

Researchers say parents are overwhelmed and it's affecting their kids' eating

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It's the end of a long workday, which also included managing your children's schedules and after-school activities. You're exhausted, and the kids just won't eat their broccoli.

You ask nicely. Cajole. Outright beg. Finally, you've had it and resort to threats, warning that misbehavior is going to cost the kids dessert if they don't eat their broccoli.

You're not proud, but it works.

New research from the University of Georgia suggests this type of interaction at the dinner table becomes more likely as parents grow increasingly overwhelmed and stressed.

Difficult jobs, too much to do and financial worries are [daily stressors](#) on family life. Those stressors add up and may result in parents engaging in less than ideal behaviors at the [dinner table](#).

While one mealtime incident of pressuring may not affect a child's relationship with food, multiple negative experiences related to meals add up.

"Minimizing overwhelm is important to help parents create positive experiences that reinforce healthy eating behaviors in kids when they're young so that they have habits that they can fall back on," said Allan Tate, lead author of the study and an assistant professor in UGA's College of Public Health.

"This matters for [child health](#) and development because healthy dietary intake is protective against onset of chronic diseases later in adulthood."

Mothers more overwhelmed than fathers

As parents' patience begins to wane and they run out of mental "space," they often resorted to less ideal feeding practices both that day and the following day, the researchers found. These practices included pressuring their children to eat certain healthier foods and restricting

access to less healthy options.

Previous studies have shown that women continue to largely bear primary caregiver responsibilities of household management and [child care](#), despite often working similar or more hours outside the home as their partners.

The present study found that mothers reported more depletion than the fathers included in the study.

"Mothers may experience it differently than fathers do," Tate said. "We place a lot of individual responsibilities on parents, and particularly on female caregivers, that are not always in their realm of control. Feeling depleted is an everyday reality for caregivers."

Interestingly, the single parents in the study who split parenting duties with their former partner were less likely to report feeling overwhelmed. This is likely due to a more even split of child care responsibilities between co-parents. Single parents also may have access to other resources, such as living with their own parents, that dual caregivers do not, according to previous research.

More children, less money may mean less mental energy to give

Conversely, parents with more children and/or lower income levels reported higher levels of feeling depleted and overwhelmed.

"Economic insecurity is one persistent stressor that might play a role in parents feeling overwhelmed," Tate said. "As a society, we should make programs that mitigate these stressors easier for parents to access and remain enrolled."

For example, the federal government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP, has administrative hurdles that make it harder for families to stay enrolled even when they are eligible, Tate said.

"We should also make them more generous so that parents can exert their energy on activities that will positively impact their family life," Tate said.

Assistance programs like SNAP can provide parents with reassurance that their children will have access to healthy foods, regardless of what other stressors are happening in their lives. And that knowledge can ease the mental burden on parents.

Stress one day can affect behavior the next

The UGA researchers utilized data from the Family Matters project. The study followed 631 racially and ethnically diverse families for several years to examine risk and protective factors for cardiovascular health in children from diverse backgrounds and low-income households.

Parents were asked a variety of questions to assess their levels of resource depletion and stress, such as "since you woke up, have you forced yourself to do something you didn't really want to do" and "have you had trouble staying focused or concentrating?"

They were also asked whether they had to "make sure (their child) didn't eat too much food at this meal" and whether they needed to "encourage (their child) to eat more."

On days when parents reported elevated levels of resource depletion and stress, the researchers found that parents were more likely to engage in coercive food practices both that day and the following day. This is

important because being able to overcome overwhelm can have compounding effects on the home food environment, Tate said.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Appetite*.

More information: A.D. Tate et al, Association between parental resource depletion and parent use of specific food parenting practices: An ecological momentary assessment study, *Appetite* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2024.107368](#)

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