

The Relationship Between Food and Behaviour

An expert guide to toddler behaviour
for health care professionals

Healthcare professionals have an important part
in helping parents of toddlers (1-3 years) establish
healthy habits and links between food and behaviour.

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Key Learnings

- 1. Our society has an increasingly problematic relationship with food.**
Problems around eating are beginning at a younger age, and are affecting more people. Parents of toddlers need to be aware of the issues.
- 2. Parents must acknowledge their own behaviour.**
Whether it's incentivising behaviour with sweet food, or talking too much about weight and diets, parents must review their own attitudes.
- 3. Food should never be used as a reward or punishment.**
Any very short-term gains are soon lost, and in fact it just makes the problem worse.

What's gone wrong with our relationship with food?

- One in four, or 26%, of Ireland's nine-year-olds are classified as overweight or obese.
- 23% of those aged between one and four are above the recommended weight for their age.
- Boys and girls as young as five are developing eating disorders and/or demonstrating eating disordered behaviour or EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified).
- An increasing number of families are seeking help for eating disordered behaviour.

Why are people developing an unhealthy relationship with food at such a young age? What does this mean as they grow into adulthood? Some obvious adverse influences include the media, society, commercialised play, beauty salons for children, pageants, and sexualised clothing. These all encourage children to become very body obsessed at far too premature an age.

One of the most challenging drivers behind unhealthy relationships with food is: parents. Most parents admit to using food – particularly sweet food - at home to incentivise behaviour.

Parents: the problem...

Emotional charge.

Using food to influence behaviour places an emotional charge around food at a young age. This allows toddlers to use it as a control tool. Behaviours include refusing to eat, controlling what is cooked, and throwing tantrums.

Food and feelings.

Incentivising behaviour with food sends the message that eating particular things are an answer to uncomfortable feelings. It distracts from body regulation, which is eating by listening to the body's cues as to hunger and fullness. It teaches people to consume food when they are not hungry because emotion is dictating eating behaviour. Food should only ever be food, something we eat, and yes, take pleasure in. Yes, it's a social practice, a family time event, an opportunity to sit and talk and share, but it is still just food; simply necessary for health and energy.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

1

Try not to use food as a reward or punishment

Junk food.

Placing an emotional charge around food at a young age can have lifelong consequences for children as they grow up. They learn that the answer to emotional challenges does not lie within themselves (ie the ability to regulate, problem solve and control); nor do they seek such outcomes through relating to others to talk about what is distressing them. Instead, they turn to junk food to 'feel better'.

A 2003 study reported in the Eating Behaviours journal asked 122 adults to consider their current eating habits with reference to how they recall their memories about food as children. There was a strong correlation between those adults who had unhealthy relationships with food as adults and those who could recall their parents using food as a reward/punishment tool in their childhoods.

...And the solution

Rewards should be used sparingly.

Some tasks at home are simply not to be rewarded. They are activities the toddler must be responsible for doing, such as tidying up toys. Parents should use time and privilege rather than food to incentivise. Perhaps a gain or loss of ten minutes of bedtime for certain behaviours? Maybe at the end of a good week, the toddler gets to have extra time with Mum and Dad building things together at home?

Be the behaviour you want to see.

Parents must embody the behaviour they want their toddler to learn. They must not use food as a personal reward or punishment. Suggest limiting talk at home about dieting and cutting food out to lose weight – talk about eating healthy to stay healthy instead. Create positive associations with food for your family.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

2

Don't incentivise your toddler with promises of food. Use time with you instead.

Food as reward or punishment: what parents need to know

It doesn't work.

It's an easy trap for parents to fall into because using food as a reward for behaviour can be relatively inexpensive and can bring immediate short-term behavioural changes. It places a value system on food in which healthier food choices are less valuable because they are never used to reward but rather used as a means to get a reward. It is always the sugary, fatty foods that serve as the reward so by association these become more valuable and more enticing to children.

However, using food as reward or punishment has adverse developmental impact and is not a sustainable effective tool. Parents can't stay in control of it because their toddler will learn to manipulate them to get what they want. Rather than address the behaviour they want to change, this perpetuates it and can make it worse.

Comfort eating.

There are global multi-billion euro industries devoted to maintaining an emotional charge around food and equally global multi-billion euro industries claiming to help break those cycles. Comfort eating is an everyday phrase. How many adults can cite, without hesitation, their comfort food of choice? There is a growing worldwide problem with body image and weight related illnesses (both under and over weight). When toddlers are developing unhealthy relationships to food, parents have to consider where the behaviour is coming from and how to model a different way.

Suitable articles for parents on this topic are available at www.toddlebox.ie/behaviour and www.toddlebox.ie/nutrition