

# **Eating Competence in Adulthood may be Related to Childhood Experiences**

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this study was to try to find similarities between childhood experiences with food and how, as adults, those childhood experiences have shaped the way people feel about food, cooking, and what they eat. Special importance was placed on how they view food today as an adult. This includes feelings such as control around food, if they enjoy cooking, if they enjoy eating, etc. It was then explored what may have shaped these feelings; what their dinners were like when they were younger, if their parents force them to eat before leaving the dinner table, etc. Interviews were individually conducted with four different female participants, who were all college students majoring in different subjects. Their ages ranged from 20-26. None of them have had a history of eating disorders or other known illness that would affect the outcome of this study. Results indicated that the women whose parents included them in the food preparation process and whose parents did not force them to eat food when they were younger have much more positive experiences with food and eating. They do not worry about what or how much they are eating. Those who had less pleasant food and eating experiences growing up have a harder time accepting food and being happy with what they are eating. In conclusion, this study shows that the methods parents use to get their children to eat will shape their eating habits for the rest of their lives.

## **Introduction and Literature Review**

In many nutrition classes that are taken in college, it is taught that the way children grow up around food, and the different experiences they have with food influence the way they treat food and eating once they are adults. Their attitudes towards

food could stem back to when they were children and their father would tell them they were eating too much, or when their mother would tell them they had to finish everything that was on their plate before they left the dinner table. On the other hand, they may not have issues with food and this could be attributed to their parents not criticizing them for eating too much/little. I wanted to discover possible reasons why issues with food and eating develop. To do this I had to look back at their childhood experiences.

Articles were used as a research aid for this topic. The first article I found, titled “A Qualitative Exploration of Relationship and Attachment Themes in Families with an Eating Disorder,” discusses the similar themes between girls suffering from anorexia. Although my research was not on anorexia and eating disorders, it helped to show how a girl’s experiences growing up shape the way she views her entire life, including her eating patterns. The article talks about things that may instigate the eating disorder, “anorexia nervosa originates from an interaction with a mother who...imposes her own will on the child by constantly interfering, suggesting and criticizing without regard to the child’s signals”( Dallos et al, 2008, page 306). This is a great example of how a mother’s comment can scar a little girl for life. The article found five different themes between their participants. These were false or fragile reality, troubled relationships: corrective scripts, arguments and triangulation, lack of comfort and receiving and giving of care, and negative relationship with and memories of food. All of these themes were noticed in the different families with a child with an eating disorder. It was not just the exact words that were said to the child, but also the way the parents and siblings acted towards the child (Dallos et al, 2008, page 310). This was one of the main things I wanted to find out

in my study, to see if the way parents acted about food would affect the child's views on food and eating. The non-verbal cues that the parents could have used that would affect the child's eating could be, "tears, hesitation, laughter, and contradictory statements" (Dallos et al, 2008, page 310). This article helped me understand the subject a little better.

The second article was called, "Understanding women's experiences of developing an eating disorder and recovering: a life history approach." This article was very different from the first one. It looked more at the eating disorder and whether or not the patient recovers from it. They discussed a few themes between the women that may have helped cause the disorder. These were, "Lack of control, a sense of not belonging, using food to reconnect, and parental expectations" (Patching and Lawler, 2009, page 14). The theme that is similar in both articles is the parent's expectations. Parents play such a huge role in a woman's life. If they are expecting their daughter to be thin and she isn't, the daughter can sense from the non-verbal cues that they are a disappointment to their family. Another interesting concept that was found in this article is that the women develop the eating disorders because they like the feeling of control. It is mentioned that, "Initially, the adolescent believed a sense of control, afforded them by their eating disorder, would assist them in developing their sense of self" (Patching and Lawler, 2009, page 15). This article was interesting in revealing how women overcome their eating disorders, but not with why they got them.

## **Methods**

The study population included four female students that were ages 20, 21, 23, and 26, none of whom have had an eating disorder prior to this study. These participants were chosen because they all come from different backgrounds, and were able to provide information regarding this study. The women all came from different majors including; economics, criminal justice, exercise physiology, and animal science. Each of the participants was given an in-depth qualitative interview that was performed at a private location so as to keep the confidentiality of the participants. Each interview consisted of nine questions (Table 1) which pertained to the participant's experiences with food and eating attitudes growing up and also how they view food and eating now in adulthood.

**Table 1**

1. Growing up, what were your dinners like?
2. Who decided what was going to be eaten for meals, and how did they decide?
3. Were you ever forced to eat all of your food before leaving the dinner table?
4. How were you involved in the food preparation process?
5. Are there foods that you avoid eating because you feel out of control around them?
6. Do you enjoy eating?
7. Have you ever tried a diet? If so, what type and for how long?
8. Do you prefer cooking, or going out to eat?
9. How would you describe your eating habits?

The first interview was conducted with a 21 year old economics student. The interview took place at her house and lasted about 20 minutes. She seemed to feel

comfortable and relaxed about the interview. She mentioned that her parents never forced her to eat food; they always let her eat when she felt like it and that she has never been a fan of dieting. All of her friends always tell her about the new diets they are on, but she doesn't think dieting sounds like fun, so she eats what she wants. She also enjoys cooking dinners for her and her two roommates.

The second interview conducted was with participant 2. She was a 26 year old student majoring in Criminal Justice. The interview took place in an empty room on campus. She mentioned that when she was younger her dad would always criticize her for snacking, and told her she ate too much. She also was told to eat all of her food before leaving the dinner table. At the present moment she is on a diet where she restricts her calories daily.

The third interview conducted was with participant 3 at her house. She is a 20 year old student majoring in exercise physiology. She talked about how her mom was constantly exercising when she was younger, and was always eating "healthy" foods. She also remembered her sister going off to college and gaining a lot of weight, so she was always scared of that happening. She also doesn't like to eat meat because she thinks it is "bad" for you.

The fourth interview that took place was with participant 4 at her house. She is a 23 year old student majoring in animal science. She grew up raising pigs, and eating a lot of meat products. She likes to drink whole milk because it tastes better. She is dissatisfied with her weight, but doesn't want to diet. Her roommates have told her that if she wants

to lose weight she needs to stop drinking whole milk and take the yolks out of her eggs, but she doesn't want to do that. She does not diet and doesn't have any intention to.

After all of the interviews were conducted, the data needed to be analyzed. I looked over my field notes from the interviews to see what the similarities and differences were between all of the participants and I compared them to see if I could find any underlying themes. I looked at how they grew up, how their parents treated their eating patterns, and how they are doing today as an adult with their eating habits.

### **Results and Discussion**

From the interviews that were carried out, there a few similarities and differences that were noticed.

#### ***Dieting***

Some of the women that were interviewed had history of dieting. They may not have been on a structured diet, but in some way they were restricting themselves from eating how they wanted. The first woman that I came across that was a dieter was participant 2. She grew up with parents that would always tell her when she was younger that she had to finish all of her food before she could leave the dinner table. She mentioned, "It's funny because when I was little I had to eat all of my food, once I got older they would tell me I ate too much food" (Participant 2). As she started to get into her teenage years, if she would be in the kitchen snacking on food, her father would say things like, "Do you really need to eat that? You know that's not good for you? You're going to start gaining weight."(Dad of Participant 2). She never liked it when he said this, but felt that he was just looking out for her in the long run. Today, she is constantly

counting the calories that go in her mouth. She claims that she is just being aware of how much she is eating and not truly restricting herself, yet if she thinks that she has eaten too many calories in the day then she will just eat something “healthy.”

The next participant that was considered a dieter was participant 3. She mentioned that as she was growing up, her mother was always running on the treadmill and lifting weights while watching TV. The mother was also always on the latest fad diet. The daughter never had issues with food growing up, but when she was 16 her sister went off to college and gained the freshman 15. She said, “I did not want to get fat like my sister did, so I started working out a lot more and I cut out all of the bad foods I used to eat” (Participant 3). She has been like this since she was about 16 and has not been able to eat meat and animal products since because she believes that they make you fat.

The two participants that did not report patterns of dieting were participants 1 and 4. They both had parents that allowed them to eat when they wanted to, and did not criticize them for eating a certain type of food. They both have very positive eating attitudes.

### ***Cooking***

Another theme that was noticed is the women’s attitudes towards cooking. Participant 1 enjoys cooking today, she said she is “always looking for new, fun recipes to make and try out with all of her roommates” (Participant 1). Growing up she always helped her mom go grocery shopping and watched her make dinners at night. She is very interested in trying new and exciting foods.

The next participant that was interested in cooking was participant 4. She grew up on a ranch raising pigs and her uncle owned a dairy. Her parents would always kill their own meat and get their milk from the uncle's cows. She learned early on in life where her meat came from and how to prepare it. Today she lives in a sorority house that has a personal grocery shopper. The shopper always buys ground turkey and turkey bacon, but she won't eat it because she believes "ground beef tastes better and bacon is not a cut of turkey! (She) prefers the real meat, not the low-fat turkey stuff" (Participant 4). Since she won't eat the turkey meat, she is always cooking pork chops, and steak. She loves to cook the "real" meat for all of her friends to try to get them to enjoy meat more.

Participants 2 and 3 did not mention that they enjoy cooking. Instead they discussed how they prefer healthy, convenience items. They both also believe that if they cook, then they will eat too much.

### ***Indications from the study***

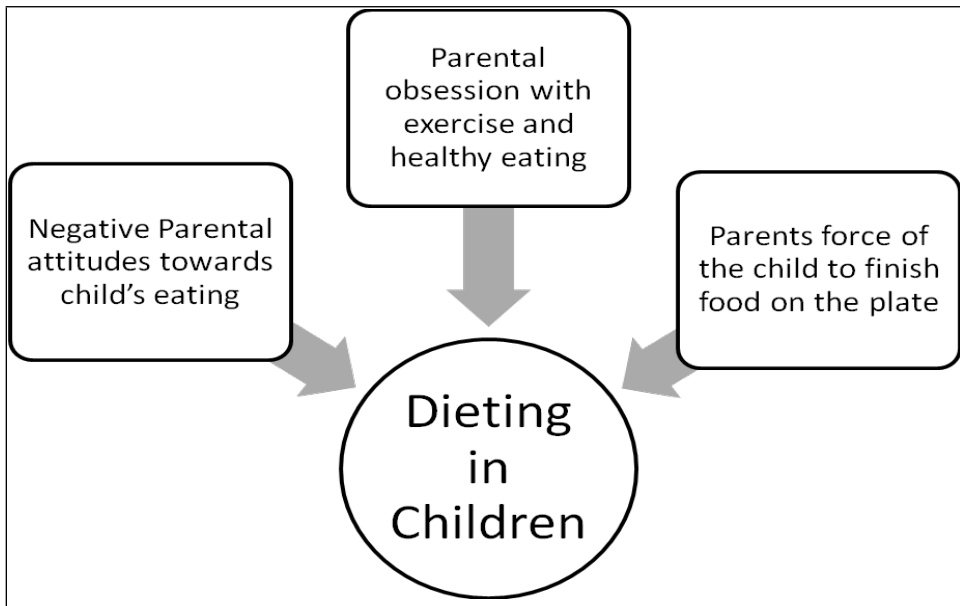
The study results show that there are two main themes between the participants; people who diet and people who cook. The dieters both seem to have had issues with their parents and dieting (Figure 1). Participant 2 grew up with her father telling her she eats too much, this may have lead to her watching everything she eats. She most likely felt that she has to watch what she eats otherwise she will not win her father's approval. The second participant that was a dieter grew up watching her mother diet and workout excessively. This set her up to be a lifelong dieter; it has been engrained in her head that dieting is the norm because her mother did it all of those years.

The second theme that was looked at was cooking (Figure 2). The participants

that love to cook are the ones who had positive experiences with food growing up.

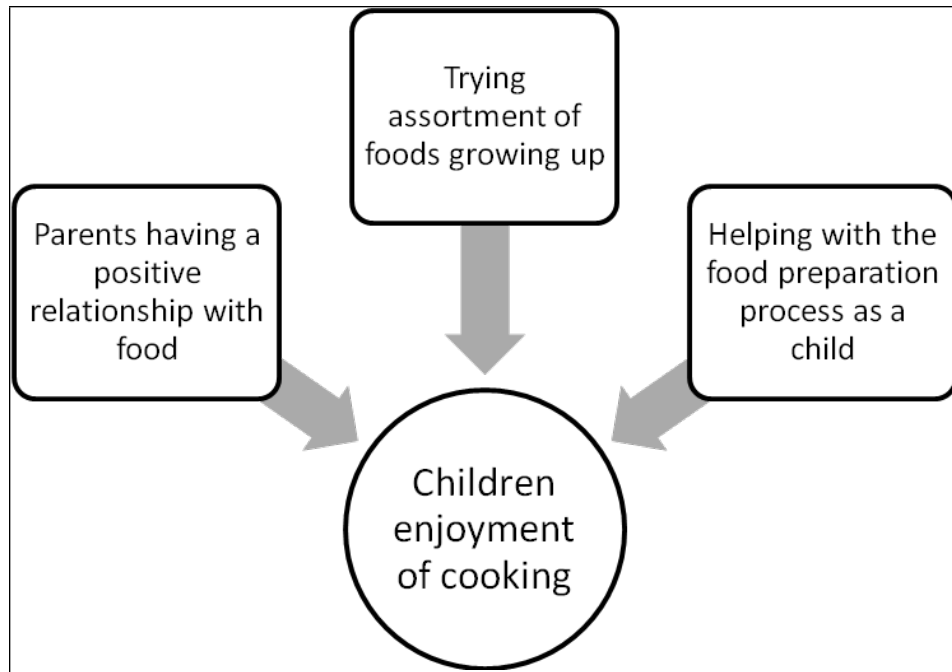
Participant 1 enjoys cooking because her parents embraced cooking and eating. They did not force her to eat her food and they always welcomed her in the food preparation process. Participant 4 enjoys cooking because she knows where her food comes from and enjoys preparing it for others to try.

**Figure 1**



**Trends that lead to Dieting**

**Figure 2**



**Trends that lead to enjoyment of cooking**

***Compare and Contrast with Literature***

After discovering my findings from the interviews, I compared them to the findings from the literature. The themes were quite different, but that is most likely because the literature was looking at people with eating disorders and this study was just looking at peoples eating habits. The underlying causes of why the participants were on diets were similar to the themes discussed in the first study. One of the themes from the first study, “A Qualitative Exploration of Relationship and Attachment Themes in

Families with an Eating Disorder,” was “Negative relationship with and memories of food” (Dallos et al, 2008, page 306). This was similar to the study performed because the dieters had a negative relationship with food because of their experiences growing up around dieting mothers and critical fathers.

The second study, “Understanding Women’s Experiences of Developing an Eating Disorder and Recovering: A Life History Approach,” had a theme that helped explain why some participants enjoyed cooking and had positive relationships with food. It discussed how people developed eating disorders because of lack of control of their lives. In this study the participants that enjoyed cooking seemed to feel in control of their lives, so they did not need to have negative attitudes towards food.

### ***Limitations of the study***

There were a few limitations of the study. The participants were not asked how they felt about their body or their weight. This may have helped to see who was dieting and if the people with a negative body image had a higher risk of dieting. Another limitation was that it is hard to remember everything that happened as a child, if it had been possible, this study may have been more effective if it had been a process. Possibly seeing the participant a few times and trying to get more information out of them would have been more helpful because it is not easy to think of every experience that you had growing up and it is difficult to relay all of that information in one session. I feel that the limitations did not affect the study too drastically though.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In this study, it has become apparent that the way a child grows up around food greatly influences how they will view food and eating as an adult. Parents that tell their children what to eat and when to eat are setting their child up for a disastrous life of dieting and being dissatisfied with their food and eating choices. On the other hand, parents that allow their children to listen to their hunger and fullness cues and include them on the food preparation process are helping their children to become competent eaters.

If this study was to be performed again, there are a few recommendations I would make. I would recommend that more time be spent with the participants and try to get to the center of their feelings towards food. I would also recommend that more participants are used to see if there are more themes between them. The criteria for my participants would be women ranging in age from 20-40 years old, without any chronic diseases because chronic disease can cause other implications that are not related to childhood experiences.

## References

- Dallos, Rudi, and Sarah Denford. "A Qualitative Exploration of Relationship and Attachment Themes in Families with an Eating Disorder." *Clinical Child Psychology & Psychiatry* 13.2 (2008): 305-22. *Sagepub.com*. Web. 1 Apr. 2010. <<http://ccp.sagepub.com>>.
- Patching, Joanna, and Jocelyn Lawler. "Understanding Women's Experiences of Developing an Eating Disorder and Recovering: a Life-history Approach." *Nursing Inquiry* 16.1 (2009): 10-21. Web. 1 Apr. 2010.

## Participant 1

1. Growing up, what were your dinners like?
  - She always sat down with her family, which consisted of her mom, dad, and brother. They had dinner in the evening and would discuss what happened during the day, talk about what was going on during the week, etc. Her mom always did the cooking. On special occasions they would go out to eat.
2. Who decided what was going to be eaten for meals, and how did they decide?
  - Her mom would just make something, and they would eat it. Sometimes her mom would ask what they wanted and if they could agree on something, then she would make that.
3. Were you ever forced to eat all of your food before leaving the dinner table?
  - No, her parents let her eat however much she wanted.
4. How were you involved in the food preparation process?
  - As she got older, she would help her mom cut up food, and maybe toss a salad. In high school she took a cooking class and after that she would make dinners every once in a while instead of her mom.
5. Are there foods that you avoid eating because you feel out of control around them? What are they?
  - No, she likes eating everything and doesn't restrict food from herself.
6. Do you enjoy eating?
  - Yes, she is always trying new foods, and adding more spices to her food. She also is always looking for more recipes online to try out.
7. Have you ever tried a diet? If so, what type and for how long?
  - No, she never saw the point.
8. Do you prefer to cook, or go out to eat?
  - She loves to cook; she is always having dinners for her and all of her roommates at their apartment. She says it's nice to go out to dinner when she has had a long day, but otherwise she wants to cook.
9. How would you describe your eating habits?
  - She says she thinks she has good eating habits. She isn't fat, so she must be doing something right.

Field Notes:

Kelly is 21 years old, from Southern California. She is an economics major at Chico State. The interview was conducted at her house, about 20 minutes long. She was very enthusiastic while talking. She wanted me to let her know how the study goes.

## Participant 2

1. Growing up, what were your dinners like?
  - We would just eat whatever was given to us. Sometimes it was spaghetti, sometimes it was Taco Bell, and it just depended on the day and whether or not my mom had time to cook.
2. Who decided what was going to be eaten for meals, and how did they decide?
  - I guess my mom decided, but sometimes my dad would call up on his way home from work and ask if he should pick something up, like fast-food stuff.
3. Were you ever forced to eat all of your food before leaving the dinner table?
  - (laughs nervously) It's funny because when I was little I had to eat all of my food, once I got older they (her parents) would tell me I eat too much food. (Asked what she meant by that) Well my dad was always nagging me when I was looking through the pantry, telling me I shouldn't be eating crap because it will make me fat and cause me to get pimples. He would say things like, "Do you really need to eat that? You know that's not good for you? You're going to start gaining weight"
4. How were you involved in the food preparation process?
  - I wasn't really. I mean I would sit at the kitchen table and talk to my mom while she was cooking.
5. Are there foods that you avoid eating because you feel out of control around them? What are they?
  - I don't like to buy chips because I eat the entire bag the second I bring it home from the grocery store. I'm sure there are others, I just can't think of them.
6. Do you enjoy eating?
  - Yes, I love the taste of food.
7. Have you ever tried a diet? If so, what type and for how long?
  - I have tried weight watchers, and I have been on and off of that since I was in high school.
8. Do you prefer cooking, or going out to eat?
  - I don't really like cooking. I mostly buy the lean cuisine frozen meals, or I will go to subway or something like that. So I guess I like going out to eat.
9. How would you describe your eating habits?

- I think I eat pretty well. I am really good at making sure I don't eat too much during the day. I am not supposed to have more than 2100 calories, I normally stay under that. (Asked if she considers that to be depriving herself from food) No, I am just aware of what I am eating, I mean, if I have a hamburger for lunch, then I will just have a salad for dinner. You know something healthy like that.

Field Notes:

Theresa is 26 years old and is a criminal justice major. She wants to go to Law School in the fall. We conducted the interview on campus in an empty classroom. She doesn't look like she is overweight, but looks like she is a healthy weight. She is from the bay area, and lives with her cousin in a house in Chico. She was a little quiet during the interview.

### Participant 3

1. Growing up, what were your dinners like?
  - We would eat dinner whenever we felt like it. My mom would make us stuff, and whenever we wanted to eat we would, normally we didn't eat at the same time. Mostly because my dad always got home late.
2. Who decided what was going to be eaten for meals, and how did they decide?
  - Well my mom decided, but she never ate what she decided for us. She would always make my sister and me something, and then she would eat steamed veggies and rice.
3. Were you ever forced to eat all of your food before leaving the dinner table?
  - No, my parents never really cared how much I ate. They would tell me not to waste food, but they never made me eat it.
4. How were you involved in the food preparation process?
  - I wasn't.
5. Are there foods that you avoid eating because you feel out of control around them? What are they?
  - Peanut butter and pizza. Peanut butter is my trigger food, once I start eating it I can't stop. I will eat spoonful after spoonful of peanut butter. Not the crunchy types though, only smooth.
6. Do you enjoy eating?
  - Not really, the more I eat, the more I have to work out.
7. Have you ever tried a diet? If so, what type and for how long?
  - Well I watch what I eat to make sure I don't eat bad foods. I guess I have been doing that since I always saw my mom working out and eating healthy foods. My mom used to always be on the newest diet, and she would run on the treadmill every morning and lift weights while watching TV at night. So no, I have never been on a real diet.
8. Do you prefer cooking, or going out to eat?
  - I don't really like either. If I go out to eat, all of the food is so bad for you, but I don't enjoy cooking. I guess I cook the food I do because I have to.
9. How would you describe your eating habits?

- I eat really well. I don't allow myself to overeat, so I won't get fat. (Have you ever felt that you were fat?) Well no, but my sister, who is 2 years older than me, went off to college she gained the freshman 15 and came home and looked so fat. I did not want to get fat like my sister did, so I started working out a lot more and I cut out all of the bad foods I used to eat.

Field Notes:

Krista is 20 years old, and majoring in exercise physiology. She is very thin, and looks "in shape". The interview took place at her house and lasted about 30 minutes.

#### Participant 4

1. Growing up, what were your dinners like?
  - We always had a real home cooked meal. It was the true meat and potatoes type of meal.
2. Who decided what was going to be eaten for meals, and how did they decide?
  - Both of my parents did. My dad would be the one who hunted the meat like deer, turkey, quail, and fish. Then my mom would be the one who decided what kind she wanted to eat that night. I guess it wasn't your typical family.
3. Were you ever forced to eat all of your food before leaving the dinner table?
  - Not that I can remember.
4. How were you involved in the food preparation process?
  - Well my two brothers and I always helped my mom cook and we would go hunting with my dad. I guess I was involved with the entire process.
5. Are there foods that you avoid eating because you feel out of control around them? What are they?
  - I don't really feel out of control around foods. I just eat what I want to eat, when I want to eat it.
6. Do you enjoy eating?
  - Yes, I love eating. I like going to new restaurants, and trying new things. I also am always cooking for my boyfriend and my roommates. I live in a sorority house with 20 other girls, so they always like it when I cook. I usually make steak and pork chops.
7. Have you ever tried a diet? If so, what type and for how long?
  - No, I know I am on the larger side, but I love my fatty food, so I will eat it. My friends are always telling me that if I want to lose weight I should stop drinking whole milk, and take the yolk out of my eggs and just cook egg whites. My uncle lives on a dairy farm, so I grew up on real whole milk. I think it just tastes better than the skim milk.
8. Do you enjoy cooking, or going out to eat?
  - I like both. I like cooking more though because you can decide exactly how you want your food.
9. How would you describe your eating habits?

- I know I don't eat healthy, but at least I eat good food.

Field Notes:

Jamie is 23 years old and is majoring in Animal Science. She wants to go to grad school for animal nutrition. She grew up raising pigs for 4-H and her uncle owns a dairy. Jamie lives in a sorority house that has a personal shopper. She doesn't like how the personal shopper buys ground turkey instead of ground beef. He also buys turkey bacon. Jamie mentioned that, "ground beef tastes better and bacon is not a cut of turkey. I prefer real meat, not the low fat turkey stuff."