

REVIEW ARTICLE

Mothers' perspectives on toddlers' picky eating behaviour: A systematic review

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Abstract

Eating habits are formed from an early age through experiences gained from contact with food and observation of the environment. This research aims to determine mothers' views regarding toddlers' picky eating behavior. Because there is very little research on this, it is necessary to understand mothers' perspectives in making decisions about dealing with picky eating behavior in toddlers. A systematic search of relevant databases was conducted based on four electronic databases (Scopus, ScienceDirect, Pubmed, and Springer Link) using predefined search terms in the preceding 10 years. A total of 361 articles were obtained from the data sources, while 41 studies met the study criteria. Articles were included if they were of good quality and focused primarily on family parenting, maternal perspectives, feeding practices, and the impact of picky eating. The results of this review show the influence of parents' food serving practices and children's eating habits. Mothers who have bad eating habits tend to have picky eater children. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2024; 28 [10s]: 499-507*).

Keywords: Eating habits; eating behaviour; fussy; mother's view; picky eater

Résumé

Les habitudes alimentaires se forment dès le plus jeune âge grâce aux expériences acquises au contact de la nourriture et à l'observation de l'environnement. Cette étude vise à déterminer le point de vue des mères sur le comportement alimentaire difficile des tout-petits. Comme il existe très peu de recherches sur ce sujet, il est nécessaire de comprendre le point de vue des mères lorsqu'elles prennent des décisions sur la façon de gérer le comportement alimentaire difficile des tout-petits. Une recherche systématique de bases de données pertinentes a été effectuée sur quatre bases de données électroniques (Scopus, ScienceDirect, Pubmed et Springer Link) à l'aide de termes de recherche prédéfinis au cours des dix dernières années. Au total, 361 articles ont été obtenus à partir des sources de données, tandis que 41 études répondaient aux critères de l'étude. Les articles ont été retenus s'ils étaient de bonne qualité et s'ils portaient principalement sur la parentalité familiale, les perspectives maternelles, les pratiques alimentaires et l'impact de l'alimentation capricieuse. Les résultats de cette analyse montrent l'influence des pratiques alimentaires des parents sur les habitudes alimentaires des enfants. Les mères qui ont de mauvaises habitudes alimentaires ont tendance à avoir des enfants difficiles. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2024; 28 [10s]: 499-507*).

Mots-clés: Habitudes alimentaires; comportement alimentaire; difficile; point de vue de la mère; mangeur difficile

Introduction

The transition period from infant to childhood can result in problems with children's eating patterns¹. Maternal eating habits and feeding strategies are the dominant factors that determine children's eating behaviour and food choices². Children's eating habits are not part of everyday life and are therefore ignored. The presence of eating behaviour problems in children affects their future nutritional status and health. The patterns of eating behaviours that

featured during infancy can continue into adolescence and even into adulthood³. Mothers who have experienced eating disorders have limited eating habits, have less emotional attachment to their child, and have more health problems, especially depression and anxiety⁴. Eating habits are formed from an early age through experience gained from contact with food and observation of the environment. The approach and promotion of parents to consume certain foods is an important part of overcoming resistance to new foods. Acceptance

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of new foods involves complex interactions between innate responses that may constitute barriers to acceptance of a particular food, and many factors such as cultural norms and parental style/pressure⁵.

One of the causes of disrupted eating and feeding patterns is picky eating⁶. Picky eating is the consumption of food with inadequate variety or quantity through the rejection of several familiar and unfamiliar foods that are severe enough to disrupt daily routines and parent-child relationships⁷. Picky eating behaviour is associated with increased stress when eating, and less time eating with family, and is considered a barrier to improving children's eating patterns⁸. Picky eating occurs because mothers don't introduce a variety of foods to their children. If this continues for a relatively long time, it can result in children lacking energy and nutrients as well as growth disorders which can endanger health⁹. The prevalence of picky eating in the world varies. The age range for picky eating is from 2 to 6 years old, where the incidence of picky eaters reaches its peak¹⁰. Research in Singapore shows the highest proportion of picky eaters are aged 3-5 years at 29.9%¹¹. The prevalence of picky eating in children aged 3-5 years in Taiwan was 72%¹². Mothers of picky eating children have an important role in their child's upbringing, but little is known about their views regarding the support they seek and receive to fulfil this role¹³.

To get toddlers to eat properly, mothers use techniques with forceful feeding practices, such as pressure, rewards, and restrictions. Emotional feeding is using food to soothe, distract, or change behaviour. Although well-intentioned and insensitive feeding practices that prioritize parents over children are ineffective, early feeding interventions are needed to help parents understand their child's normal eating behaviour and encourage healthy eating methods¹⁴. Research shows that parents' eating habits predict children's eating habits. Parenting style, eating behaviour patterns, frequency of family meals, and food exposure, all of which are related to children's eating behaviour such as fruit and vegetable consumption, are the mechanisms underlying this influence. Eating as a family and having good family relationships is very important for children's healthy eating habits. More frequent

family meals are associated with increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, and essential nutrients such as fibre, calcium, and iron, as well as supporting overall mental health¹⁵.

Reviewing additional literature on breastfeeding is also an important key to avoiding picky eating behaviour: the "when," "what," and "how." "When" refers to when solid foods should be started and when different types of foods should be started. What is meant by "what" includes the balance of food and nutrients consumed as well as the sensory properties of food (taste and texture). The interaction between parents and children is very important in determining "how" to regulate children's eating habits and mother's consumption. Mothers act as providers, role models, and monitors of children's nutritional intake¹⁶. Early detection and intervention are key to supporting mothers, as research shows that mothers of picky toddlers are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety⁶.

Previous systematic reviews of picky eaters have been limited by varying definitions of picky eating with varying prevalence and examination of the internal and external impact of picky eaters on the family. The objective of this study was to determine mothers' opinions regarding picky eating behaviours in toddlers, including the support they need to provide non-selective feeding choices for their children.

Methods

A systematic review is a form of research that summarizes several previous studies on a particular issue. On the evidence pyramid, systematic reviews are considered to provide the greatest level of evidence. The systematic review was chosen because of the emerging characteristics of picky eaters, a review of the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of picky eaters that can impact families, and still ensures a rigorous and transparent mapping method¹⁷. This systematic review follows the methodological framework established by Askey and O'Malley¹⁸, including the Population, Intervention, Context (PICO) search strategy. The review follows a five-step process in conducting a scoping review which is as follows: 1) Identifying

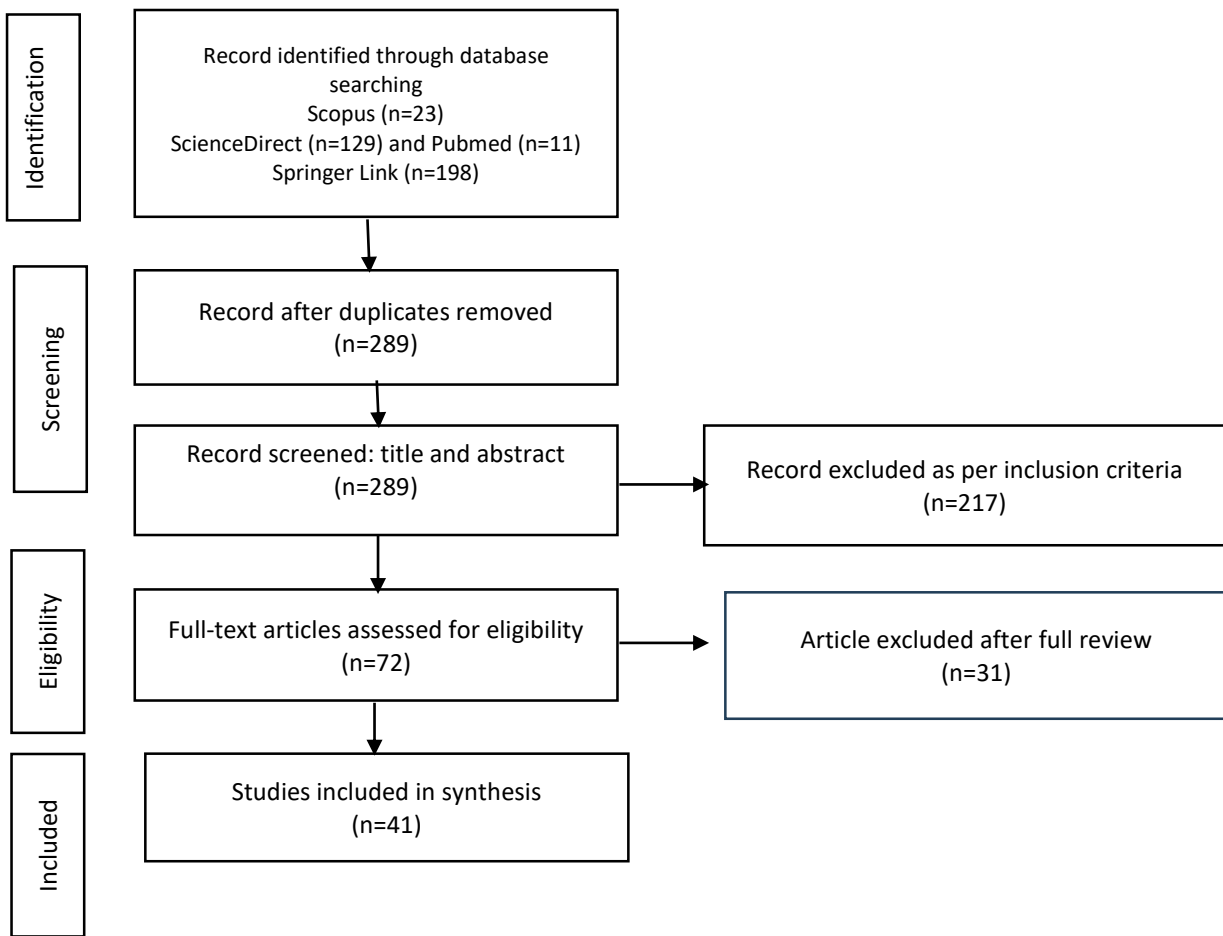


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

research questions, 2) identifying relevant studies, 3) Selection of studies, 4) Map data, organize, summarize, and 5) report results¹⁹.

Stage 1: Identify the research questions

Research Questions Given the complexity of the topic, four research questions were identified for this review:

- a. What causes toddlers’ picky eating behaviour?
- b. How does a picky eater behave from the mothers perspective?
- c. What methods are used to identify children who are picky eaters?

- d. What impact does picky eating have on others around them? (for example, support from people around you)

Stage 2: Identifying relevant studies

We designed a search strategy to identify all articles on mothers' perspectives on toddlers’ picky eating. The review team carried out the search process from August 2023 to October 2023, using the following key phrases: (picky OR fuss* OR faddy OR choosy) AND (eat* OR feed* OR drink* OR self-feed*) AND (Child* OR paediat* OR pediat* OR todd*) AND perspective AND behaviour. The search used

four databases - Scopus, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and Springer Link. Inclusion criteria were all articles written in English and relevant to the phenomenon published between 2013 and 2023 (10-year period). The reference lists of the relevant literature obtained were also analysed to identify any relevant literature not included in the initial search.

Stage 3: Study selection

The research team tabulated search results, removed duplicates, and applied criteria. Inclusion criteria are as follows:

- a. The identified literature was all articles written in English and relevant to the phenomenon published between 2013 and 2023 (10-year period).
- b. Literature with a focus and definition of picky eater in children or other similar meanings includes picky eating/selective eating or fussy eating;
- c. Maternal perspectives on behaviour change
- d. Interventions for picky eating behaviour focus on what impacts the behaviour.

Additionally, once abstract screening was complete, full-text articles were screened and saved for charting. Any differences were discussed and reviewed using inclusion criteria to resolve these. The article selection process is summarized using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) diagram presented in Figure 1.

The search yielded a total of 361 papers. After removal of duplicates, 289 records remained. After screening titles and abstracts the total was 41 papers.

Stage 4: Charting the data

In this literature review, full texts were retrieved and read to ensure their relevance to the research questions. Data interpretation followed a narrative and descriptive approach. Researchers analysed each paper independently and recorded details including author, year of publication, type/methodology of research, aims/objectives of the research, study population, and study size,

definition of picky eater, child characteristics and behaviours associated with picky eaters, mother's perspective on picky eaters, and an assessment tool used to identify picky eaters. This process helps ensure that all relevant information extracted from selected articles has been synthesized and interpreted.

Stage 5: Collating, summarising and reporting results

The research process includes data collection followed by analysis and summary of the results. In this process, the author carries out an analysis and the evidence will be mapped using content analysis according to the resulting title, which is cross-checked for its relationship to the research question.

Results

Causes of toddlers' picky eating behaviour

All relevant sample articles reported that picky eating behaviour is associated with inadequate and less varied food intakes, increased stress during meals, less family meal time, and is considered a barrier to improving children's diets. The level of children's familiarity with taste, timing, and ways of introducing new products and parents' attitudes towards food were also identified. These behaviours are critical to helping families get more nutritious and enjoyable meals. This can also shape children's eating habits in the future^{8,20,21}.

Picky eating behaviour from mother's perspectives

Various articles described different maternal perspectives on meal-serving practices and eating habits^{22- 29}. The mother's efforts to influence the child's eating choices as well as the mother's unrealistic expectations regarding the toddler's food intake can make the mother worry, increasing feelings of discomfort and at the same time increasing the toddler's resistance. Parental feeding practices include a combination of food provision and socialization (teaching proper etiquette and

Table 1: Assessment tool used to measure or identify intrinsic characteristics of picky eater behavior

Assessment Name	Description
Children's Eating Behaviour Questionnaire (CEBQ)	The three questions related to picky eating to consider are: My child leaves food on his plate, after he finishes eating. My child can't eat anything if he has already eaten. At first my child refuses new food ^{30,31}
Children's Eating Behaviour Questionnaire (CEBQ)	A 35-item assessment is used to measure children's eating behaviour. This item has eight subscales: responsiveness to food; food fussiness (as above); emotional overeating; enjoyment of food; desire to drink; emotional undereating; satiety responsiveness; slowness in eating. Parents answered each question on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always) ^{32,33}
One study specific question	'is your child a picky eater' or 'is your child picky about food' ³⁰

eating habits) and are used to regulate the child's food intake (i.e. what to eat, when, and how much). Specific measures that shape maternal feeding practices are used to classify overall parenting style. Specifically, maternal feeding practices were classified based on the type of maternal control over feeding interactions. The use of targeted feeding methods may stem from parental concerns regarding their child's eating patterns or a lack of knowledge about age-appropriate eating behaviors^{22,23}.

Methods used to identify children who are picky eaters

The tool most often used to identify picky eater behaviour is the Children's Eating Behaviour Questionnaire (CEBQ) subscale which is presented in the following table. Table 1

The impact of picky eating on others

Picky eating behaviour has an impact on the people around the child, especially the mother. The most frequently reported impact is the mother's choice to prepare alternative food with special presentations for children who are picky eaters. Negative impacts on mothers' meal times include feelings of disappointment and frustration²³, concerns about leftover food and the toddler's weight³³.

Giving gifts for eating is a factor that can increase picky eater behaviour. This has been reported as a response to the influence of cause and

effect. These results indicate that picky eaters can hurt other people in the surrounding environment³⁴.

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory observation was to identify the causes of toddler picky eating behaviour from mothers' perspectives, the methods used to identify picky eating children, and the impact of picky eating on other persons.

The development of picky eating can be influenced by several factors such as feeding pressure, personality factors, and parenting patterns, including parental control and social influence, as well as specific factors, such as not being able to provide exclusive breastfeeding, giving complementary foods before the age of 6 months and late complementary feeding. Healthy maternal eating behaviour is associated with children who are less picky about food. Although some studies report higher energy intake or more energy-dense foods, such as salty and sugary snacks, in picky eaters, most report that picky eaters tend to lead to poor eating patterns, reduced overall food consumption, and nutritional distortion due to lack of variety^{20,35}.

Some research suggests parents can adjust certain practices to accommodate their child's eating behaviour. Interventions that support appropriate feeding should be designed to provide input in parents' feeding decisions²⁵.

Maternal behaviour can influence children's eating practices in various ways. In families, the

availability and accessibility of food in the home as well as parental food preferences are related to children's eating behaviour and are very important factors in the quality of meal preparation²⁸. Practical approaches such as gardening and cooking can encourage more vegetable consumption and may have a greater impact. Providing easily accessible and free fruits and vegetables to toddlers has been shown to have a positive impact on eating behaviour in the long term³⁶.

The Children's Eating Behavior Questionnaire (CEBQ) is generally considered one of the most comprehensive tools for assessing children's eating behavior. The most commonly used tool to determine the presence of picky eaters is CEBQ. This assessment tool is designed to collect information on eight different eating style components for toddlers. For this reason, mothers need to understand what a picky eater is and how the picky eater itself is related to a child's growth and development. This assessment tool is designed to collect information on eight different eating style items for toddlers. This requires mothers to understand what a picky eater is or how a picky eater itself is related to their development^{30,32}.

A review critically summarized previous research on parental eating habits and concluded that parents have a very important role in shaping children's eating habits. Therefore, parents are encouraged to model behavioural such as providing healthy foods, modeling healthy eating patterns, and increasing healthy eating recommendations. The results of previous studies show that mothers tend not to force their children to eat, and this shows that children tend not to be picky about food. On the other hand, if parents severely restrict their children's food intake in the hope that children will choose healthy alternatives, children will crave those foods even more. Therefore, various studies discourage restraint, as it can create a negative eating environment in the family and turn children into picky eating. Evidence suggests that active engagement and modeling practices are more effective in promoting positive food-related behavioural, especially among toddlers. Therefore, longitudinal studies are needed to clarify the causal relationship between parental eating habits and

children's eating habits. Researching additional strategies to combat picky eating habits can help build on existing ones. Such a comprehensive approach not only improves the generalizability of research findings, but also contributes to the development of tailored educational policies, and programs that promote positive co-parenting, parenting strategies, and picky eating habits in children^{38,39,40}.

There is growing evidence that parents strongly influence children's eating habits, so parental feeding behavioural should receive more attention in policies to prevent picky eating in children. It is applicable that parents receive information and guidance on what and how to feed toddlers, and that these promotional strategies specifically address parents' unhealthy eating habits and ensure toddlers learn from their parents' diets. We recommend that parents help their children get better at improving their eating habits so that they can do the same. Establishing healthy eating habits early on and creating a supportive eating environment is critical to preventing picky eaters and ensuring long-term health benefits. The results of this study will help health professionals, caregivers, and researchers develop more effective strategies to promote children's holistic development. Future researchers can build on the results of the study among parents from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds^{38,39}.

Conclusion

This study aims to determine mothers' perspectives on toddlers' picky eater behavioural. The review showed the importance of mealtimes, the influence of parents' food serving practices, and children's eating habits. It was found that responses to picky eating, such as pressure to eat, were associated with an increased likelihood of becoming a picky eater. The impact of picky eaters on those around them is not only limited to food preparation time, but also increases stress and potentially causes problems in the mother-child relationship. Many factors, including differences in sensory perception and emotional judgment, categorization, anxiety, disgust, and problematic parent-child interactions

resulting from picky eater behavioural, appear to play a role in toddler picky eater behavioural, thus providing a useful starting point for further research. Toddlerhood is an optimal time to learn healthy eating habits, a better understanding of picky eater behavioural is not only relevant to toddlers and parents today but can also help toddlers stay healthy and achieve better health later in life. Understanding picky eater behavioural in toddlers can be the key to creating healthier families.

Contribution of authors

Oktovina Rizky Indrasari, Shrimarti Rukmini Devy, and Dewi Retno Suminar, all contributed to data collection and analysis, data charting, and data interpretation, as well as preparation and review of the manuscript.

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