

Parents are key to tackling kids' picky eating, according to research findings

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Five years of UniSC-led research into the pesky problem of picky eating by children suggests that therapists should focus more on empowering parents to ease family angst at the dinner table.

The [collaborative research](#) led by Dr. Laine Chilman of the University of the Sunshine Coast also highlighted the effectiveness of an online coaching intervention for parents to improve children's mealtime behaviors.

Dr. Chilman, an occupational therapy academic who graduated this month with her Ph.D., said the findings were novel because previous research focused on how to fix [picky eating](#) from the perspective of the child rather than the parent.

"Picky eating is a common problem for many [young children](#), potentially affecting their nutritional intake with consequences into adulthood, but the impacts also extend to the family unit," said Dr. Chilman, a mother of three children aged under 15.

"With this strain on [family relationships](#) at mealtimes, parents may inadvertently reinforce the problem through their behaviors, such as pressuring the child to eat.

"We worked directly with a sample group of Queensland parents, using a structured online program called Occupational Performance Coaching (OPC).

"It is a goal-oriented approach that combines education and support for parents, positioning them as the agents of knowledge and change."

The trial of an online intervention for parents emerged from the findings of four previous internationally published studies based on Dr. Chilman's doctoral research, and co-authored with colleagues from UniSC, the University of South Australia and The University of Queensland.

"We identified that parents perceived [health professionals](#) as minimizing or undervaluing their concerns around picky eating, so we sought to

better understand the parent experience and the factors that may influence them to change behaviors," she said.

"With the evidence also showing parents' inventiveness when tackling the issue, we adapted the online program to these circumstances.

"The results were encouraging, with improvements in both children's food intake and parental satisfaction. Parents also appreciated its flexibility and accessibility."

Dr. Chilman, whose research was supervised principally by UniSC Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy Dr. Michele Verdonck, officially graduated with her Ph.D. at a UniSC ceremony on 11 April.

The most recent paper, published in the *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, was also co-authored by Professor Pamela Meredith, Dr. Ann Kennedy-Behr, Associate Professor Thuy Frakking, Dr. Libby Swanepoel and Nicole Southon.

More information: Laine B. Chilman et al, Occupational Performance Coaching for parents of picky eaters: A mixed methods study, *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/1440-1630.12947](https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12947)

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