

Supportive caregiving reduces emotional overeating in toddlers

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Managing a fussy infant or a determined toddler can be a daily test of patience and endurance for parents and caregivers. New research on the origins of emotional overeating in 3-year-olds suggests that how caregivers respond to infants' and toddlers' negative emotions such as disappointment, fear and anger influences the children's development of emotional overeating.

Researchers at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign followed more than 350 children from birth to age 3 and found direct associations between infants' temperaments and their development of emotional overeating at age 3. However, [caregivers'](#) supportive and non-supportive responses to the children's negative emotions had significant influence as well.

Emotional overeating was defined in the study as consuming food to cope with feelings rather than in response to hunger.

In assessing the children's temperaments, the researchers looked at their orienting responses—their ability as infants and toddlers to engage with, maintain and disengage their attention from external stimuli.

"Our findings show that if a child has a greater capacity to orient their attention and regulate their emotions during infancy, caregivers may be more likely to implement supportive responses—therefore the child is less likely to turn to food for [self-regulation](#)," said first author Sehyun Ju, a graduate student in human development and [family studies](#). Ju's co-authors were Kelly Bost and Samantha Iwinski, a professor and graduate student, respectively, in the same department.

Supportive responses from caregivers included using problem-solving strategies to alleviate a child's distress, validating and addressing the child's feelings or offering encouragement. Conversely, non-supportive responses included caregivers punishing a child for expressing their

emotions and minimizing or dismissing their feelings.

Some prior research found that emotional eating is driven by individuals' ability to regulate their emotions as opposed to the feelings themselves, according to the current study, [published](#) in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

Accordingly, parents should be aware that emotional overeating is a complex behavior that is influenced by caregivers' reactions to the child's emotional expression as well as by the child's temperament and ability to manage their feelings, Ju said.

All of the children and their caregivers were participants in the STRONG Kids 2 birth cohort study at the U. of I., a research project that examines various family [environmental factors](#) and biological characteristics that influence children's weight and dietary habits from birth through age 9.

When the children were 3 months, 18 months and 3 years old, their parents or caregivers were surveyed on their children's eating behaviors such as whether they ate more when bored, sad or angry; their [personality traits](#) or typical way of behaving, including how frequently they showed cheerfulness or distress; their ability to self-regulate their emotions; and how they responded to external stimuli.

Using 12 hypothetical scenarios in which the child expressed negative emotions such as sadness, fear, anger or disappointment, the caregivers indicated how likely they would be to react using supportive methods such as problem-solving strategies or non-supportive methods such as punishing the child.

The researchers found that 3-month-old infants that had high levels of cheerfulness, sociability and spontaneity were more likely to engage in emotional overeating three years later. The children's eating behaviors

also were significantly predicted by their abilities to adapt to external stimuli and self-regulate their emotions. But the children's likelihood of consuming food as a coping mechanism was significantly affected by their caregivers' responses to their negative emotions.

"The findings highlight the importance of the family system," Iwinski said. "We see that things are impacting each other at multiple time points. Behaviors at 3 months of age can affect children when they are 3 years old.

"We need to consider the optimal times when we can implement interventions and provide assistance. From these findings, we see that assistance may be needed at multiple developmental milestones."

Ju said emotional overeating is an obesogenic behavior that may contribute to unhealthy weight gain, potentially increasing young children's risks of developing serious health problems such as Type 2 diabetes and hypertension.

Responding supportively to [children](#)'s negative emotions is essential to promoting their [psychological health](#) as well as their physical health because it affects how young people learn to manage their feelings as well as their approach to food, she said.

More information: Sehyun Ju et al, Temperament and emotional overeating: the mediating role of caregiver response to children's negative emotions, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1369252](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1369252)

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