

Abstract Title:

The implications of using food as a reward on the healthy development of children ages 0-6: A review of current literature

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Background: Healthy child development is influenced by how and why children are fed. Feeding practices include instrumental and emotional feeding in response to a child's behaviour and emotions respectively as well as prompting and encouragement to eat (e.g. a variety of foods), and control over eating (e.g. determining the types and quantities of foods consumed). This literature review focused on one facet of instrumental feeding; using food as a reward. Studies show that the use of food rewards in young children has negative consequences later in life.

Objectives: To conduct a literature review and summarize current evidence relating to the implications of using food as a reward on the physical and psychological development of children ages 0-6.

Methods: PubMed, CINAHL, PsycInfo and TRIP were systematically searched from September 2016 - January 2017 for English articles published after 2009 which included children ages 0-6, and specifically used food rewards. Retrieved articles were critically appraised using the Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition (PEN®) Evidence Grading Checklist (2014) and then thematically analyzed.

Results: Eighty unique articles were initially identified. Twelve studies were included in the final review: two systematic reviews, two literature reviews, three randomized control trials, four cohort studies, and one cross-sectional study. Despite differences in study design and context, several consistent themes emerged from the literature. The implications of using food to reward young children included: increased preference and over-consumption of energy dense foods (n=8), decreased intake of healthy foods (n=2) and rapid weight gain and Body Mass Index rates (n=2).

Conclusions/ Significance: Findings illustrate the potential negative consequences on children's development, namely increased risk for poor eating habits and excessive weight gain. Discouraging this practice through evidence informed key messages used by Registered Dietitians and other healthcare professionals may prevent unhealthy feeding practices during this critical stage of development.