

Parents' binge eating, restrictive feeding practices may be reactions to kids' emotions

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Jaclyn A. Saltzman, a doctoral researcher in human development and family studies, found in a new study that parents' reactions to their preschoolers' negative emotions may explain the association between parental binge eating and restrictive feeding practices. Saltzman's co-authors on the study included University of Illinois faculty members Kelly K. Bost, child development; Barbara Fiese, human development and family studies and director of the Family Resiliency Center; and Janet Liechty, social work and medicine. Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

A new study of more than 440 parents and their preschoolers offers insight into why some parents who binge eat also may try to restrict their children's food intake, placing their children at higher risk for unhealthy eating habits and weight problems.

Parents who reported feeling distress when their child was angry, crying or fearful were more likely to engage in episodes of [binge eating](#) - and to limit the amounts or types of food they provided to their children, University of Illinois researchers found.

In the three months preceding the study, 52 parents in the sample, or about 2 percent, reported episodes of binge eating, which ranged in frequency from one to five times per week. Parents also were assessed for depression, anxiety and stress, and completed questionnaires about their use of specific [feeding practices](#) with their children and their children's eating behaviors.

Although numerous studies have examined the potentially detrimental effects of restrictive feeding practices on children, the current study was novel in that it focused on the interplay of the parent's emotions with their controlling the child's [food intake](#), said lead author Jaclyn A. Saltzman, a doctoral researcher in human development and family studies and scholar in the Illinois Transdisciplinary Obesity Prevention Program.

"Previous research has linked restrictive feeding practices to children's overeating, eating when they're not hungry and to higher child body weight, so we know it's a problem for children's health," Saltzman said.

"We also know that parental binge eating is related to restrictive feeding, but it's a counterintuitive relationship. Why is caloric excess in one individual related to caloric restriction in the family? We wanted to explore why that was happening," Saltzman said.

Adults who binge eat - defined in the study as eating unusually large amounts of food in an uncontrolled manner without compensatory behaviors such as purging - often struggle with feelings of shame and guilt about their behavior and have difficulty regulating their emotions, studies have found.

"Parents are people, too, and we knew that parents

who binge are going to experience a lot of distress because of those behaviors, so we tried to take a sympathetic approach," Saltzman said. "We hypothesized that this [emotional](#) overload was going to bleed out into the parent-child relationship, and that's exactly what we found. Binge eating did affect restrictive feeding practices through parents' distress about their children's negative emotions."

Parents in the study completed a survey indicating how they would likely respond to their child's anger, fear or crying in various hypothetical situations, and parents' responses were scored as being supportive - behaviors that were emotion- and problem-focused - or unsupportive, which included feeling distress, minimizing the problem or punishing the child.

Comparing data on the adults who were binge eaters with other parents in the study, the researchers found that parental binge eating was correlated with feeling distress in response to children's [negative emotions](#) and was associated with restricting the child's food intake for health reasons or to control the child's weight.

"We think there are two possible reasons why that was happening: Parents who binge eat may be so focused on trying to control their own distress that they might struggle to respond sensitively to their children's emotions and to their cues of hunger or satiety," Saltzman said.

"Having trouble in sensitivity to the children's emotions was leading to trouble with sensitivity to the children's hunger in the feeding environment. It also could have been possible that parents who binge eat were trying to help their children avoid engaging in the same type of behavior, so they may have restricted the children's intake in an effort to curb excessive overeating behavior," Saltzman said.

Saltzman cautioned that since the study was a cross-sectional analysis of the data, the researchers can't make a statistical inference that parental binge eating is caused by parents' responses to their children's emotions. However, from a theoretically grounded perspective, that explanation makes the most sense, Saltzman said.

"We want researchers and practitioners working with problems around eating and weight to consider how parents' emotions are being brought to the dining table," Saltzman said. "Self-regulation is important for emotions, but it's also important for eating behavior. Many researchers have looked at the interplay of children's emotions with their eating behaviors. However, parents control the amounts and types of food they feed their [children](#), so you really want to focus on what's happening with [parents'](#) emotions, not just what's happening with the kids."

More information: Jaclyn A. Saltzman et al, Parent binge eating and restrictive feeding practices: Indirect effects of parent's responses to child's negative emotion, *Eating Behaviors* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.eatbeh.2016.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2016.02.001)

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