

(In)effective strategies and cues to promote healthy eating in toddlers: perceptions of parents, nannies and daycare assistants.

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INTRODUCTION

Healthy eating in children is important since it contributes to normal growth and development. Therefore, it is important that people who are responsible for the daily care of children (such as parents, nannies and daycare assistants) apply appropriate strategies and accommodations to facilitate healthy eating. This study explores which strategies and environmental facilities are perceived by parents, nannies and daycare assistants to promote healthy eating. We will translate the findings in a theoretical framework.

METHOD

Four focus group discussions were conducted, two with parents (n = 7 and n=7, mostly mothers), nannies (n = 9) and daycare assistants (n = 10). The discussion started with general questions and narrowed to more specific questions, tailored toward the research questions. The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. In order to identify the answers on our questions, we applied a thematic analysis using NVivo software (qualitative analyses).

RESULTS

	Parents 	Nannies 	Daycare assistants 
involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He likes to help in the kitchen. When he helped cooking, he eats it. • When they have chosen themselves, they are interested. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When they can help in the kitchen, that's a good motivation: by helping, they are tasting along the way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving them in the process of cooking really helps
encouragement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forcing him to eat did not work, and he didn't like that. Encouraging him to taste did 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step by step, always encouraging her • If you encourage them, they'll eat it. • You tell them "you eat well" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You need to encourage some children more than others: "Go ahead, you can eat it."
reward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When they know there will be dessert... • If he does not finish his plate in time, he is not allowed to go and get his brother from school (something he likes very much) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She would get a reward when she had eaten something • If she had eaten three spoons, she would get a big applause. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I remember a study in England, where they rewarded when the kids eat fruit
repeated exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I tell them it can take up to 25 times before they will like it. Then I say: "Come on, only 25 times to go" ... "only 24 ..." and that works. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't think that they don't like it when they don't eat it the first time. Keep on presenting it to them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If they don't like it at first, keep on presenting it to them, several times
modelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes, it's a bit of a competition with the older one. • It sometimes depends on the other kids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • His sister will be his 'big example'. • Its how you tell them about food yourself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Wow, this looks njammie"., even if you don't like it yourself
atmosphere and presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have special plates and cutlery, a bit playful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A quiet, peaceful atmosphere is very important • wrapping • You need to take your time, be patient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We try to make it a cosy, homelike situation

The participants perceived encouragement, reward, repeated exposure, modeling and offering a variety of healthy options as effective strategies, whereas offering alternatives and forcing were considered ineffective. The participants further stressed the importance of a quiet, cozy atmosphere in which one has patience with the children. Involvement in cooking activities and an attractive presentation of the food was also seen as facilitating healthy eating.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The discussions revealed different strategies and environmental cues to promote healthy eating that are perceived to be effective by parents, nannies and daycare assistants. We can translate this according to Learning Theory that says that (a) approach behavior will increase when a rewarding consequence follows the approach behaviour (b) modeling the new behavior by a role model is very effective to initiate new behavior (c) positive auditive and visual cues can facilitate new behavior and (d) a positive relaxing atmosphere is an anti-fear agent as it reduces stressful arousal and neo-phobia. When further research investigates which aspects have the most impact in interaction with individual differences, important data are provided for future intervention programs.