Family dynamics and relationships play a key role in children’s appetite self-regulation, interventions offer hope for health and well-being

BY RYANN MONAHAN | COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST FOR THE FAMILY RESILIENCY CENTER

URBANA, Ill. – Helping children develop healthy appetite self-regulation, could set them up for a road to success in health outcomes over a lifetime, and family dynamics and parent relationships may play a role.

Children’s unhealthy habits can be formed early and can impact weight over a lifespan. However, eating behaviors, specifically appetite self-regulation, may be linked to family processes and can be modified, according to a new review of research authored by Jaclyn Saltzman, with the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Published recently in the journal Child Development Perspectives, the paper by Saltzman, along with co-authors Dr. Barbara Fiese, Dr. Kelly Bost, and Dr. Brent McBride, investigates how family processes, interpersonal relationships, and individual behaviors and abilities can promote healthier eating behaviors and weight outcomes.

Positive parent-child relationships can make it easier for parents to promote and practice healthy eating habits, like responsive feeding, with their children. However, other factors can also have an effect- either increasing or decreasing the child’s risk for unhealthy eating habits and obesity.

“We wanted to investigate how these other factors- things like family functioning, routines, rituals, or chaos/disorganization- may come into play by either affecting children’s appetite self-regulation directly, or indirectly by influencing the quality of the parent-child relationship,” explains Saltzman, a PhD candidate in the University of Illinois Department of Human Development and Family Studies.
The paper reviews published studies investigating how the parent-child relationship and family factors may affect responsive feeding - or feeding practices that attend and respond to the hunger and satiety cues of the child- with their children and those who engage in controlled feeding. Research shows that children of parents who practice responsive feeding are shown to have better appetite self-regulation and better appetites self-regulation is linked to reduced risk for obesity over a lifetime.

The study also converges on the idea that increasing family routines and promoting positive interactions during meal times can contribute to children’s weight-related health. “Of course, feeding practices are behaviors, and interventions, such as the Intervention Nurses Start Infants Growing on Healthy Trajectories (INSIGHT) study out of Penn State University, have shown that these behaviors are modifiable and show promise in promoting healthier appetite self-regulation,” Saltzman explains.

The published paper in Child Development Perspectives specifically focuses on children in the first two years of life. Saltzman explains this is for three key reasons. First, this time period is critical in the development of general self-regulation. Next, children’s dietary needs change substantially over those two years transitioning from a primarily milk-based diet to a solid foods diet. Finally, earlier prevention can stem off negative outcomes before they occur. The review emphasizes that by testing pathways of risk, resilience, and well-being, investigators may be able to identify modifiable risk and protective factors among at-risk families.

“I think this is especially important because family dynamics, healthy relationships, and engaging in positive routines could be either low or no-cost and can benefit other aspects of parent and child well-being, and do not involve shaming or blaming parents,” Saltzman explains. Instead, Saltzman and her co-authors urge researchers, clinicians, and families to capitalize on strengths and focus on what can be improved to promote healthy child development.

“The key takeaway from our research is that we—researchers, healthcare providers, and policymakers—have to understand that parents and children don’t live in a vacuum,” says Saltzman. “By conducting this review, we hope to have highlighted many of the complicating, dynamic factors that could strengthen or undermine family and child health. We’re hoping this will spark research and interventions promoting positive relationships and dynamics to improve children’s eating behaviors and health.”

For parents and providers hoping to promote positive family mealtimes, the Family Resiliency Center at the University of Illinois has created Mealtime Minutes, a series of
educational videos about creative strategies for managing work/life stress, sibling conflict, picky eating, and other mealtime challenges. These videos are available for free at [http://familyresiliency.illinois.edu/resources/mealtime-minutes](http://familyresiliency.illinois.edu/resources/mealtime-minutes)


Contact: Ryann Monahan | Communications Specialist for the Family Resiliency Center | University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign | ryann@illinois.edu | 217.300.6486