

DECISION-MAKING IN EATING BEHAVIOR: THE FAMILY CONTEXT

Sandra Hofferth
University of Maryland, College Park, MD

The importance of the family can be seen in the high correlations between the weight of parents and the weight of children. Although both genes and environment are likely contributors, I will focus on environment. Girls from families with obese parents are at greatly increased risk for obesity even when they start out life at normal levels.

Basically, I am going to focus on the limits on decision-making, those aspects of life that are part of our background and preferences and that limit our abilities to make completely independent decisions but that simplify our choices.

Prenatal Period: The Establishment of Early Predispositions

There is some research that suggests that the early maternal environment, the environment of the fetus *in utero*, may set up predispositions later on to obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Stress in this period also could relate to later eating patterns.

Early Postnatal Environment

Most believe that the early postnatal environment is critical for later patterns. There are two key factors: whether the child is breast-fed and, second, the introduction of solid food. There are two important considerations: (1) the ability of the child to regulate his/her own intake of food, and (2) how early food choices establish preferences.

The body has an innate ability to self-regulate; generally species eat the appropriate amount of food to remain the same weight. When we lose the balance, we can have a problem of overeating or undereating. How intake is regulated is important. Research suggests that breastfeeding is important to self-regulation because breast milk production is linked to intake by the child. Introducing solid food too early could interfere with this development of a self-regulating capacity.

The types of foods introduced at an early age will be linked to food preferences later on. Research has studied the establishment of preferences for fruits, vegetables, fats, and sweet/salty tastes. Exposure is important to establish taste. However, control/restriction on foods is problematic. Parents who restrict foods may increase preference for the very foods that are restricted.

Toddler and Preschool Ages

As children grow, additional factors become important. Income influences the quality of the foods that can be purchased, cultural factors affect types of foods purchased, knowledge influences what is thought to be desirable, and available time influences food preparation and consumption practices. Generally, it is believed that income permits the purchase of foods of higher quality in terms of nutritional value. Knowledge affects what people believe about what

should be eaten and how food should be prepared. This may be education-based, but culture/community also may influence beliefs about foods and food practices. I will discuss the maternal employment/time availability hypothesis, because this is one that is believed to influence food preparation practices, including food eaten out and food prepared at home. Also, I will discuss media influences on family eating patterns. Finally, I will discuss beliefs about body image, weight, and overweight, because these will influence whether families perceive their food purchase and preparation to be a problem or not.