



Emmett, P., Hayes, N., & Taylor, C. (2017). *Antecedents of worry in mothers of children who are choosy at 15 months of age*. Abstract from 10th World Congress on Developmental Origins of Health and Disease, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Peer reviewed version

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Antecedents of worry in mothers of children who are choosy at 15 months of age.

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Background: Picky eating is a common problem in childhood which is sometimes associated with low intake of some important dietary components and often concerns parents. The peak age for picky eating is at around 3 years, but parents can worry about it well before that age. In a previous analysis in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) 56% of children were described as choosy with food at 15 months, and these children were three times more likely than non-choosy children to be picky eaters at 3 years. Many mothers expressed worry about their child's choosiness at 15 months and this was associated with an enhanced likelihood of the child being picky at 3 years. The aim of the present study was to identify areas where support to parents may be effective in reducing the level of maternal worry and subsequent picky eating behaviour in children.

Methods: Children who were choosy with food (n=3210) were identified from a questionnaire completed by the caregiver (usually the mother) when the child was 15 months old. The mother was asked if this behaviour worried her *greatly*, *a bit* or *not at all*. Questionnaires during pregnancy and the early life of the child covered many aspects of feeding the child as well as symptoms of anxiety and depression in the mother.

Results: At 15 months of age, 5.0% of mothers of children who were choosy with food were *greatly* worried about this behaviour, with 27.1% *a bit* worried. The mother was twice as likely to be worried if the child was first-born compared with third-born or more (Table 1). The worry of the mother at 15 months postpartum was associated with the child refusing solid foods (mother 92% more likely to be *greatly* worried) and being difficult to feed (53% more likely) by 6 months of age. There were also associations between worry and feeding practices. If the child was introduced to lumpy foods from 10 months onwards compared with between 6 and 9 months the mother was 2.3 times more likely to indicate that she was *greatly* worried about the child's choosiness at 15 months. Mothers who had fed vegetables to their child daily at 6 months were 49% less likely to be *greatly* worried at 15 months. There was no association between the presence of maternal depressive or anxiety symptoms (during pregnancy or the first year of the child's life) and worry about the child's choosiness at 15 months postpartum.

Conclusion: The strongest associations with maternal worry about child choosiness at 15 months were the child being first-born, and the child refusing solid foods and the mother finding the child difficult to feed in the first 6 months. Maternal worry was associated with the later introduction of lumpy/chewy foods and less vegetables being fed to the child. Supporting parents, particularly of first-born children, during the stage at which solid foods are introduced is likely to be beneficial in reducing maternal worry and may avert picky eating behaviour during later childhood.