

Preschooler Feeding Practices & Beliefs

Findings from the Texas Child Feeding Study¹

Background

At the time of the Child Feeding Study, 20% of children on WIC received an overweight or at-risk for overweight risk code; 2.6% of children received an underweight risk code.²

Parental feeding practices play a role in the development of eating patterns and ultimately impact a child's weight.

- Restricting foods has been associated with increased intake of calories and child overweight.³
- Pushing a child to eat and letting children overindulge may teach children to attend to external rather than internal satiety cues, which may lead to unhealthy dietary behaviors.⁴

What did we ask?

- We asked 32 questions on preschooler feeding practices and parental beliefs about their children's weight.
- 17 questions were grouped together into subscales in the analysis. Others were analyzed separately.
- This report addresses five subscales (Table 1) and two individual items (below):
 - I am worried that my child is overweight right now.
 - I am worried that my child will become overweight.

What did we learn?

WIC parents were the most worried about their children's weight compared to low- and higher-income non-WIC respondents.

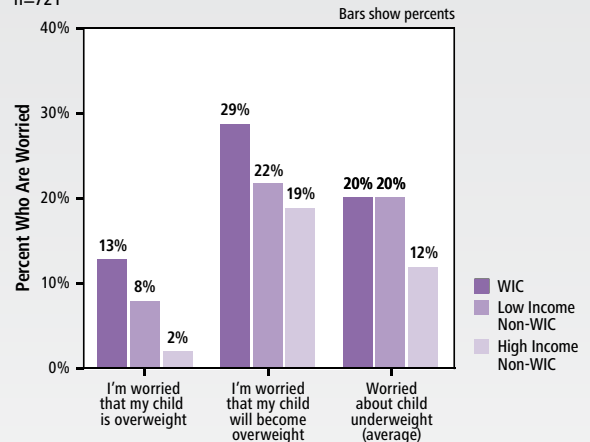
See Figure 1.

- Overall only 8% of parents in the sample were worried that their children are currently overweight. However, 23% of parents were concerned that their children would become overweight.
 - WIC parents were more worried about their children being overweight compared to low-income and higher-income non-WIC clients.
- 18% of parents were concerned about their children being underweight.
 - WIC and low-income non-WIC parents were both more concerned about their children being underweight compared to higher-income parents.
- Within the WIC subsample, Hispanics were more worried that their children are currently overweight compared to Blacks and Whites.
 - Spanish-speaking Hispanics were the most worried that their children would become overweight. This group was also most concerned about their children being underweight.

Table 1. FEEDING PRACTICES SUBSCALES

Subscale	Number of items	Sample item
Dealing with picky eating	5	How often do you have to make special foods for him/her because he/she is a picky eater?
Use food to calm child	3	How often do you give the child something to eat or drink if he/she is upset even if you think he/she is not hungry?
Push child to eat more	3	How often do you make the child finish all his/her dinner before he/she can have a dessert?
Addressing overeating	4	How often do you have to stop him/her from eating too much?
Concern about underweight	2	I am worried that my child will become underweight.

Figure 1. WHO IS CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S WEIGHT?
n=721



Continues on back.





What did we learn? (continued)

Which feeding practices and beliefs did parents in the sample report? See Figure 2.

- **Almost half (46%) of parents reported that they sometimes, often or always push their children to eat more.**
 - We found no differences among WIC, low-income non-WIC and higher-income non-WIC groups or among ethnic groups in the WIC subsample.
- **40% of parents reported that they sometimes, often or always deal with picky eaters.**
 - Higher-income parents were most likely to report that their children are picky eaters.
 - Within the WIC subsample, there were no differences in reports of picky eating based on ethnicity or language spoken at home.
- **88% of parents never or rarely use food to calm their children.**
 - We found no differences among WIC, low-income non-WIC and higher-income non-WIC groups.
 - Among WIC parents, Blacks and Spanish-speaking Hispanics were more likely to report that they use food to calm their children.
- **88% of parents never or rarely restrict food intake or were concerned about their children overeating.**
 - WIC parents were most likely to report that they restrict their children's eating out of concern for the child overeating.
 - Within the WIC subsample, there were no differences among ethnic groups.

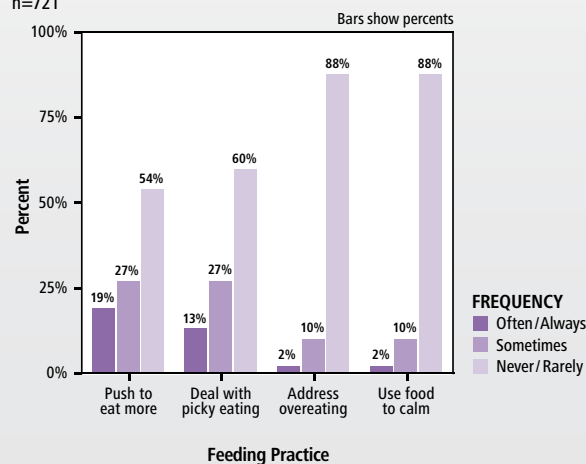
Implications for WIC Nutrition Educators

- There may be a disconnect between children's weight status and parental perceptions, with parents having a disproportionate concern about their children being underweight.
- Promote a division of responsibility⁵ in the parent-child feeding relationship where the parent decides what, when and where the child will eat and the child decides if and how much to eat.
- Encourage parents to offer their children nutritious foods and then let the children decide how much they want to eat.
- Inform parents that they may need to offer foods repeatedly before their children will eat them.
- Encourage parents to trust that their children know when they are full.
- Talk with parents about "food jags" and reassure parents that it is normal for children to go through phases of "liking" or "not liking" certain foods.

For more information about this study series, please visit:

www.dshs.state.tx.us/wichd/nut/riskreport-nut.shtm

Figure 2.
WHICH FEEDING PRACTICES AND BELIEFS DID PARENTS REPORT?
n=721



¹ Results from the Texas Child Feeding Study, conducted by the University of Texas at Austin Nutrition Education Team, in conjunction with the Texas Dept. of State Health Services. Seven hundred and twenty-one (721) Texas households were surveyed. Households had at least one child between the ages of 1 and 5 years and were grouped into the following categories WIC households (n=241); low-income, non-WIC households (n=274); middle to high-income households (n=203). For more information on the study, contact Shellie Shores at: shellie.shores@dshs.state.tx.us.

² Source: <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/wichd/nut/riskreport07StQuarter-nut.shtm>

³ Faith MS, et al. Parent-child feeding strategies and their relationships to child eating and weight status. *Obes Res* 2004 November;12(11):1711-22.

⁴ Drucker RR, et al. Can mothers influence their child's eating behavior? *J Dev Behav Pediatr* 1999 April; 20(2):88-92.

⁵ Source: <http://www.ellynsatter.com/showArticle.jsp?id=3998§ion=397>