campbell (1993) found that snacking was common among American children, with the most common snacks being carbonated drinks, fruit, and fried potato chips. Also, Skinner et al. (2004) in the USA concluded that snacking is an integral part of young children's diets and that if young children start snacking at a very young age, their need for snacks will increase accordingly as they get older. A study by Wright et al. (2007) in the UK showed that young children had significant problems with picky eating and snacking and drinking. Mc Dermott et al. (2008) in a study conducted in Australia showed that eating irregularities were common among young children. From this literature, it can be seen that overseas researchers have focused on several aspects of young children's picky eating and snacking behaviour, and that the formation of certain poor eating behaviours can even affect the development of good character in young children, which should be taken seriously.

At this stage, eating behaviour problems are prevalent among Chinese children. According to surveys, 6.1% of children in China do not eat breakfast, with more rural children than urban children. And most studies show that snacking is common among Chinese children, and snacking before meals is more common. Many young children have more or less bad eating behaviour and habits, for example, the findings of Chinese scholars such as Sun Neng and Liu Qing show that the main problems in young children's eating behaviour and habits are that young children's meal times are too long or too short, about 30% of young children have unstable eating patterns, more than 50% of children have picky or partial eating behaviours, 45.9% of children cannot eat independently, children have poor meal concentration, and 67.8% of children eat while watching TV (Liu, 2017). This suggests that a healthy diet is particularly important for child-

ren's development, and that good mealtime education is an important safeguard for healthy eating (Li & Lu, 2022).

With the boom in preschool education, the developmental issues of young children have become increasingly important to the community. Children in the early years live at home for long periods of time, and there is an important relationship between their eating behavioural problems and their mothers' eating patterns. Mothers, as the closest nurturers to their children, have a close relationship with them, and eating is a central feature of parent-child relationships and family culture (Cole, MUSAAD, Lee, Donovan, & The STRONG Kids Team, 2018). In addition, studies have shown that parents have an important influence on children's eating behaviour through their own eating behaviour (Wardle & Carnell, 2007; Faith, Scanlon, Birch, Francis, & Sherry, 2004). Edmunds and Hill (2006) conducted a study on the relationship between young children's eating behaviours and their family food background. Often young children with strong parental control will have smaller food portions and less snacking. Therefore, close cooperation from parents is needed to improve and solve the problem of poor eating behaviour of young children, and only in this way can we better promote the healthy physical and mental growth of children. Most of the research we have found so far has focused on the interaction between teachers and young children, making the relationship between eating behaviour enrichment and parents all the more valuable.

Good eating behaviour not only contributes to the physical health of young children, but is equally significant for their psychologically healthy development. Studies have shown that picky eating in childhood is associated with poor health (Zohar, Lev-Ari, & Bachner-Melman, 2019), while Zhao Guojun (2020) in his paper also points out that there is a direct correlation between various physical and mental disorders in young children and eating behaviour. Therefore, the focus on children's eating behavior is to make a significant contribution to the healthy growth of children's physical and mental health. Evidence suggests that children's eating behaviours are formed by the end of preschool and remain stable thereafter (Ashcroft, Semmler, Carnell, van Jaarsveld, & Wardle, 2008), and if behavioural problems are not addressed in a timely manner, this can have a negative impact on the individual child's life trajectory. The 3 - 6 years period is a critical time for healthy growth and development of young children and for the development of eating behaviours. Parents who do not treat and deal with these behaviours correctly will only amplify them and make them more serious over time, so early identification and appropriate guidance will be beneficial to the long-term development of young children. For these reasons, in this study, three young children and their mothers were studied to investigate the current situation of their eating speed, picky eating behaviour and snacking behaviour, and to conduct a deeper analysis of the young children and their mothers who had poor eating behaviour, so as to help more parents understand their children's behavioural problems and give practical educational advice.

2. Study Design

2.1. Study Subject

In this study, Y kindergarten in Yulin City was used as an example. The researcher used a random selection method to select one child from each of the three classes: primary, secondary and tertiary, and the mothers of the three children were also used as the main subjects of this study. The three children were examined in terms of their meal speed, picky eating behaviour and snacking behaviour. The three children had different personalities: V was a boy in a small class, Q was a boy in a middle class and A was a girl in a large class. All three children's mothers were from families with high educational backgrounds. The main age group was 35 years old and above (including 35 years old).

2.2. Research Methodology

1) Literature Approach: This thesis addresses the research on the relationship between young children's eating behaviour and motherhood by analysing the current situation and results of different educational research literature and by drawing on the experience and results of previous research, making maximum use of existing knowledge and experience and scientific findings. It facilitates the researcher to get a comprehensive and correct picture of the situation and the current status of the issue to be studied.

2) Observation method: The observation method used in this thesis is non-participant observation, in which the researcher observes the meals of three children, including the speed of eating, picky eating behaviour and attitude towards snacks. If necessary, parents will be contacted for video recording.

3) Interview method: This interview was conducted using a structured interview method. After observing the eating behaviour of the three children, the researcher decided to use the mothers of the three children as the interviewees, formulated an outline of the interview before the interview, and then agreed with the three interviewees on the time and place of the interview. In the course of the interview, the questions were expanded as appropriate to achieve the desired effect. The interview was also recorded with the consent of the interviewees to facilitate the extraction and collation of data at a later stage.

3. Study Results

1) Analysis of the correlation between the speed of eating in young children.

The issue of eating speed has always been one of the main concerns of parents and teachers, and a timely and reasonable eating speed is the basis for children to develop good eating habits. However, at this stage we find that many families have children who are "slow" or "windy" when eating. Some children eat slowly, procrastinate, dawdle, and take two to three hours to eat a meal, while others, on the contrary, are too fast and swallow directly without chewing the meal in their mouths properly, which is not good for the development of good eating beha-

viour. There is usually a limit to the amount of time children can eat. Based on the observations, we found that the eating speed of the three children varied: V was a normal eater, Q was a boy and a fast eater, and A was a slow eater who usually took nearly two hours to finish a meal.

Interview 1: How long does it take for A to eat a meal at home? Did you go to play or watch TV while eating?

Answer: She usually takes more than an hour to eat a meal at home, and she is very picky when she eats. She does not eat green vegetables or noodles, and before each meal, she has to pick out all the green vegetables in the bowl. However, she doesn't go to watch TV when she eats, we don't make it a habit at home and she doesn't run out to play, she just gawks and plays with her meal by herself and eats very slowly.

Interview 2: A's mum, how long does it usually take you to eat and how fast or slow would you say your eating speed is?

Answer: I generally eat relatively spontaneous, when there is an emergency, I will quickly finish eating, if there is no emergency eating will be a little slower, mainly because sometimes eating while busy with work, easy to forget the time.

Based on the conversation with A's parents, we can see that A is a typical slow eater. The reason for this is found to be mainly related to the child's picky eating and lack of sense of time. The child's chronic procrastination led to the child becoming accustomed to such a faulty eating speed, which he did not think he was aware of.

2) An analysis of the correlates of picky and partial eating behaviour in young children.

Picky eating is a type of undesirable eating behaviour preference that is found in most children, with one study defining "picky eating" as "a preference for one or more foods." This study defines "picky eating" as "a child who is fussy about food or picks only one or a few of its foods." Eating behaviour is influenced by many factors, including poor picky eating behaviour, and we can speculate that the development of this habit may be linked to the parents themselves or the parenting style of the family. Chinese scholar Xu Zhening et al. found that picky and picky eating behaviour was the predominant eating behaviour preference among current preschool children by examining the eating behaviour of children in Shanghai families. In addition, this study found that all three young children had distinctive characteristics in their picky and picky eating behaviour. We observed the children's dietary preferences and found that different children had different dietary preferences. Although V had a normal eating rate, he liked to eat meat and did not eat vegetables, therefore, he had meat in every meal. In addition, Q's preference was mainly for eggs and vegetables, but not for beans. Finally, it was found that A did not like green vegetables and did not eat noodles, which was one of the reasons for her slow eating at each meal. In order to get a clearer picture of the reasons behind the picky and paranoid eating of the three children, we also investigated the dietary preferences of their parents: from the results of the interviews, most of the parents themselves had some picky and pa-

ranoid eating behaviour, and many post-90s parents, who did not want to cook, liked to take their children to eat “KFC” and drink “hot milk tea” together. “Many female parents, in order to keep their bodies in shape, have a bias towards food choices, believing that eating more meat will cause obesity, so they set up the idea of eating less meat for themselves and their children, which leads to mothers not being able to model well when educating their children about eating, resulting in children picking up their parents’ bad eating behaviour and attitudes. This leads to mothers not modelling their children’s eating behaviour and attitudes.

3) A correlational analysis of young children’s snacking behaviour.

Regarding snacking behaviour, snacks are defined as a variety of small amounts of food and beverages (excluding water) consumed at non-meal times, according to the “Guidelines for the Consumption of Snacks by Children and Youth in China”. As the standard of living improves and consumer demand for food gradually increases, many beautifully packaged and varied snacks are becoming more and more popular in our daily lives, especially as many parents use snacks as an important item to coax and reward their children. However, these so-called “prizes” can have a negative impact on children’s eating habits if they are not consumed properly. According to the researcher’s survey of the three children, they all liked snacks and ate them almost every day. After the activity, they would have an empty stomach, but not at mealtime, so they filled their stomachs by eating snacks. When it was time to eat, they could not eat much. In addition, after interviewing A’s mother, we found that A was slow, not only in eating but also in doing other things, so often parents used snacks as a bargaining chip to tempt her in order to arouse her interest. Therefore, from the above findings, we found that the phenomenon of “snack preference” is the result of a combination of active preference and passive gift from parents.

In summary, the main findings of this study are as follows: Firstly, there is an association between young children’s eating speed and their mothers’ slow eating behaviour, as well as an association with other partiality factors. Secondly, young children’s picky and partial eating behaviour was associated with parents’ picky and partial eating perceptions. Thirdly, young children’s snacking behaviour was mainly caused by parents’ use of snacks as rewarding objects. Based on these results, it can be found that there is an inextricable relationship between the development of young children’s eating behaviour and their mothers. Most of the children’s misbehaviours were formed based on family habits. Therefore, in order to explore which eating behaviours in parents have an impact on children, the researcher went on to conduct a study on the influencing factors.

4. Family Factors Influencing Young Children’s Eating Behaviour

From the previous results, we can see that there is a strong relationship between young children’s eating speed, picky and partial eating behaviour and the mothers themselves. Thus, we find that the eating behaviour of mothers can directly

influence the eating behaviour of children. What, then, are the specific factors? The researcher, through reading the book “Eating Behaviour and Health Education for Young Children” by Gu (2015), a scholar, attributed the family factors affecting young children’s eating behaviour to the following three main points.

The first is the mother’s eating behaviour and perceptions. Parents, as an important role in family education, have an important role in the development of their children’s eating behaviour. Many scholars and practitioners agree that children’s eating behaviour is influenced to some extent by the eating behaviours and perceptions of the parents with whom they are in close contact. The book “Eating Behaviour and Health Education for Young Children” by Gu (2015), a scholar, provides a detailed study of the eating and nutrition education behaviour of parents of young children in different classes, making a great contribution to the development of healthy eating behaviour in young children. Many parents are partial and picky eaters, throwing away things they don’t like at the table or only eating things they do like. This can cause children to become increasingly disgusted with such things and, over time, develop the habit of being partial and picky eaters. Other mothers, due to their limited time and energy, may gobble up food or watch mobile phones and TV while eating, which will inevitably lead to their children imitating and acquiring these bad habits.

Secondly, the parenting style of parents. Parents, as the first teachers of parents, play an important role in initiating the development of their children’s lives, and a set of correct parenting styles is the basis for parents to teach their children. Scholar Sun Weimin has also pointed out that the main cause of poor eating behaviour in young children is the parenting style. An incorrect parenting style can have a significant cognitive bias on a child’s eating habits. Currently, many parents have learned some wrong parenting styles from the experience of their elders, television and the Internet, such as the upbringing of “little princesses”, “little masters” and “little bullies”. ...If the child doesn’t eat, he or she will change to something they like, and if the child is fussy, he or she will be coaxed. According to Deng and Wang (2015), some parents throw tantrums or force their children to eat because they are not eating well, and these behaviours can cause emotional stress and affect their children’s appetite during meals. Other parental behaviours such as rewarding or punishing children with food can also influence children’s food preferences. This can lead to a range of eating habits that can cause children to be picky eaters. As a parent, you think you are creating a good physical and spiritual environment for your child, but this consistent style is even more detrimental to your child’s development.

Thirdly, parents’ own knowledge of nutrition. As young children are in a critical period of growth and development, many parents’ pursuit of nutrition is to “eat well” and “eat a lot”, resulting in children consuming too much high-protein and high-calorie food in their early years, resulting in unbalanced dietary nutrition. Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2010) found that regular family meals have a positive impact on children’s food consumption. If parents or caregivers are nutritionally literate, this will reduce the risk of picky eating behaviour in children.

Parents with a high level of nutritional knowledge and a receptive attitude towards nutrition will be able to apply nutritional knowledge to their daily diet in the process of parenting their children, which will guide and help in the formation of good eating behaviour in young children.

5. Education Advice

5.1. Create a Warm and Welcoming Dining Environment

The mealtime environment for young children refers to the state presented by the environment around them during the mealtime process. Researchers [Fu and Zhang \(2011\)](#) point out in their article “Optimising the Mealtime Environment for Young Children” that “the mealtime environment is one of the most important factors affecting the quality of young children’s meals, and a good mealtime environment not only refers to the beauty and convenience of the physical environment, but also includes a relaxed and pleasant psychological environment, which can arouse young children’s appetite and stimulate their interest in eating. This will help them to develop good eating habits.” The plasticity of eating habits in early childhood is strong, and if timely interventions are made in this period, and a full range of social, family and kindergarten ‘food education’ is carried out, it can help them to develop healthy eating habits that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. The materials used to set up the physical environment for children’s meals should come from the children’s daily lives and should be maintained and provided mainly by the children, and should be changed regularly. For example, the “Little Helpers” activity is carried out before meals, and the “Little Helpers” of the day are invited to set up the collective tableware, exercise their self-care skills and raise their awareness of self-service and responsibility. Therefore, in order to help children to accept healthy food in a more active, positive and enjoyable way and to develop good eating habits, the eating environment for children should be the most appropriate, both in terms of physical and mental environment.

5.2. Creating a Good Psychological Climate

To make it easy for children to eat on their own, parents or teachers should begin to create a good atmosphere for eating before meals. A good mealtime atmosphere can have a positive impact on children’s behaviour. A relaxed and harmonious mental environment and a friendly parent-child relationship, which makes children physically and mentally happy and often keeps them in a happy mood, can help to increase their appetite. For example, a relatively quiet activity before a meal can help children to relax physically and mentally, and light music can be played during the meal so that children can eat to the music, chew their food and savour the original taste of the food. Parents should not criticise their children before a meal or allow them to feel pressure from their parents’ actions, tone of voice or eyes. During the mealtime process, it is important to be tolerant of negligent behaviour. Do not over-pressurise children or put pressure on picky

eaters, as this tends to create negative and stressful emotions in children and affects the amount of meals they eat. In short, loving, patient and attentive adults, as well as understanding, tolerance and wisdom, are the best environment for young children to eat.

5.3. Building Good Dietary Practices in Parenting

Lead by example. Parents' own eating habits have a great influence on their children, and good habits will have a positive impact on them. Conversely, negative influences can occur. So parents should set a good example for their children by not being picky or parochial in their diet, and by not talking too much about good or bad diet in front of their children, which can easily give them a bad impression of things.

Find the causes of picky and paranoid eating. Picky and partial eating is a common problem for many children. Children at this stage of life are at their peak of growth and development and need balanced nutrition. Therefore, as a parent, it is important to find out the cause of your child's picky eating, but often we cannot identify the cause, but we can choose to observe your child's behaviour in their daily diet. For example, whether the child likes to eat snacks before meals, whether there are many problems during meals, whether the parents themselves are picky eaters, etc. Therefore, the development of young children's eating behaviour is not only closely related to the mother's eating behaviour, but also requires the mother to be more careful, attentive and patient in the process of education.

Inspire your child to take an interest in food. Often, children's poor eating behaviour is due to a lack of interest. This can be done by telling the child a little story, for example: "Eat this to grow taller and be like whoever you are" (replace the person with a child who knows the character, or a cartoon character). It is also important to pay attention to nutrition and colour and flavour to increase the appeal of the food. For example, if you make the same noodle dish as a steamed bun and make it look like a "little animal", it will increase children's curiosity and appetite.

5.4. Increase Awareness of Healthy Eating

Many parents like to snack as the motivation for children to do things, from a physiological point of view, eating snacks all the time will make digestive disorders, resulting in that food can not be well digested and absorbed, if often so, children's appetite continues to decline, and naturally gradually formed the problem of picky eating. As parents, it is important to increase awareness of healthy and nutritious eating. Snacks and desserts should not be used as a basis for rewarding children for eating, as eating more will only develop a strong desire for junk food, and learn to pay attention to regular rationing and the variety of snacks to choose from. Not only should you pay attention to the amount you eat, but you should also encourage your child to eat "snack foods" that are good

for their health and contain nutrients, such as milk and walnuts for calcium, and can also supplement foods that your child lacks in nutrients themselves, so that “snacks” can be given a new meaning. This will give a new meaning to “snacking” and raise awareness of healthy eating for children, which will be more beneficial to their health.

In summary, good family eating behaviour is an important condition for healthy eating behaviour in children. It is clear from the study that poor eating habits of mothers, misconceptions about parenting and misconceptions about snacking can all have an impact on children’s eating behaviour. For young children aged 3 - 6 years, they are influenced by their home environment, and are particularly influenced by their mothers. Therefore, this study is a key step towards developing good eating behaviour in young children, and parents need to start by actively improving their own eating practices to avoid picky eating behaviour. Only if parents themselves have good eating habits can they lay a good foundation for the formation of good eating habits in their children.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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