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## The Link Between Childhood & Adulthood Eating Patterns

### **Abstract**

Eating patterns are very diverse across ethnicities, ages and genders. There are many factors that contribute to eating behaviors. This qualitative research study examines the relationship between childhood and adulthood eating behaviors. Participants were asked questions about what their eating patterns were like during childhood and how it has affected current eating patterns. The results showed a strong correlation between family influences and certain eating patterns. Various factors such as rules in the home and observing older family members were common among participant answers. Rules and restrictions about food influenced food attitudes of participants. Being taught about healthy eating was an important factor in what food choices are made in adulthood. Common food practices such as eating out and cooking were seen to directly correlate to how often this is done in adulthood. Overall, childhood eating habits played a large role in developing adult eating habits.

### **Introduction**

Nutrition is an essential component of health and is relevant in every stage of life. Throughout our entire lives, our overall health status is reflected by what we put into our bodies. We may not be consciously aware of eating behaviors that started when we were just infants and how it has impacted our eating behaviors as adults. For my research paper, I chose to write about how childhood eating patterns affect adult eating patterns. I chose this topic because I am very interested in child nutrition and am curious about the impact it has in adulthood. According to Venter and Harris, "Learned food preferences are determined by two factors: exposure to a food

and modeling eating behaviors seen within social groups” (Harris & Venter, 2009). In this article, the authors discuss how these factors play a role in food preferences in adulthood. This is a vital part of food behaviors that can either have positive or negative effects. In another article the author states that, “Parents play an important role in the development of children’s food habits and preferences” (Puhl & Shwartz, 2003). This study shows that food rules established in the home by parents have a large impact on adult eating behaviors. I am interested in finding out what childhood influences have led adults to eat the way they do.

### **Literature Review**

Studies have been conducted about childhood influences on dietary preferences and how it impacts them later in life. In one study by Venter and Harris, they researched different factors that influence food choices and attitudes. They state that, “Learned food preferences are therefore determined by two factors. The first is exposure to a food; and more exposures are needed as the child gets older. The second is modeling that eating behavior and preferences that the child sees within his or her social groups” (Harris & Venter, 2009). As children are introduced to new foods, they can develop taste preferences. They found this to be at the strongest point during infancy when weaning off of breastfeeding. Children learn about eating by observing their parents and through this observation, begin to establish eating patterns. This places more importance on parents maintaining a healthy diet and serving nutritious meals to children.

In another study by Puhl and Schwartz, they researched how childhood food rules link to adult eating behaviors. “Some rules may restrict access to foods...while others encourage eating...or are designed to elicit desired behavior” (Puhl & Schwartz, 2003). The types of rules about eating are important for children when developing healthy eating behaviors. Other studies

have been shown that obese individuals report having had more rules/restrictions of food than other weight groups. One study showed that parents who tried to restrict child access to unhealthy foods, had children who wanted to eat those foods more. They found that parents who used food to control behaviors by using food as a reward or punishment, had children prone to binge eating. This was seen as negative because food was being used to make children feel better, as a reward and as punishment for bad behavior. “While food may work to reinforce behavior in the short term, it is possible that using food in this manner may play a role in establishing children’s preferences for unhealthy foods, and may simultaneously communicate mixed messages to children about the role that food should play in their lives” (Puhl & Schwartz, 2003). Children are also taught that the “bad” or restricted foods are earned by being on good behavior. Rules similar to this can be detrimental in helping children develop long-term healthy eating behaviors.

## **Methods**

To gather information about this topic, I developed 13 qualitative interview questions. The questions were based on what typical childhood eating patterns were like for participants during childhood and how they compare to their adulthood eating habits. Questions included common family practices, food preferences, eating experiences and influences on eating patterns. Four adults were interviewed, two of who were males and two females. All four varied in ethnicities. One male was Iranian, 24 years old, the other male was Italian, 22 years old, one female was Caucasian, 22 years old, and the other had a mixed European background, 22 years old. I conducted the interviews in my apartment at the kitchen table. I used a hard copy of the interview questions and took notes on participant responses. Participants were asked the same 13 questions with some variations of follow-up questions. After each interview I created field notes

that summarized the interview and included participant quotes. I then examined the field notes and made notes on the edge, known as edge coding. Edge coding drew out similarities, differences, and links between childhood and adult eating patterns. Using the edge notes, a code matrix was created. The code matrix organized participant responses into key themes and I could see the different influences and factors that played into the development of eating patterns. The data obtained was then interpreted to find links between child and adult eating behaviors.

## **Results**

This study showed that there are many influences that factors in to establishing childhood eating patterns. These in turn influence eating habits as adults.

### *Influences*

Most participants reported learning eating behaviors through observing older adults, usually their parents. When parents cooked at home for most of the meals, this resulted in the adults rarely eating out and cooking their own meals at home. Results for this study consistently show that the main parent who prepared meals was the mother. Participants reported learning about cooking from observing their mother or other older family members. Participant B recalled, "I learned a lot by watching my dad and uncle making huge meals together in the kitchen." Participant D also learned from watching her mother. "I learned to cook by helping my mom cook and bake. She would give me jobs to do and taught me how to make meals for when she was gone working." All participants reported using their mother's recipes presently and like to try making their own changes to them.

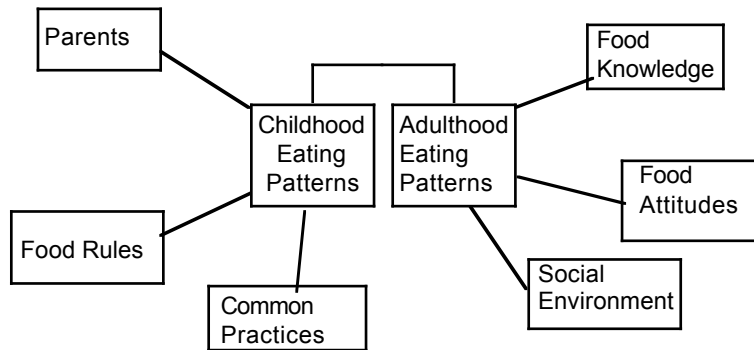
### *Rules/Restrictions*

There were variations between household rules about food and how it affects adult behaviors. For example, Participant A reported having a rule about junk food in the house, which

he still follows. “Not having junk food around is common for me. I’m not used to eating sugary foods so I don’t really like or want them.” Participant B reported having this same rule about limiting junk food in the house, but she does not implement this into her current eating habits. “My mom thinks that sugar is the devil, so we never had sweets around. Now I like to have sweets around but I still eat them in moderation.” Some participants reported having to follow rules about finishing certain foods. None of the participants were required to finish their entire plate but Participant A and Participant D had to finish the vegetables on the plate. Participant A stated that “We didn’t have to clean our plates but we had to at least finish all of the vegetables.” Participant D also remarked, “If we didn’t finish our vegetables, we weren’t allowed to watch television after dinner.” Participants A and D stated that they were required to at least try a small taste of new foods or foods they didn’t like.

### *Attitudes*

Childhood eating patterns also had a heavy influence on food attitudes in adulthood. Participant A stated that he was taught about the importance of food for an active lifestyle. “My mom taught me that food is fuel. Today I have a very active lifestyle and I know how to feed myself so that I can have enough energy and right nutrition to be able to support myself.” Participant B said that she was raised by a very health-conscious mother. On the other hand, she had a father who emphasized the importance of flavor in food. “I use what my mom taught me about healthy foods and then I add what my dad taught me about flavor so I can make healthy and delicious food now.” Participant C also has developed a healthy eating mindset due to his upbringing. “My mom always cooked lots of vegetables. I am a vegetarian now and I love vegetables.” Most participants had a healthy relationship with food and felt comfortable with current eating choices.



This chart simply organizes influences of childhood eating patterns and how it relates to adulthood eating patterns. Adulthood eating patterns are rooted in childhood and are also influenced by other factors.

## **Discussion**

The studies in the literature review and the study done for this paper pointed to heavy parental and family influences. This places a lot of importance on the role of parents to implement healthy eating habits at an early age. From the participants in this study, rules about restricting foods did not seem to have a negative effect. The rules specifically limited junk food but these foods were not used as rewards and punishments. The study done by Puhl and Schwartz indicates that when food is used as a reward and punishment, mixed messages are being sent to the child. In this case, participants who did have these rules had been taught about healthy eating and did not feel restricted from not being able to eat certain unhealthy foods. Participants who had parents that were health conscious were more likely to grow up and hold

the same values and ideals. This supports the study by Harris and Venter that states children learn food preferences through parental modeling.

Limitations of this study include the number of participants, more detailed information about participant eating habits as adults, and other childhood influences. There were not any questions about childhood influences from people outside of the family. This study also lacked the psychological component of how food is related to each individual.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the health of an individual is closely related to learned food preferences. Childhood eating behaviors are very influential in adulthood. Parents are largely responsible for eating habits of their children and should be educated about proper diets and appropriate rules. Learning about healthy eating habits as a child is very important for establishing positive long-term relationships with food and eating.

If this study were to be conducted again, it would be much more in depth. More participants would be used and more detailed questions would be asked. If participant eating patterns were tracked over a long period of time instead of having to recall memories about food, it might produce more detailed results. It could also include emotional and psychological aspects related to food behaviors to explain why participants may eat the way they do. It would also be important to include adulthood influences on eating patterns such as social environment and other factors. I would enjoy researching and learning more about this topic.

## References

- Puhl, Rebecca M., and Marlene B. Schwartz. "If You Are Good You Can Have A Cookie: How Memories of Childhood Food Rules Link to Adult Eating Behaviors." *Science Direct* 4 (2003): 283-293. *Sciencedirect.com*. Web. 17 Feb. 2012.
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