

Exploring Aspects of Parental Control over Feeding:  
Influences on Children's Eating Behaviour and Weight

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary.....	v
Declaration.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
CHAPTER 1 – Parental Restriction of Young Children’s Snack Food Intake: Implications for the Development of Poor Self-Regulation of Energy Intake and Overweight in Childhood.....	1
1.1 Chapter Overview .....	1
1.2 Obesity in Australian Children .....	1
1.3 Aetiology of Obesity.....	3
1.4 Parental Feeding Practices and Obesity.....	3
1.5 Measurement of Restriction.....	5
1.6 Restriction and Intake of Snack Foods .....	6
1.6.1 Studies Leading to the Development of the Child Feeding Questionnaire.....	6
1.6.2 CFQ Restriction in Longitudinal Cohort Study of Girls.....	9
1.7 Restriction and Overweight .....	11
1.8 Restriction and Early Development.....	14
1.9 Snack Food Consumption and Obesity.....	17
1.10 Chapter Summary .....	17
CHAPTER 2 – Factor Structure and Psychometric Properties of the Child Feeding Questionnaire in Australian Preschool Children .....	20
2.1 Introduction.....	20
2.2 Method.....	24
2.2.1 Participants.....	24
2.2.2 Procedures.....	25
2.3 Results.....	27
2.3.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis .....	27
2.3.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis .....	31
2.3.3 Relationships between the CFQ factors and BMI z scores.....	38
2.3.4 Final CFQ Model Factor Internal Consistencies .....	48
2.4 Discussion.....	40
CHAPTER 3 – Investigating Mothers’ Feeding Practices to Manage Intake of Snack Foods in Toddlers’ Diets.....	45
3.1 Introduction.....	45
3.2 Method.....	50
3.2.1 Participants.....	50
3.2.2 Procedure .....	50
3.2.3 Interview Development and Pilot Testing .....	52
3.2.4 Demographic Variables .....	53
3.2.5 Interview Analysis .....	54
3.3 Results.....	57
3.3.1 Responsibility for Feeding.....	57
3.3.2 Concern about Toddler’s Weight.....	57

3.3.3	Control over Access to Palatable Snacks.....	60
3.3.4	Qualitative Analysis.....	63
3.3.5	Toddler's Level of Exposure to Sweets and Snack Foods.....	64
3.3.6	Managing Toddler's Consumption.....	71
3.3.7	Toddler's Behaviour.....	81
3.4	Discussion.....	86
CHAPTER 4 – Development and Preliminary Validation of the Toddler Feeding Questionnaire.....		92
4.1	Introduction.....	92
4.2	Method.....	96
4.2.1	Participants.....	96
4.2.2	Procedure.....	97
4.2.3	Scale Development Phase.....	97
4.2.4	Data Analysis.....	99
4.3	Results.....	103
4.3.1	Sample Characteristics.....	103
4.3.2	Descriptive Statistics.....	105
4.3.3	Exploratory Factor Analysis.....	113
4.3.4	Interpretation of the Factors.....	114
4.3.5	Factor Analysis of Sample 2 Questionnaire Data.....	122
4.3.6	Comparison of Factors in Sample 1 and Sample 2.....	128
4.3.7	Inter-relationship amongst Factors.....	129
4.3.8	Relationship between Factor Scores and Feeding Practices Measured with the Child Feeding Questionnaire (Sample 1 and Sample 2).....	131
4.3.9	Relationship between Factor Scores and Frequency of Snack Food Consumption (Sample 1).....	132
4.3.10	Selecting the Items for the TFQ Scales.....	134
4.3.11	Final TFQ Model Descriptive Statistics and Factor Internal Consistencies.....	135
4.3.12	Test-Retest Reliability.....	135
4.4	Discussion.....	138
CHAPTER 5 – Are Feeding Practices Associated with Parents' Weight Status and Preschoolers' Body Mass Index?.....		145
5.1	Introduction.....	145
5.2	Method.....	150
5.2.1	Participants.....	150
5.2.2	Measures.....	150
5.2.3	Statistical Analysis.....	152
5.3	Results.....	155
5.3.1	Sample Characteristics.....	155
5.3.2	Differences in Feeding Practices between Normal Weight, Overweight and Obese Parents.....	155
5.3.3	Associations between Feeding Practices and Child BMI z score.....	157
5.3.4	Associations between Feeding Practices and Parental Concern about Child's Weight.....	157
5.4	Discussion.....	161

CHAPTER 6 – Parental Feeding Practices and Ad Libitum Snack Food Intake in Toddlers .....	164
6.1 Introduction.....	164
6.2 Method.....	170
6.2.1 Participants.....	170
6.2.2 Measures .....	171
6.2.3 Free Access Procedure.....	175
6.2.4 Statistical Analysis.....	179
6.3 Results.....	182
6.3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Scale Reliability .....	182
6.3.2 Relationships between Measures of Feeding Practices .....	182
6.3.3 Children’s Food Intake (KJ) in the 15 Minute Session .....	185
6.3.4 Relationship between Feeding Practices and Energy Intake from High-Energy Snacks .....	187
6.3.5 Interaction of Restriction and Allow Access .....	188
6.3.6 Supplementary Analyses.....	193
6.3.7 Influence of Weight Concerns on Feeding Practices.....	195
6.4 Discussion.....	197
CHAPTER 7 – Summary and Conclusions .....	203
7.1 Aims of the Thesis .....	203
7.2 Examining the Validity and Reliability of Restriction .....	205
7.3 Toddler Feeding Questionnaire Factors and Weight Status .....	208
7.4 Toddler Feeding Questionnaire, Restriction, and Self-Regulation.....	211
7.5 Relationship between Control over Feeding and Parent Feeding Styles....	212
7.6 Parents’ Self-efficacy and Child’s Attraction to Snack Foods .....	214
7.7 Issues with Methodology .....	216
7.8 Contributions of the Research to our Understanding of Children’s Eating Behaviour.....	217
7.9 Future Research .....	219
7.10 Conclusions.....	220
REFERENCES .....	222
Appendix A – Manuscript accepted for publication.....	238
Appendix B – Child Feeding Questionnaire Items, Item Labels and Response Scale.....	247
Appendix C – Correlation Matrix for the Child Feeding Questionnaire Items.....	250
Appendix D – Interview Schedule .....	252
Appendix E – An Example of the Application of Indexing to the Interview Notes .	260
Appendix F – Questionnaire for Mothers of Toddlers (Sample 1).....	264
Appendix G – Questionnaire for Mothers of Preschoolers (Sample 2).....	280
Appendix H – Toddler Feeding Questionnaire Items.....	297
Appendix I – Questionnaires and Materials (Chapter 6) .....	301

## SUMMARY

The current research was developed from a review of the literature on the influence of parental control on children's eating and weight, and in particular the research examining parental restriction and poor self-regulation of energy. The impetus for the research was the confusion in the literature about the positive and negative aspects of control and the need to explore the influence of parental control at earlier periods of child development in socio economically diverse samples.

The aim of the first study was to investigate the factor structure and psychometric properties of the Child Feeding Questionnaire (CFQ) in an Australian sample of preschool children. Consistent with previous research, the factor structure was problematic with respect to the Restriction subscale. The two items that ask about the use of rewards showed poor cohesion with other items on the Restriction subscale, raising concerns about the conceptualisation of restriction as measured by the CFQ.

The second study sought to determine whether currently available measures of restriction were appropriate for assessing parent behaviours with toddlers, and to explore the strategies that mothers use to control their toddlers' intake of energy-dense snack foods. A qualitative methodology was employed and interviews were conducted with 22 mothers who had toddlers aged between 18 and 24 months. A key finding was a lack of variability in responses to the CFQ Restriction subscale in contrast to the range of individual differences in parents' reported use of control. A thematic analysis provided the basis for the development of a questionnaire to quantify the key concepts that were identified.

Exploratory factor analysis was then used to refine these concepts resulting in a five factor structure that has been named the Toddler Feeding Questionnaire (TFQ). The TFQ incorporates a broad range of measures of parental control over feeding, including how much parents allow access to energy-dense foods (Allow Access), the rules associated with managing intake of these foods (Rules), and flexibility in the way rules are applied (Flexibility). It also includes a measure of parental self-efficacy beliefs (Self-efficacy), which

may influence the use of feeding practices, and a measure of toddlers' attraction to energy-dense foods (Child's Attraction), a characteristic of the child that may influence both parent feeding practices and energy intake.

The factor structure was examined in a sample of mothers of toddlers, and replicated in a second sample of mothers of preschool children, who responded retrospectively about their feeding practices. Subsequent analyses were conducted to examine the internal consistency, test-retest reliability, convergent, discriminant and concurrent validity of the TFQ factors to provide a preliminary validation of the instrument. To further examine the validity of the TFQ, feeding practices of normal weight, overweight and obese parents were compared. The relationship between the TFQ factors (based on retrospective reports) and BMI *z* scores in preschool children were also examined. In the preschool sample only, normal weight parents had significantly more rules compared to obese parents and were less flexible compared to overweight parents, and obese parents allowed their children more access to snack foods compared with overweight and normal weight parents. The TFQ factors were not associated with BMI *z* scores in preschool children.

The final study investigated the association between feeding practices, including the TFQ factors and CFQ Restriction, and self-regulation of energy intake in toddlers. The main aim was to determine if the TFQ factor Allow Access would moderate the relationship between CFQ Restriction and *ad libitum* intake of snack foods, using an age appropriate adaptation of the Free Access Procedure developed by Fisher and Birch (1999a). The findings confirmed a moderating influence of Allow Access. Restriction was a significant predictor of intake only when Allow Access was high. The implications of this finding for the development of parental feeding advice and the conceptualisation of parental control are discussed.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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