

# **Negotiating food choice: parents' perception of children's eating behaviour**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article is based on a qualitative study exploring parents' attitudes and perceptions of their role in their children's eating habits in schools in Angus, Scotland. Parents believed they had different degrees of influence on their children's eating habits. This article will examine these different perceptions of parental responsibility for children's eating habits to explore how parents viewed their influence over their children's food choices. I argue that although parents influence the degree of 'choice' that children have in their food choices, particularly 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' choices, children as competent decision-makers, may not always choose to follow their parents' choice but instead find ways to negotiate their own aims, needs and wishes for food choices, suggesting that decisions regarding food choices are part of a negotiated process between parent and child.

**KEYWORDS:** children, parents, health, food, competence, negotiation

## **Background and methodology**

This article is based on a qualitative, action research project concerned with reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease in later life through making changes in children's lifestyle. This was done through a primary school-based lifestyle intervention package that aimed to improve children's (9-11 years) diet and activity through classroom lessons and take-home activities. The research was in the context of the medical agenda and the body of evidence that obesity in children can lead to cardiovascular risk in later adulthood. As the following extract highlights, there is a growing concern with improving the diet and health of people in Scotland, particularly children:

Our diet in Scotland is notoriously unhealthy and worse than that of almost any other country in the Western world. Indeed, next to smoking, it is the most significant reason for our poor health record. Children's diets are particularly poor, with many failing to eat green vegetables and fruit (Eating for Health: a Diet Action Plan for Scotland, 1996: Introduction 1.3).

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The anthropological research was carried out in four schools in the council area of Angus, on the east coast of Scotland, northeast of Dundee and south of Aberdeen. Several council areas were approached to take part in the study, but Angus Council were the first to give consent to the research and within the Council area, four schools were willing to be involved. The schools were divided into two groups matched according to the number of children in the school, and the proportion of children receiving free school meals. These groups were then randomly allocated to the intervention or the control groups. Two schools acted as control schools, receiving the standard health curriculum, and two schools received the lifestyle intervention package. A total of ninety-four children took part in the study, with forty-four of those receiving the intervention. The parents and children were from a mixture of educational and income-level backgrounds, ranging from low incomes to middle-class. Children also came from different family backgrounds, some from the traditional nuclear family, some from single-parent families and others from families where their parents had separated and had new partners. Fifty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with the parents taking part in the study and ten focus groups with twenty-one children were held with the children receiving the intervention. Participant observation was used to some extent, but the nature of the research meant that both parents and the schools acted as gatekeepers to the children, and access was limited to short visits to the schools to hand out intervention materials or conduct focus groups.

## **Food, health and choice**

Research into children's roles as social actors has acknowledged that children are competent and actively construct their social experiences and everyday lives (James 1998: viii). Whilst acknowledging children as active agents, children are nevertheless constrained by unequal power-relations between themselves and their parents (Punch 2001). This can be seen particularly in children's use of time and space (Ennew 1994; Christensen and James 2001). As Solberg comments, parents have both authority and power to punish and reward their children whereas children do not have the corresponding means at their disposal (1997: 127).

Food itself can be used as a means of both punishing and rewarding children (Charles and Kerr 1998; Conner and Armitage 2002; Lupton 1996). For children in particular, their 'freedom of choice' is very much within the context of the family and the school. It has been observed that patterns of food choice and consumption are developed from earliest childhood and that families are the primary setting for feeding children and young people (Backett-Milburn et al. 2006: 624).

Conner and Armitage (2002) argue that a child's attitudes to certain foods are learned by modelling what their parents do. Lupton shows that children's eating habits are surrounded by rules about food within the family. For instance, when a child eats forbidden food, such as confectionary, it represents a challenge to parental authority. However, when these rules are relaxed and a child is allowed confectionary, it represents different familial ties, such as those between grandparents and grandchildren, or special events, such as birthdays or treats (Lupton 1996: 52). She argues that it is parents' attempts to shape their children's food consumption habits that mark the boundary between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour (ibid).

As Lupton demonstrates, a child's food consumption habits are very much shaped by their family, nonetheless, rules around food within the family context and the way in which food and eating habits are perceived can differ greatly from family to family and therefore children's 'freedom of choice' as regards their food consumption habits, such as the type of snacks they allowed or the school-lunches they can choose from, can also differ.

Although it has been observed that children's food behaviours are constrained by rules about food within the family, this does not necessarily mean that children's eating habits or food beliefs are determined by their families. As Punch shows for children in rural Bolivia, children themselves use different strategies to negotiate their position and counteract and resist adults' power and control (Punch 2000; 2001; Christensen and James 2001). This article examines the ways in which children use various strategies to negotiate their food choices and how Angus parents' view their role in their children's eating habits. Since children's eating behaviours are developed in the context of the family, it is important to understand parents' views and perspectives of their role in their children's eating habits. For this reason, this focuses mainly on parents' perspectives of their influence on their child's food behaviour.

Parents themselves believed they had different degrees of influence on their children's eating habits. Some felt that it was up to their children to make changes in their eating habits whilst others thought their children were too young to make dietary decisions on their own and that it was the parents' responsibility therefore, to 'determine' what children could or could not eat. This will examine these different perceptions of parental responsibility for children's eating habits through looking at how parents talked about food purchases, snacking, school lunches and family mealtimes. I argue that although parents influence the degree of decision-making that children have in their food choices, particularly 'healthy' choices, children as active decision-makers may not always choose to make the 'healthy' choice and use different means to negotiate their food choices with parents.

## **Shopping and 'pester power'**

The children involved in the study had different levels of purchasing power over their food. The majority of parents remarked that they tended to do the grocery shopping when their children were at school rather than take their children with them, as it was considered to be easier and quicker, particularly if their child tended to pester them to buy 'sweeties' and other items that the parents did not consider appropriate.

**Interviewee 1:** I normally do that when they're at school. You know, so they don't throw everything in the basket sort of thing. It's mainly me so that I can get around like without them getting in the way sort of thing.

**Interviewer:** So when they come with you do they often ask you if they can buy certain things?

**Interviewee 1:** Yeah, can we get this, can we get that. Yes, they're very good at that!

One mother commented that ‘shopping and children don’t mix.’ Another reason was that their children found shopping ‘boring.’

Although children did not necessarily go grocery shopping with their parents, this did not mean that they had no input in what was being bought. Some parents commented that their children would make particular requests for certain items.

**Interviewer:** So do the kids get much of a say in what you’re buying for the house? What you’re buying for meals and things?

**Interviewee 2:** Not really. That sounds awful now. I suppose, I mean we tend to buy what we know they like anyway, you know. And certainly sometimes there’s something they particularly request, something that we’ve maybe not had for a while. So in that respect they do have a say.

As shown in the above quote, although parents might not specifically ask what their children wanted before they went shopping, they tended to buy food that they already knew their children would like and their children’s likes and dislikes would influence the shopping trip despite not being physically present. Several families would make shopping lists before they went to the supermarket that all family members contributed to. A few parents did take their children shopping or went shopping as a family at the weekends and for some, it was viewed as an opportunity to spend time together.

When asked if their children had any say in what was being bought, some parents stated, ‘yes, they get to choose what cereals they want’ or ‘they get to choose what fruit they want’. In these cases, although children were given a choice, it was a limited choice, for food items that the parents intended to buy anyway. A number of parents remarked that if they let their child choose whatever they wanted they would only be buying ‘unhealthy’ items such as sweets and crisps, therefore the parents retained responsibility over the shopping. As this shows, the extent of purchasing power that a child had was very much dependent on how much power they were given by their parents. It was very rare that a child had a great deal of control over what was being bought for themselves or their family.

Nevertheless, despite parents having more authority over food purchases, the process of deciding what food to buy would sometimes be the result of a negotiation between parent and child. For instance, when I asked one of the children what kinds of things they asked for when they went shopping with their parents and if they ever got what they asked for, they said they usually did not get it if it was ‘treats’ such as sweets or chocolate. However, when I asked if that meant they stopped asking for ‘treats’, they said they continued to ask because if they caught their parents in the right mood they would give in and buy it for them. Although not always successful, children were able to obtain sweets or chocolate by assessing and manipulating their parents’ mood to get the desired items.

## **Eating 'rubbish' vs. 'healthy eating': snacks, treats and family meals**

### ***Snacks and treats***

Within the home, children had varying degrees of choice over food. For instance, the majority of parents preferred for their children to ask permission for snacks. When questioned why, one parent in particular used the phrase 'controlled snacking.' Others commented that they wanted to monitor what their children were eating. One mother for instance, wanted to keep a check on her daughter's sweetie intake to prevent cavities.

However, many parents said their children were allowed to help themselves to drinks and fruit, suggesting that what they wanted to monitor was not their eating in general but how much they were eating of items such as crisps, biscuits and chocolate. For instance, one parent said that if their child had already had a packet of crisps that day, such as in their packed lunch, they were not allowed to have another packet of crisps when they got home. Even with food items such as fruit, parents would sometimes tell their children they could not have it, for instance if it was too close to their tea time.

Many parents said that their children would still ask for permission, even for snacks that they were allowed to help themselves to without asking. Some parents commented that their children might not have to ask permission, but they knew what they were eating anyway, as certain food items would disappear from the cupboards, and were able to keep track of how much their children were eating of different snacks.

Only a few parents said that their children could help themselves to snacks, without asking permission, some because they did not feel the need to control their children's snack intake, and others because they felt that their children were old enough, and knew what they should be eating, to make the 'right' snack choice. This implied that some parents thought that their children had the competence to choose snacks that they might not enjoy as much, but were the 'healthier' option, whereas others thought that their children, if left to themselves, would make the 'unhealthy' choices and therefore the parents needed to control those choices for them.

In an interview with some of the children, they said that if it was up to them they would perhaps choose snacks like chocolate and crisps but they were also aware that they should be eating 'healthy' snacks like fruit as well, and that if they ate too much of crisps or chocolate they would not be 'healthy.' Although their parents still wanted to monitor their snack intake, the children themselves were aware of what they should be eating and felt that they were able to make 'healthy' choices themselves.

One mother in particular, said that she had gone on a diet herself and because she felt that she could not control her own snacking habits (for instance, if she had one biscuit she would be tempted to eat the whole packet), she decided not to have any snacks such as biscuits or crisps in the house anymore, which meant that her daughter also did not have access to biscuits and crisps. As this demonstrates, although many parents were keen to control their children's snack choices, some parents were themselves unable to make 'healthy' snack choices.

There were other parents that followed the theory that if they did not have certain food items in the house then their children would not be tempted to eat them. One mother however, believed that by having crisps and chocolate in the cupboards where her children could help themselves, they were less tempted as it was freely available rather than creating something forbidden and therefore more enticing. A few parents commented that they did not want food to be an issue by forcing their children to eat food they did not like.

Some parents contrasted their parenting styles to other parents or to their children's grandparents, observing that when their children were at their grandparents, they were indulged and allowed to eat whatever they wanted, whereas they personally preferred to control what their children ate. In Charles and Kerr's (1988) study of women, food and families, they point out that women's control over their children's food intake was often undermined by other members of the family and also by people who were not closely involved with the children, such as strangers giving them sweets at the shop. For instance, some parents compared what they provided at mealtimes for their children with what they got when they were at their friends' houses for sleepovers and parties. In an interview with two boys from the study, they said that they would get food at each other's houses that they had not encountered before and would often ask their own parents to make what they had tried at a friend's house if they liked it.

One mother remarked that although her daughter was allowed to eat as many sweets and processed food as she liked at her grandmother's, quite recently she had asked her grandmother to buy melon for her instead, and her grandmother was quite taken aback by her request. This demonstrates that although children have the ability to choose 'unhealthy' options, which may be seen as 'treats', they also may choose to pick something that is considered to be 'healthy' and perhaps less of a 'treat'.

### **Family meals**

There was also quite a variety in the amount of decision-making that children were allowed for family mealtimes. Many parents decided beforehand what their children would be getting to eat. Some parents tried to encourage their children to try new food, making comments such as, 'they have to try a mouthful', whereas others said that they tended to make meals that they knew their children would like.

**Interviewee 1:** Yes, like I say, he doesn't always, like for instance, yesterday, he doesn't like Brussels sprouts but I always say like well at least if you have three, you know, so give him his three he does, he really doesn't like eating all the time, but he does make an effort.

This mother also reflected an attitude that many of the parents seemed to have, that children should eat what has been given to them.

**Interviewee 1:** He eats a variety, yeah, he does eat a variety. Like see, even if I just put a little bit on the plate he tends to eat it, you know. Well if he don't eat that he don't get nothing else.

**Interviewer:** So does he have to finish what he's been given?

**Interviewee 1:** Yes, or he doesn't get any treats. Simple as that. Same as the little one, like I say it's the same, you eat what's on your plate or you don't get nothing else.

In an interview with a boy from the intervention group, he said that he and his siblings would often get to take it in turns to choose what they were having for their evening meal.

The majority of families ate together and ate the same meals together, although some would tailor their meals slightly according to what different family members liked. For instance, one parent commented that if they made a stir-fry they would leave out a particular vegetable that another individual in the family did not like. A few parents cooked completely separate meals for members of the family, as they liked very different kinds of food.

## **Swapping and sharing: the exchange of school-lunches**

An arena where children had an opportunity to eat something other than what their parents gave them was school-lunches. There was a contrast between school dinners and packed lunches. Some children would only get one or the other whereas others would get a mixture of both throughout the week. This was dependent on various factors, for instance, some children were entitled to free school dinners so it was cheaper for their parents to send them to school dinners rather than give them a packed lunch. Other children would get school dinners on the days when their parents were working and get packed lunches or go home for lunch on days when they were not at work. One mother started giving her children packed lunches after her third child started at school as she said they could not afford to pay for school dinners anymore, and they were not entitled to free school dinners.

Not all children liked school dinners and some chose to have packed lunches instead. One mother mentioned that she had stopped her child going to school dinners after realising how little they got. A few parents commented that by the time their child got to school dinners, there was not much left, or at least not much to choose from.

Many parents and children remarked that the school dinners were not particularly nice, although there were a few that thought that they had improved and that they got a good selection. Although parents got a meal list each week of what was on at school dinners, ultimately it was up to the children as to what they chose, and whether they would have vegetables with their dinner or fruit for dessert (this was optional in most of the schools). Nevertheless, it was a limited choice, as they would only get two options, and for vegetarians, there was no choice as they had only one option. Although school dinners were not decided by their parents, the choices that children were offered were still determined by adults in the school rather than the children themselves.

Some parents gave their children packed lunches as they believed that they had more control over what they got and also that packed lunches were 'healthier' than school dinners.

**Interviewee 3:** We usually give him packed lunches and that's because, well I suppose in the past I haven't really trusted school dinners, and I know they're trying to get healthy and all that, but still it's out of your control, and I don't really like that because peer pressure is very big now. And quite often, you know, they might have things which maybe wouldn't be suitable for him to eat because we don't eat pork.

However, one mother started giving her daughter packed lunches when the school started insisting that the children eat fruit for dessert, which her daughter disliked.

The majority of parents said that they made up their children's packed lunches for them, either the evening before or in the morning, when the children had either gone to bed or were still in bed or getting ready for school. Some children would get more input than others, for instance, they would get to choose what kind of sandwich they wanted or what they wanted for their 'play piece'. A few children did help to make their own packed lunches, although it was usually with their parents rather than their sole responsibility.

Although parents tended to make the packed lunches and decide what was going to go in them, they commented that they put in things that they knew their children liked. However, the children themselves mentioned that they would get items in their lunch box that they did not like, for example one boy mentioned getting mini-cheddars that he disliked. Some children would eat everything in their lunchbox whereas others would bring food back. Children brought food back not necessarily because they did not like what they got but because they would not have time to eat it.

In an interview with two boys, they said that they would often not eat their lunch, or give their lunch away because they wanted to get out and play and did not have enough time to eat their lunch and play as well. They said that if they ate their lunch fast enough to go out and play football, they would get indigestion. Their suggestion was that they should get half an hour for lunch and an hour for playing and one of them said that he would bring it up at the pupil-teacher council. When asked if he thought the teachers would agree to the change, he said they would probably say 'they'll think about it' but that they probably would not agree to the change. This highlights the unequal power-relations between the children and their teachers, where although the children have a forum to voice their opinion it is ultimately the adult's choice as to whether a change is made.

A few parents remarked that although they could monitor what their child ate at home they could not always control what they ate at school, even if they made them packed lunches. They said that children would occasionally swap their 'play pieces' and even their packed lunches, which meant that although they brought their lunchbox home empty, they had not necessarily been the ones to eat the food in it. Nevertheless, as one mother pointed out, this was dependent on other children wanting to swap with her son's 'healthy' lunch, which was not a common occurrence. In this case, children needed to persuade each other that they would both gain something from swapping their food. As Lupton comments, food is consumed not simply because of nourishment or to alleviate hunger, but because of the cultural values that surround it. She argues that 'food is chosen to reflect to oneself and others how individuals perceive themselves, or would like to be perceived' (Lupton 1996: 23).

When I asked the children about swapping lunches, they said that they would sometimes swap lunches even if they did not really want their friend's lunch because they didn't want to let their friends down. They would often swap parts of their lunch rather than the whole, for instance one boy would swap his grapes for more sandwiches. They said that some of the children would just give their lunch away, for instance if they wanted to go out and play, and they also mentioned one other child who they said was 'too scared to say no' if someone asked him for his lunch.

Children would also have opportunities to try different food at school than they got at home. For instance, one boy said he had never had pepperami until his friend gave him one to taste. The children did observe that they would ask their parents for different items in their lunch box if they wanted it, but it would often depend on whether their parents had those items in the house already.

The teachers observed that a few children were given money to spend at the school tuck shop or shops on their way to and from school. This tended to be more amongst older children than with the Primary 5 to 6 children in the study, particularly since many of the children were considered too young to walk to school when they were in Primary 5. One of the parents, when commenting on other parents' parenting styles said that some of their children's friends would be given money to buy take-away for their evening meal and as a result their own children would ask them for money to go buy chips from the take-away.

## **Parents' perceptions of children's eating habits**

Parents' had different perceptions of their role in their children's eating habits. Some believed that what they ate had an influence on what their children ate and thought that they had an important role in their children's eating habits. For instance, one mother said she did not like eating vegetables herself, but she would have some on her plate and pretend to eat it so as to encourage her children to eat vegetables. She blamed her dislike of vegetables on the way that she had been brought up. She also suffered from a bone disease and told her children that it was because she did not eat vegetables as a child.

When questioned on whom they thought had the most influence on their children's eating habits, whether it was their child's peers, the school or the family, many said themselves. Some commented on this explicitly, saying that because they did not like a certain food item, their children usually did not get an opportunity to try it either or that their dislike for a certain item influenced their children's perceptions of it.

**Interviewer:** So do you think that what you like eating has much of an influence on what [she] likes eating or do you have different tastes?

**Interviewee 2:** Well, I think that probably with all of them, certainly tend to like what we eat, simply because we eat a certain thing and that's been introduced to her.

**Interviewee 2:** I'm a great influence to things that she would perhaps like. I personally don't like eggs, I don't use eggs, I don't cook eggs, I don't buy eggs. My children don't really know much about eggs. Just again, obviously influenced by me because of my own likes and dislikes, I suppose.

She also made the point that she was in a sense 'forcing' her ideas about food on her children as if they had disliked something that she liked she would have persevered with giving it to them. However, she also commented that they seem to have agreed with the majority of things that she and her husband liked.

Another mother said that she was made more aware of buying food for her children that she might not necessarily like herself:

**Interviewer:** Do they get much say in what you buy?

**Interviewee 1:** I must admit, if I don't like something, I don't tend to buy it but I stopped doing that because I didn't realise [he] liked fish for a long time but now I do. I tell him if maybe if he likes something, like lasagne, because I hadn't realised he liked lasagne, because I don't like them. Every teatime, I'll say what do you fancy for your tea tonight, and if I've got it in, if I don't I'll make an effort to go out and get it. You see, so they do get a variety of what they want.

While some parents said that their children liked what they liked, other parents said that their children had their own individual tastes in food, which were not necessarily the same as theirs. For instance, a few parents gave the example of hot or spicy foods, which they liked to eat but their children did not.

Some parents quite consciously tried to influence their children's eating habits, particularly those that wanted to encourage their children to eat 'healthy' food. One mother said that she believed that the reason that her younger daughter was not a fussy eater, was because she had brought her up differently to her older daughter. She said that her first daughter was her first baby and she had not known what to do with her, whereas with her second daughter, she and her husband had made a conscious decision to encourage her to eat vegetables and other 'healthy' food. Some parents argued that it was up to parents to get their children to eat 'healthy' food because they were the main providers of food in the household.

Others observed that although they had tried to get their children to eat more vegetables, their children's personalities and 'individuality' meant that no matter what they did, their children would only eat what they wanted to eat. As one mother remarked, it was the easy option.

**Interviewee 4:** She, her eating habits aren't good. It's definitely not, it's probably to do with me as well, for, it's the easy, the easy option, you know.

She also said that she thought her daughter relied on her too much to help her make healthy choices and that it was up to her daughter to make the changes herself, despite previously saying that her daughter did not get much say in the food shopping or decision-making regarding family mealtimes.

**Interviewer:** Have you noticed any changes at all since she's been taking part in the study?

**Interviewee 4:** Very short-lived changes. I think she's becoming aware of her shape as well. You know, so it's, I think she wants me to do all the work for her.

**Interviewer:** Ok. So what do you mean by that?

**Interviewee 4:** She, she's aware that she's bigger than other people.

**Interviewer:** When you say that she wants you to do all the work for her, is it in terms of making her eat things or?

**Interviewee 4:** Yeah. It's things that, it's very short-lived. I'm not going to eat crisps and sweeties now. And then the minute she obviously gets a craving for it she says she wants some sweeties.

However, she did acknowledge that some of the responsibility for her daughter's diet rested on her as well.

**Interviewer:** So do you think she'll take on board any of the kind of bigger things maybe?

**Interviewee 4:** Yeah, eventually later on. You know she does become aware of her shape. And I suppose it's my responsibility as well, to be aware of what she is eating. But she doesn't actually eat a huge amount.

As Backett-Milburn et al. (2006) note for the parents of teenagers who disliked 'healthy' foodstuffs, parents distanced themselves from feeling responsible for the teenager who ate a poor diet by saying that they were 'fussy eaters'. Teenagers described as 'good eaters' were ones who did not complain about and ate all of the food their parents provided rather than because they ate 'good' or 'healthy' foods (Backett-Milburn et al. 2006: 628).

A few parents said that they wanted their children to have a good attitude towards food rather than have any issues with particular food items. They compared their own upbringing to their children's, commenting that they had been forced to eat food they did not like as children, which had affected them as adults, and therefore they did not want to do the same with their children. Many parents said that their children were aware of 'healthy' eating but that did not mean that they chose to eat 'healthily'. Some believed that this awareness of 'healthy' eating would be a short-lived one, whereas others thought it was more a long-lasting change.

Although parents talked about 'healthy' eating, they had different views regarding what constituted 'healthy'. Some of the parents emphasised to me that they only bought low-fat food items and that their children were not allowed to eat crisps or sweets.

One of the fathers spoke at length about 'health' and 'healthy eating'. For instance, when asked about food shopping he commented:

**Interviewee 5:** What she's learning to do with her mother is looking at labels. We look at labels to see what's in it. And if there's any fancy stuff we leave it.

When asked if his daughter had to ask permission for snacks he said that he did not have chocolate biscuits in the house because he did not eat them and he did not believe in them. However, when I asked what his daughter ate when she came home from school, it turned out that she did get chocolate biscuits for snacks.

The father had been told by the doctor that he needed to lose weight and had decided to go on the Atkins diet although this was something he decided himself rather than something that was recommended by the doctor. He perceived this as 'healthy' as it had helped him to lose weight, although he did say that he did not think children should go on the Atkins diet. His daughter broke into the conversation with this comment:

**Interviewee 6:** My teacher says that if you go on the Atkins diet for too long it's like a drain, if you put fat down the drain and you put the tap on, it just all clogs up and that's the same as a drain.

This shows that the advice that children may get on 'healthy eating' from different authority figures can be contradictory. This may reflect the conflicting advice that parents themselves get, for instance from the media or government recommendations.

**Interviewee 3:** So all of these things kind of, promotes more awareness. But I think the problem is, is a lot of awareness of what you should be doing and not so much actually doing it. You know a lot of our, a lot of things that people do these days, you watch how to keep your house clean, you don't actually keep it clean and so, a bit the same with food stuff, it's you know what you should be doing but your lifestyle either doesn't allow you to do that or you don't do it.

Conner and Armitage (2002) comment that although people may want to eat a 'healthy diet' people of different ages, genders and educational attainment levels have different views as to what constitutes a 'healthy diet'. They argue that 'many of the messages about what does and does not constitute healthy eating have changed and even reversed in recent years' (ibid: 122). Keane contends that even when people are aware of what constitutes 'healthy' food, they may not use the information in the way that 'healthy eating' campaigns intend. She argues that participants' embodied knowledge, how they were affected personally by patterns of food consumption, was more important to their understanding of the relationship between food and health than the information they received from 'healthy eating' campaigns (1997: 181).

One mother said that although she fed her children 'healthy' food she did not think they ate as 'healthily' at their father's house (they were recently separated) and she thought that he gave them too much pasta and too big portions of food. A couple of other parents commented on portion sizes and the need to control not only what their children were eating but also how much. For instance, this mother thought that her daughter's larger body shape was more down to lack of exercise than her eating habits (although earlier she had said that she would tend to get crisps or sweeties for snacks for example rather than something like fruit unless her mother told her to have fruit instead) as she said she didn't eat large portions:

**Interviewer:** So it's more what she eats than the amount?

**Interviewee 4:** It's probably the lack of exercise.

Although many parents talked about 'healthy' eating, their perceptions of what constituted 'healthy' differed between parents. For instance, one parent commented that they were healthier because they had started eating oven chips instead of fried chips, whereas other parents thought chips were unhealthy altogether.

## **Conclusion**

This has examined the ways in which children's competence to make dietary decisions are perceived by their parents. Children are given advice on what they should be eating both by the school and their parents. However, they may receive conflicting advice on 'healthy eating' both through verbal and non-verbal cues. As Solberg argues, it is through the interaction of parents and children that the content of childhood is shaped, and this takes place through both verbal and nonverbal exchanges (1997: 126). What their teachers tell them to eat and what their parents encourage or give them to eat may not always coincide. Keane (1997) shows that simply providing education and information on 'healthy eating'

does not necessarily entail that people will make 'healthy choices'. Although children know what they should be eating, this does not mean that is what they choose to eat.

Children may give also different values to 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' food than the adults in their lives. For instance, in her work on children's sweets, Allison James shows how children use descriptions such as 'snot' in reference to mushy peas or 'shit' in reference to mashed potatoes when expressing their views on school dinners. She states, 'Thus the foods which children are forced to put inside their bodies by adults are given the status of excretions which pass out' (1982: 304). She also comments that although adults label their children as 'fussy eaters' they are only fussy in adult terms and in fact they eat a wide variety of substances that are abhorred by adults (ibid: 305). Although children know that certain foods are better for their health than others, the value they attach to concepts such as 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' may be different than adults. Like Keane's (1997) informants, they may rely more on their embodied knowledge of food and health than advice given to them.

Many parents believed that they had a responsibility as 'adults' to encourage their children to make 'healthy' choices. However, they did not necessarily view their children as competent enough to make 'healthy' choices without their parents' support. This brings up the question of whether an 'adult' is more competent than their children to make these choices, as some of the parents admitted that they themselves found it difficult to make 'healthy' choices when there were more appealing options available.

The level of control that a parent has over their child's eating habits may also depend on how the parent views the child. For instance, some parents viewed their children as strong-willed 'individuals' who had their own tastes in food which were separate from their parents' tastes and that the parent did not have much power to influence. These parents distanced themselves from responsibility for their child's eating habits by describing their children as 'fussy eaters' who refused to eat food such as vegetables and fruit. Others saw their children as too young to make 'choices' of their own and that it was therefore up to the parents to make these 'choices' for them. One child did make the choice to request 'healthy' food, such as melon, when sweets, chocolate and crisps were freely available, even when staying with an indulgent grandmother and away from her parents. This shows that although children may choose to make 'unhealthy' choices, equally they can also decide on the 'healthy' option.

This has also explored the means by which children actively negotiate their eating consumption habits through their everyday lives. As Solberg points out, although children are in a weaker position than their parents, nevertheless they are able to influence the negotiating process in a way that they believe is favourable to themselves. She argues that by using the term 'negotiate' she wishes to emphasize that children do not passively adapt themselves to what adults say and do and that in everyday life they make use of a considerable freedom of action (Solberg 1997: 127). Mayall also argues that 'The idea of negotiation commonly includes a notion of process whereby a person aims to arrive at change beneficial to him or her' (2001: 120-121). For instance, Williams shows that children's eating consumption habits are a source of potential disagreement and negotiation within

families where 'mothers who monitor their children's food intake are acting in what they consider to be the children's best interests but against the children's possible opposition'. As she comments, children's actions outside the home cannot be so closely monitored or controlled by their parents, and children are able to eat food that may be unacceptable within the home (Williams 1997: 166).

Although parents may have more authority and power over what their children are eating, children use different tactics to sway their parents' decision-making as regards their food choices. In her work on children's sweets, Allison James shows how by eating sweets which they described as 'kets', a term used by adults to describe something 'rubbish', children transformed the categories of the adult world.

Food belongs to the adult world and is symbolic of the adult's control over children. By disordering and confusing the conceptual categories of the adult world children erect a new boundary over which adults have no authority (1982: 306).

Children can use different methods to disorder this control such as refusing to eat certain food, using 'pester-power' to get their parents to buy particular items or to make specific meals, and exchanging food with their friends at school. These techniques do not always work as parents are in a position to be able to both chastise and indulge their children as regards their eating behaviour, nevertheless, although parents have an influence on their children's eating habits, this is not a one-way process and children may also have the power to influence their parents' eating habits. Therefore, decision-making regarding food choices within the context of the family is part of an ongoing negotiating process between child and parent, with children devising different ways to counteract adults' power and control over their food choices.

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## POVZETEK

Ta članek je nastal na podlagi kvalitativne študije, ki preučuje odnos in percepcije staršev o vlogi, ki jo imajo pri prehranjevalnih navadah svojih otrok, šolarjev v grofiji Angus na Škotskem. Starši verjamejo, da imajo različne stopnje vpliva na prehrabene navade svojih otrok: nekateri menijo, da se otroci lahko odločajo o svoji prehrani povsem samostojno, drugi pa, da so otroci še premajhni za tovrstne odločitve in da mora biti prehrana otrok domena staršev. Avtorica trdi, da kljub temu, da starši vplivajo na prehranske izbire otrok, predvsem ko gre za vprašanja o zdravi in nezdravi hrani, so otroci sposobni lastnega premisleka in zato željam staršev ne sledijo vedno. Namesto tega se otroci pogajajo s starši o prehranskih ciljih, potrebah in željah, iz česar sledi, da so prehranske izbire otrok rezultat pogajalskega procesa v gospodinjstvu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: otroci, starši, zdravje, hrana, kompetentnost, pogajanja