

Stress over fussy eating prompts parents to pressure or reward at mealtime

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Although fussy eating is developmentally normal and transient phase for most children, the behavior can be stressful for parents. A new study published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* found that

concern over fussy eating prompts both mothers and fathers to use non-responsive feeding practices such as pressuring or rewarding for eating.

"These practices can reinforce fussy eating, increase preferences for unhealthy foods, and lead to excessive weight gain," said lead author Holly Harris, Ph.D., Centre for Children's Health Research, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. "Understanding why [parents](#) respond unproductively to fussy eating is an important step to educate on healthy feeding practices."

This study recruited 208 [mothers](#) and fathers with children between the ages of 2-5 years from a socio-economically disadvantaged community in Queensland, Australia. Disadvantaged families are found to have higher levels of fussy eating and greater use of non-responsive feeding practices, but there is little understanding of what situations prompt this behavior.

In addition to information about themselves, the parents scored their perceived responsibility in feeding as well as their [child](#)'s temperament. Additionally, they reported the frequency of fussy eating behavior and their feeding practices. Questions included, "When your child refuses [food](#) they usually eat, do you insist your child eat it?" and "When your child refuses food they usually eat, do you encourage eating by offering a reward other than food?" Lastly, parents indicated how frequently they were worried about their child's fussy eating, their child not eating a balanced or varied diet, and how much food their child ate.

The study found that while both mothers' and fathers' reports of fussy eating were consistent, mothers reported higher levels of concern. Research indicates gender assumptions place greater responsibility for feeding and the child's nutrition on mothers. Mothers are also more sensitive to a child's verbal and nonverbal cues. They are therefore more distressed by the crying, tantrums, and gagging as a child refuses food.

Feeding has a significant emotional component for mothers that may contribute to their using nonresponsive feeding behaviors out of concern for the child's welfare.

"Fathers more frequently used persuasive feeding practices, but their behavior was not driven by parental concern," said Dr. Harris. "A possible explanation may be the fathers focus on practical matters such as ending mealtime after a long day at work. Acknowledging and addressing the underlying causes for non-responsive [feeding practices](#) used by both parents may improve responses to fussy eating."

Dr. Harris suggests that health professionals tasked with advising parents of fussy eaters might consider providing reassurance, education, and alternative behavioral strategies to support children's exposure to a wide variety of healthy foods.

More information: Holly A. Harris et al, Concern Explaining Nonresponsive Feeding: A Study of Mothers' and Fathers' Response to Their Child's Fussy Eating, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2018.05.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2018.05.021)

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