

Parents play a role in teen eating disorders, study finds

October 4 2013, by Stephanie Stephens



The ways parents or caregivers interact with children around mealtimes can have unintended consequences, according to a new report in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. The study found that teenagers' negative attitudes toward eating—or eating psychopathology—may result from their perceptions of their parents' attitudes about food.

Most parents have the best intentions and want their child to be healthy. As a result, they may inadvertently encourage or pressure that child to eat more food than he or she wants to, or to consume a particular type of food the child doesn't want, said lead author Emma Haycraft, Ph.D., of the Centre for Research into Eating Disorders at Loughborough University in Leicestershire, U.K.

"A parent who says, 'You're not leaving the table until you eat that vegetable' creates a negative atmosphere at mealtimes," she said. "That can also teach the child to 'override' natural feelings of fullness."

Eating disorders are most likely to manifest during the teenage years, Haycraft said, "a time of developing autonomy." When a parent attempts to control his or her child's eating, a child may then try to regain self-control of eating by not eating other [food](#) or starting to binge eat, she said.

More than 500 [boys](#) and girls ages 13 to 15 self-reported measures of eating psychopathology, their parents' current feeding practices, and their own height and weight.

"This study suggests that finding balance in the domain of [child](#) feeding might prevent eating disorders," said Shayla C. Holub, Ph.D., and associate professor of psychology at the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences at the University of Texas at Dallas.

"For both boys and girls, parental involvement was related to lower eating disorder symptomatology [the combined symptoms of a disease], while excessive control was related to higher eating disorder symptomatology. This suggests that parents should be involved in making sure their adolescents are eating the right types of foods, but that they should avoid telling their adolescents how much they should eat."

Haycraft and her two co-authors were slightly surprised by what boys thought when their parents restricted their eating. "More eating disorder symptoms were reported in these boys, which was opposite of the girls' situations", who reported more [eating disorder](#) symptoms when they were encouraged to eat more.

The study did not consider specific types of eating disorders or

behaviors, Haycraft said, which she notes, is a limitation and something for future research to build on. "We looked at this topic in a more general sense. Of course, we can speculate for girls, because we know more about eating disorders in girls—partly because of media coverage. We don't know as much about boys—only that while disorders in boys are currently less prevalent than in [girls](#), their prevalence is increasing."

"This is one of the first studies to examine parental [feeding practices](#) from the adolescent's perspective," said Holub. "I think this provides a unique advantage point from which to examine the parent-adolescent feeding relationship, especially because during the teen years, [parents](#) and their adolescents may see the world very differently."

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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