

Nature and nurture shape infant eating habits, education professor finds

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Parents have a dual influence on how their infant children eat, passing on their genetic makeup to their children as well as serving as role models of eating behavior in early childhood, according to studies conducted by a University at Buffalo education professor.

The examples parents – and caregivers – set may be particularly important for infants showing "higher emotional distress" or "difficult temperament" when eating because these [children](#) are more likely to have a higher Body Mass Index through age 6, says Myles Faith, associate chair in the Department of Counseling, School and Educational Psychology in UB's Graduate School of Education.

"If we ask ourselves, 'Are fussy eaters born that way or do they learn it in the environment?' the answer is 'yes,' both are true," says Faith, who co-authored a study in *Eating Behaviors* with James B. Hittner, professor of psychology at the College of Charleston, and Cassandra Johnson and Gina Tripicchio of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Faith and Hittner also co-wrote an

editorial on the subject for the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

A similar conclusion was reached in a 2013 study by Faith and colleagues published in the journal *Obesity*. They found that "food neophobia"—the tendency to avoid new foods—is both genetically and environmentally influenced in 3- to 7-year-old children.

"Its nature AND nurture, and neither should be discounted."

The studies done with infants and children – the most recent of which is based on observations from video tapes rather than parent questionnaires – have led the two researchers to recommend "positive parenting" strategies to help parents and caregivers be more effective in shaping healthier food choices, especially for these fussy or picky eaters.

"Parents may need a bit more understanding and patience when introducing foods to fussy or picky eaters," says Faith.

"The children really aren't intending to be difficult. Being fussy seems to be their nature around new foods, and it can be quite distressing for them if they are overly forced, pressured or coerced. This can backfire and lead to greater frustration."

Faith says that treatment studies conducted with fussy eaters and their caregivers are needed to better understand and manage these family dynamics

Faith suggests "positive parenting approaches" that hopefully will make caregivers and parents "agents of change" for healthier food choices:

- Role model healthier food choices by eating them with your child. "Don't just preach," Faith says, "but reach for the foods, as well."

- Repeat, repeat. "Children need many, many exposures to a new food before they might be more accepting," says Faith. "Throwing in the towel after two or three brief exposures to a new fruit or vegetable probably is not giving a fair chance, and will be frustrating for everyone."
- Be aware of portion control. There is strong experimental evidence that children will eat more, or less, depending on the amount of food put in front of them, according to Faith. "So caregivers might supersize the fruit and vegetable portions, while reducing the portions of less healthy foods," he says. "We might call this 'strategic nudging.'"
- Foster choice. Children like to have choices, Faith says. "So parents can encourage children to make selections among a few healthier items," he says. "For example, 'Apple, grapes, carrots – pick one please,' rather than offering no choice, but telling the children 'Eat your vegetables.'"
- Keep it positive. Pressuring, forcing and coercing often lead children to push back and resist, according to Faith. "Strategies such as praise, reinforcement or a simple 'thumbs up' for healthy food choices generally are the way to go."

Findings such as these reveal the potential information to be gained when measures of child temperament and personality are infused into obesity research.

More information: M. S. Faith et al. Shadows of temperament in child eating patterns: implications for family and parenting research, *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (2016). [DOI: 10.3945/ajcn.116.132258](https://doi.org/10.3945/ajcn.116.132258)

James B. Hittner et al. Infant emotional distress, maternal restriction at a home meal, and child BMI gain through age 6 years in the Colorado Adoption Project, *Eating Behaviors* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.eatbeh.2016.01.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2016.01.008)

Provided by University at Buffalo

In their most recent study, the two professors conducted a six-year longitudinal analysis in which 1-year-olds were video-recorded at a home meal with their mothers. Mothers were not given rules on how to behave, and were allowed to interact naturally during the meal. The videos were then scored by researchers on several dimensions, including infant "emotional distress" when eating. Results showed that infants showing emotional distress had a higher body mass index through 6 years of age. The research strengthened the link between this "difficult temperament" and childhood obesity established in a number of studies.

"There is some evidence that caregivers may use food to soothe a chronically distressed child, or use television as a 'pacifier,'" says Faith. "Either of these may lead to excess weight gain during development. The question becomes whether parents can use alternatives strategies to effectively calm emotional distress."

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