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Children and Food Acceptance

An Action Research Report
By Matti Tuuri

Children and Food Acceptance

By Matti Tuuri

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St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota

Advisor_____

Date_____

Abstract

This study was designed to investigate a child's willingness to eat certain foods using three settings. The likelihood of a child to try a food was examined using teacher modeling with positive language, involvement with preparation and peer influence. The study sought to determine which setting was more likely to encourage a pre-school aged child to partake of the offered food. Included in this study were 20 pre-school children at a New York City private Montessori school. Data sources included pre and post study parent surveys, a structured student interview and observational data in the form of field notes and narratives. The results show that children are most likely to consume a certain food when influenced by an adult using modeling with positive language or by a peer. The findings imply that parents and teachers can use adult modeling with positive language and peer influence to encourage healthy eating choices.

The mealtime habits of children are currently a topic of conversation among parents, educators and pediatricians. During classroom food activities, I have noticed that many children refuse to eat the offered food. Parents have also expressed concern regarding their children's finicky eating habits. My school offers a catered lunch program and many parents have chosen to use it in hopes that their child will become open to a variety of foods. Along with this conversation comes the term "picky eaters." Parents describe 20-30% of children as picky eaters (Sagall, 2004). Sagall (2004) notes that until recently picky eating habits in children was an unexplored territory. There is no one cause when determining why a child may become a picky eater. Picky eating in young children may spawn from fear; this fear or distaste for specific foods begins to strengthen during the onset of the pre-school years (Lynch, 2011). Food neophobias in children are not genetic; they are often a result of parents own food preferences being adopted by their children (Mata, Scheibehenne, & Todd, 2007). Merriam Webster (n.d.) defines neophobia as "dread of or aversion to novelty." However, many food neophobias can be reversed or avoided (Sullivan & Birch, 1990). During a child's early formative years he or she begins to establish food habits that will launch into adulthood (Bauer, Kalich, & McPartlin, 2009). With this established, children have the opportunity to adopt healthy food choices if given the opportunity. Recent studies that focus on childhood obesity show that the need for guiding children to nutritious foods is dire. Throughout the past 30 years, obesity rates in pre-school aged children have soared (Bauer, et al., 2009). Parents and caregivers need solutions on how to encourage their children to consume nutritious foods.

Studies have been conducted to find associations between children and their food choices. Various avenues have been explored including adult and peer influence, modeling, and intervention programs. These have been examined to determine whether or not a child's food

choices can be manipulated by external factors. Bauer, et al., (2009) note that it is during the early pre-school years that children begin to become receptive to external influences. Elmo, Kluczynski, Nitecki, Roemmich, and Salvy (2010) included 23 five to seven year olds and 27 thirteen to fifteen years olds to conclude that the presence of peers and adults does influence food choices in this demographic. Eldridge and Murcott (2000) found that children's eating habits are influenced by mere exposure in the family home. The study showed that children assumed their family's eating habits while in the home, but adopted new habits while away from the family influence (Eldridge & Murcott, 2000). Brown and Ogden (2004) found that children tended to consume foods that their parents were consuming, whether healthy or unhealthy. Birch (1980) suggests that children are affected by adult modeling and are more likely to partake of foods when adults model the consumption. Hendy and Raudenbush (2000) determined that teacher modeling with positive language can have an effect on pre-school aged children's food preferences, but when compared to peer influence, peer influence holds more authority. When comparing silent teacher modeling with modeling including positive language, teacher modeling with positive language was a more effective means of encouraging food acceptance amongst the children (Hendy & Raudenbush, 2000).

Focusing on childhood obesity, researchers Eck, Isbell, Klesges, Klesges, and Stein (1991) concluded that children are more likely to make healthy food choices where adult presence and supervision existed. Studies surrounding school obesity intervention programs found that school programs can increase knowledge surrounding nutrition and health when successfully implemented (Aleman et al., 2010).

With research supporting adult modeling and peer influence surrounding food choice, this study aims at determining which method is most influential. The research done in this study

seeks to find a connection between children's willingness to sample foods when presented with three varying approaches. Taking Hendy and Raudenbush's (2000) findings into consideration, the adult modeling will be combined with positive language. The study asks to what extent does teacher modeling with positive language, peer influence and involvement in food preparation, affect children in the three to six year old environment and their willingness to sample foods?

The results were obtained through a series of sessions involving the student participants and the researcher. The study took place in a private urban school. The children involved are part of an early childhood Montessori classroom. The study involved 20 pre-school children aged three to five. The participants include six males and 14 females.

The children were invited to sample food in three various ways. The researcher modeled food consumption while using positive language, the children sampled the food with a peer and again independently from that peer, and the students sampled the food after participating in its preparation. The results were compared to determine which method carries the greatest influence in a child's willingness to sample the food. Foods were presented during three sessions per week during the children's morning work cycle, between 9:00 and 9:30am. Teacher modeling with positive language, peer influence and involvement with preparation, were each given their own session. The order of these sessions changed per week to minimize the chance of any order effect. The results were then compared to determine which approach held the greatest effect.

Description of Research Process

The implementation of the research process took place over the course of six weeks beginning in February 2014 and ending in April 2014. The process included four data sources including pre and post parent surveys, an in classroom structured interview, and observational data including field notes and narratives.

The purpose of the pre study parent survey (see Appendix A) was to determine what challenges, if any, parents were having with a child's willingness to eat certain foods in the home. The survey was created using a Google Form. The survey was emailed to the parents prior to any in-classroom research. The results were collected and analyzed prior to the implementation of the classroom research. The parents were asked to answer questions pertaining to their own child's experiences with mealtime behavior and attitudes surrounding foods. An example question is as follows, "Do you and your child eat the same foods during mealtime?" The questions were composed to provide background information pertaining to specific children involved in the study. The parents were asked to include the names of the children. Including the names allowed the classroom results to be compared to the parent's experiences with food in the home. This allowed for the tracking of the evolution of the child's willingness to sample foods, if any evolution occurred. The results of this survey gave me insight into whether or not parental presence may be relevant in determining a specific child's inclination to have an attitude towards food compared with teacher modeling, peer influence and involvement in preparation.

The second data source included an in classroom structured interview with the participants (see Appendix B). The interview was used to gather baseline data from the children participating in the research. The structured interview was the most effective way to measure attitudes surrounding foods from a group of non-readers or beginning readers unable to participate in a written survey. The interview asked the children questions surrounding their positions pertaining to the consumption of foods. The questions were used to gauge their level of enthusiasm regarding food and the process of eating. The results were analyzed to ensure that foods that children had already established a positive opinion of were not used in the tastings. An

example of a question asked during the interview includes, “If you do not like a food, do you still eat it?” The interview took place in the classroom. Children were invited one at a time to sit with me to answer the questions.

The bulk of the data was collected in the classroom throughout the implementation of the research. The data sources were comprised of observational data including field notes and narratives. Upon the completion of the structured interview, the sessions involving food sampling began. The sessions took place three times per week over the course of six weeks during February, March and April 2014. Each session was held during the children’s morning work cycle from 9:00 until 9:30, on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. The study included three session types in which the students were presented with a food and invited to eat it. During one session, the entire group of children was invited to watch me sample the designated food while using positive language. The language used was, “Mmm, this (name of food) tastes delicious, I really enjoy it!” The children were then invited to eat the food. The positive language was used to determine if the children were more likely to sample a food if an adult whom they trust showed a positive preference towards the food. The language used remained consistent for each six teacher-modeling sessions. Data was collected in the form of observational notes (See Appendix C). Narratives were taken when an action or response was found to be exceptionally pertinent to the study. Each child’s choice whether or not they partook of the food was recorded.

The second session involved the presence of peer influence versus the lack of peer influence. The session took place on a different day of the week than session one and three. As a group, the participants were all invited to sample the food designated for that week. For the session, I used non-influential language, “I now invite you to try the (name of food).” I did not eat the food. Each child’s results were recorded. I also recorded any dialogue, along with the

number of children who sampled the food and the number of children that did not sample the food. The dialogue was recorded throughout the group presentation, before the invitation to sample the food, during, and after. The conversations were used to determine the overall response to the food, whether or not they favored the food as a group. Following the group sampling, the participants were invited, one at a time, to sit with me at a private table in the classroom. I then used the same language and invited the child to try the identical food; I did not try the food. Whether or not the child chose to sample the food during our one-on-one session was recorded. The results of the child's choice whether or not to eat the food during the group session were compared to the results of the child's choice made during our session independent of a peer influence. I noted the children that chose to eat the food amongst their peers, but not when independent from them.

The third and final session allowed the children to participate in the preparation of the designated food. For example, the food used during week one was a golden tomato. I first silently modeled how to wash and slice the tomato. The children were each then invited to wash their own tomato and slice it in half. The children gathered and I invited them to again eat the tomato. The language I used was the identical to that used during session two, "I now invite you to try the (name of food)." Similar preparation was required each week. The results were recorded. This session took place on a different day than session one or two. The order of the sessions varied from week to week to control for order effect. The results from each session were compared to determine which had a greater effect on whether or not a child would sample a food.

The fourth and final data collection source was a post study parent survey. The post study survey (see Appendix D) was created using a Google Form. The survey was emailed to the parents upon the completion of the in-classroom food activities and observations. The survey

was used to determine any changes in a child's attitude towards foods noticed by the parents. Parents were asked if during the six-week study had they noticed a change in the likelihood that their child would eat a certain food. They were then asked to comment on any changes in mealtime routines to control for other influences. The survey was used to compare the evolution of a child's willingness to eat foods in the classroom study with any changes observed in the home eating habits over the course of the six-week study. The survey was used as an aid in determining whether or not the exposure to foods in the classroom research had an impact that was present once the child returned to their home environment.

The following section will analyze the results of the aforementioned data. The results are compared to determine to what extent adult modeling with positive language, peer influence, or involvement with the food preparation determines a child's likelihood to sample a food.

Analysis of Data

During the course of my action research project, four data collection strategies were used. Included in this were pre and post study parent surveys, a structured interview and observational notes in the form of field notes and narratives. The first data collected was the online parent survey. The survey was emailed to the parents prior to any research being done in the classroom. Only one parent of each child was asked to complete the survey to avoid obtaining conflicting data. Twenty surveys were emailed and only 17 were collected. Parents were first asked to provide the name of their child; this allowed me to compare the parent's experiences with their child and food to those in the classroom study. The first question asked parents if their child refuses to eat particular foods. This was to gather information on how often children tend to refuse foods. Results are shown in Figure 1.

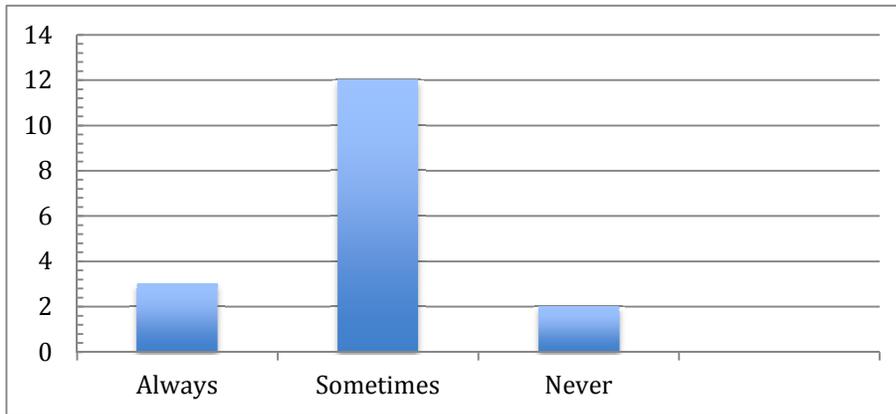


Figure 1. Does your child refuse to eat particular foods?

The second question asked the parents if their child refuses to eat particular foods, do they offer them something else instead? This question was used to gather data to be compared with the children's willingness to try the foods presented in the classroom. If a connection is found, this might provide options for future studies explaining why some children are comfortable with refusing food in knowing that there is another option available. The results are shown in Figure 2.

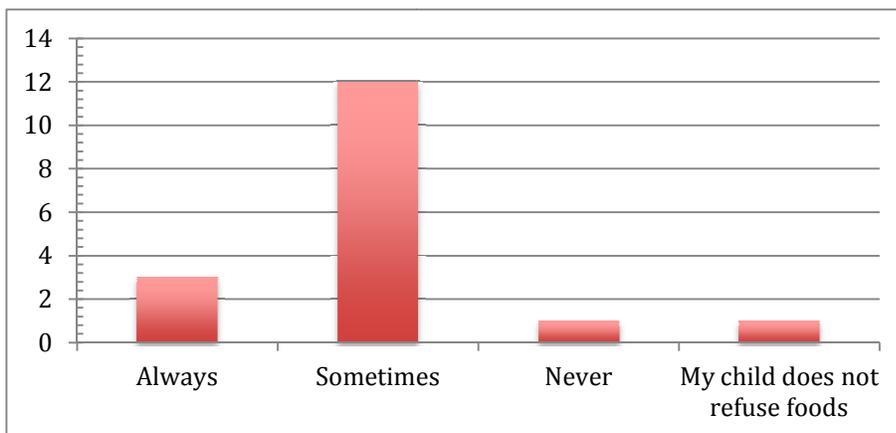


Figure 2. If your child refuses to eat particular foods do you offer them something else instead?

The third question asked how often the parents eat meals with the child. This data was then compared to the child's willingness to eat foods when influenced by teacher modeling. The results are found in Figure 3.

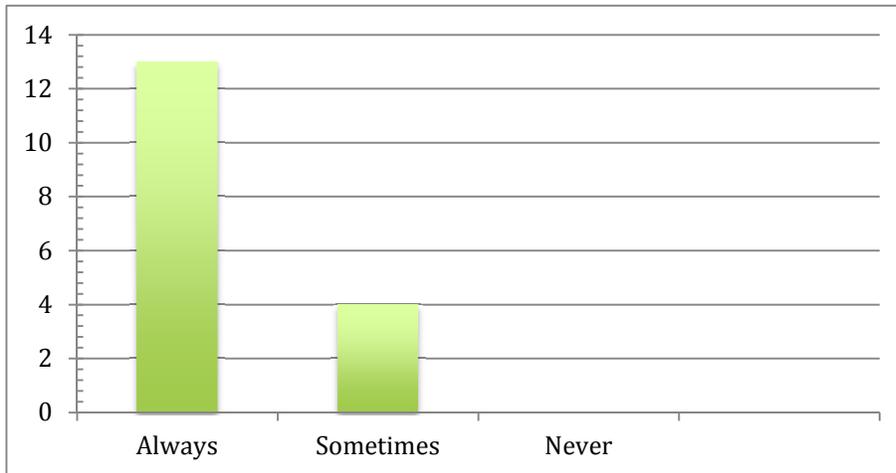


Figure 3. Do you eat meals with your child?

Question four asks the parents how often they involve their child in the food preparation process.

The responses were compared to the response to question one on the survey. The response was then compared to the child's willingness to eat foods in the classroom when involved in the preparation. Results are found in Figure 4.

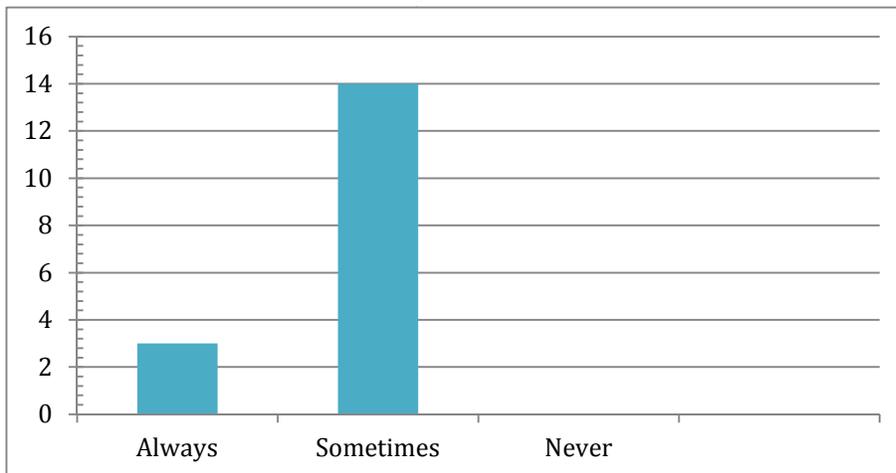


Figure 4. How often do you involve your child with food preparation?

The final question asked parents if they eat the same foods as their children during meals. This question provided data that was connected to a child's likelihood to sample food when modeled with positive language. The results are shown in Figure 5.

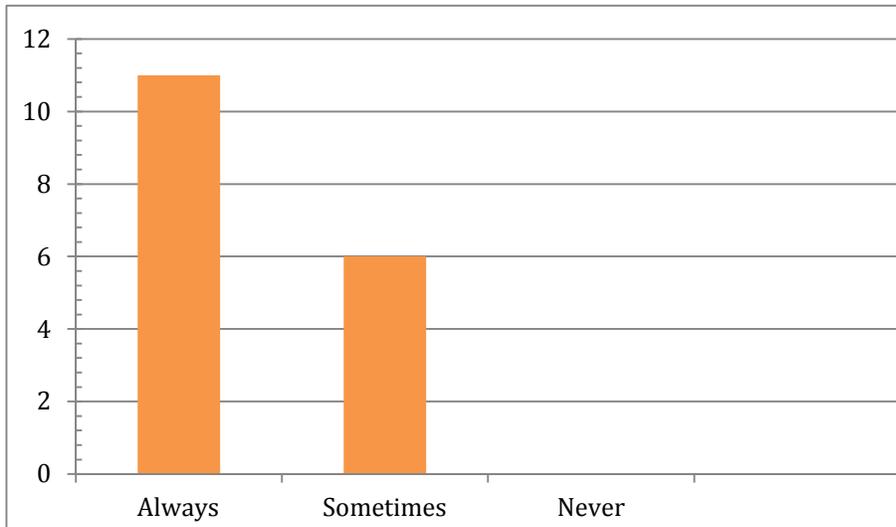


Figure 5. Do you and your child eat the same foods during mealtimes?

The second set of data I collected was in the form of a student interview (Appendix B). The interview included a set of nine questions. The questions were used to obtain baseline data before I introduced the children to the food. I wanted to find out which foods the children were already comfortable with to avoid using these during my presentations. I also wanted to find out the child's perspective of their mealtime behavior and compare it with the perspective of the parent. The anecdotal responses to questions two, three, four and six found that the majority of the children favor foods from the fruit group, the majority of the children call bananas their favorite fruit, and carrots their favorite vegetable. Most of the children stated that they eat cereal for breakfast and pasta for lunch and dinner. The results of questions one, five, seven, eight and nine are shown in Figure 6.

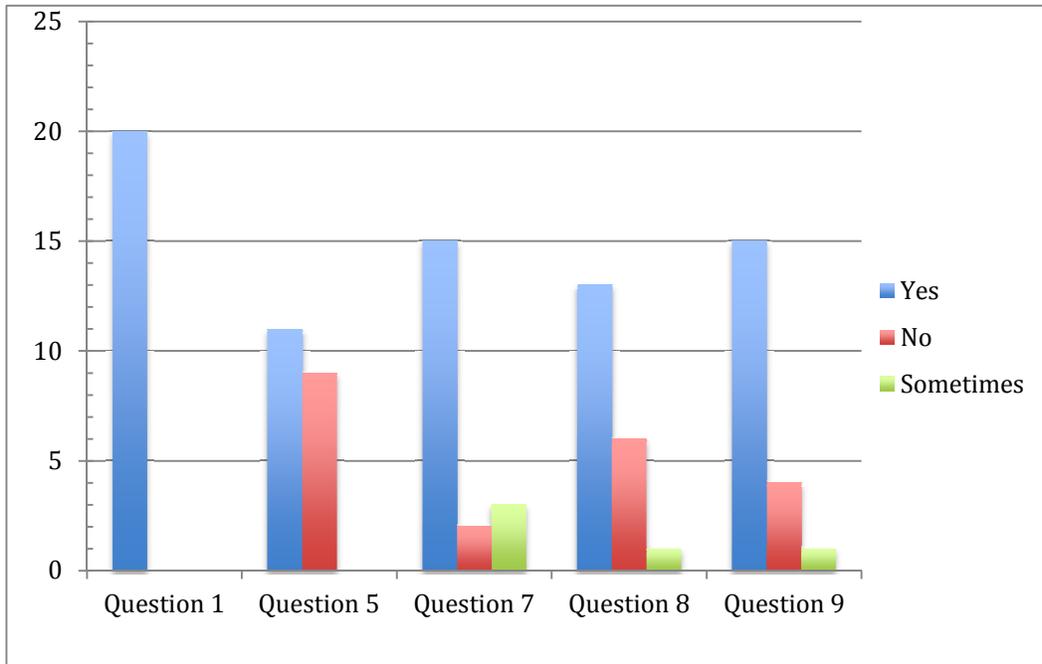


Figure 6. Student Interview questions 1, 5, 7, 8, and 9

During the in-class food presentations I collected data through observations and narratives. Here I tracked how many children chose to eat the food during the three different presentations. I took note of who ate the food during the teacher modeling session, during the peer vs. non-peer session and during the session in which the children prepared the food before consuming it. The chart below shows how many instances a child chose to eat the food or not eat the food during the varying sessions over the course of the study. Please see Figure 7.

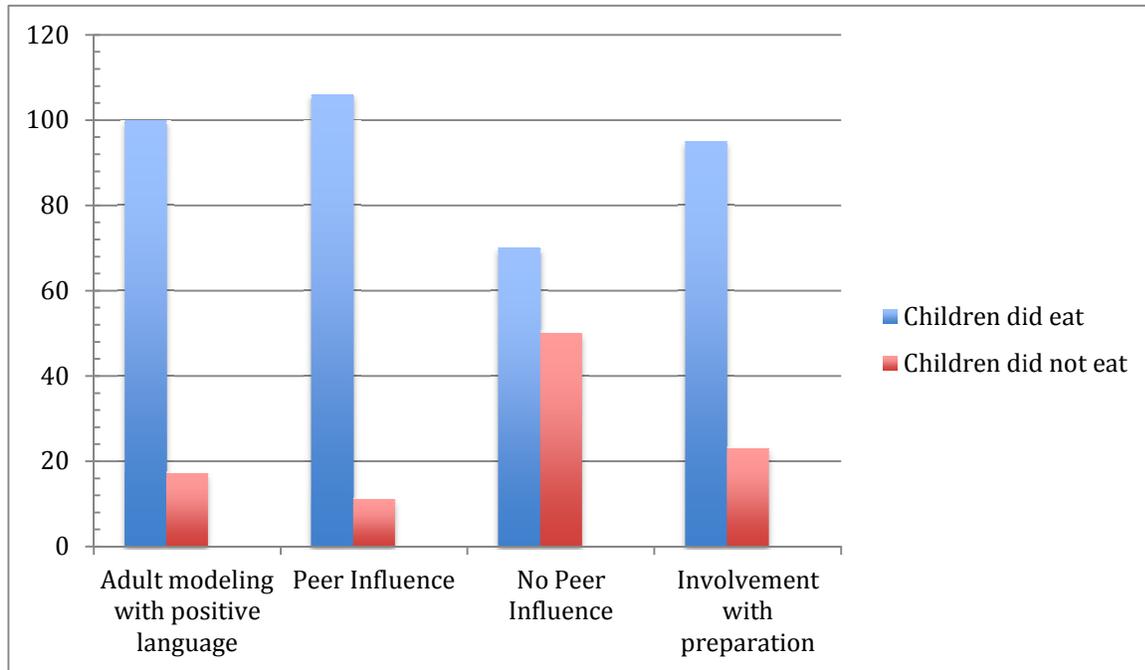


Figure 7. Instances where children ate the food versus instances where children did not eat the food

Figure 7 shows that there were more instances of children eating the food than not eating the food during each of the sessions. During each of the six sessions of involvement with preparation, each child present for the activity did participate in preparing the food. Narrative notes taken during these sessions show that while each child did prepare the food in the designated way there were 95 instances where the child then ate the food but 23 instances where the child prepared the food but did not eat the food.

Figure 8 compares choices made during the peer influence session versus the one-on-one session that lacked a peer influence.

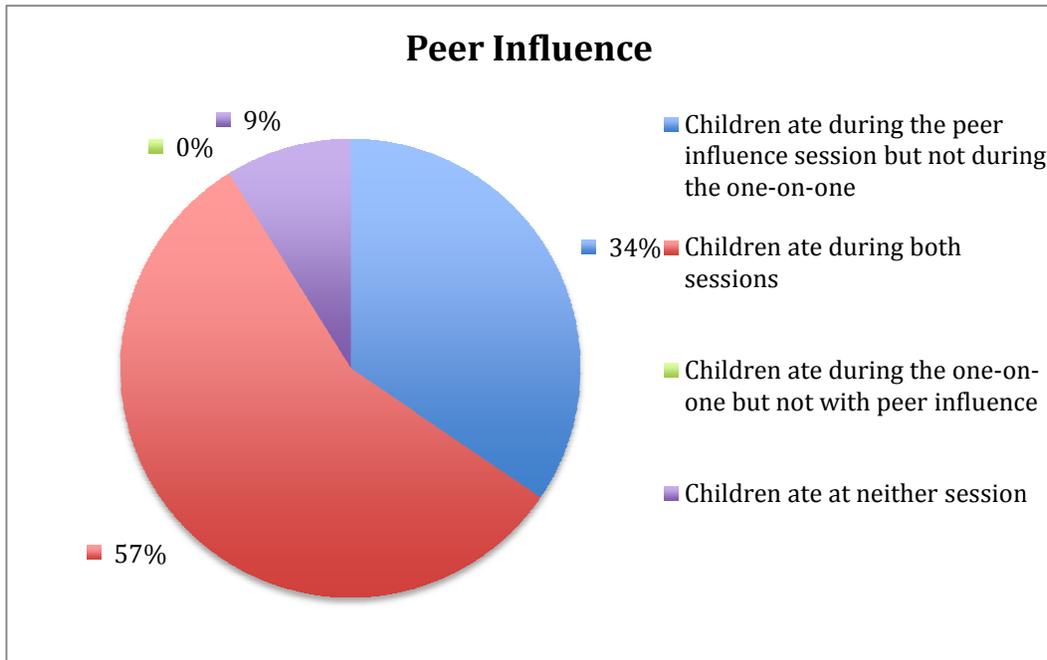


Figure 8. Peer influence session results

In addition to Figures 7 and 8, observational data was collected in the form of field notes and narratives. Relevant conversations were recorded and analyzed if they were found to be impactful to the findings. Peer influence was present not only during the peer sessions, but also during the adult modeling sessions. Students made statements that support peer influence as a determining factor in whether or not a child will eat a food. During week one's adult modeling with positive language session, child six refused to try the golden tomato. The child stared at the tomato as sixteen of the other children consumed it. After child 16 finished the tomato, words of encouragement were offered, "Try it, come on just try it once. You have to try it, just do it, it is so good." Child six was influenced and did consume the tomato. Week five provided an impactful example of negative peer influence that evolved into positive peer influence. Prior to the completion of the adult modeling with positive language presentation, child 20 stated, "We're not eating this, right (child five's name)?" Child five responded with, "Right! We're not eating this!" This conversation ignited a group discussion about the fact that they were not going

to eat the celery. Fourteen of the children agreed they were not going to try the celery with cream cheese. Comments were made, “I am not eating this,” “This looks disgusting.” Child 16 took a try as the other children observed. After observing child 16, eighteen more of the 20 children then ate the food. Even child 20, who initiated the refusal of the food, ate the celery.

The final form of data collection was a post study online parent survey. The parent survey asked the parents to share whether or not they had noticed any changes in their child’s willingness to try foods (see Figure 8). Twenty surveys were sent and twelve were returned.

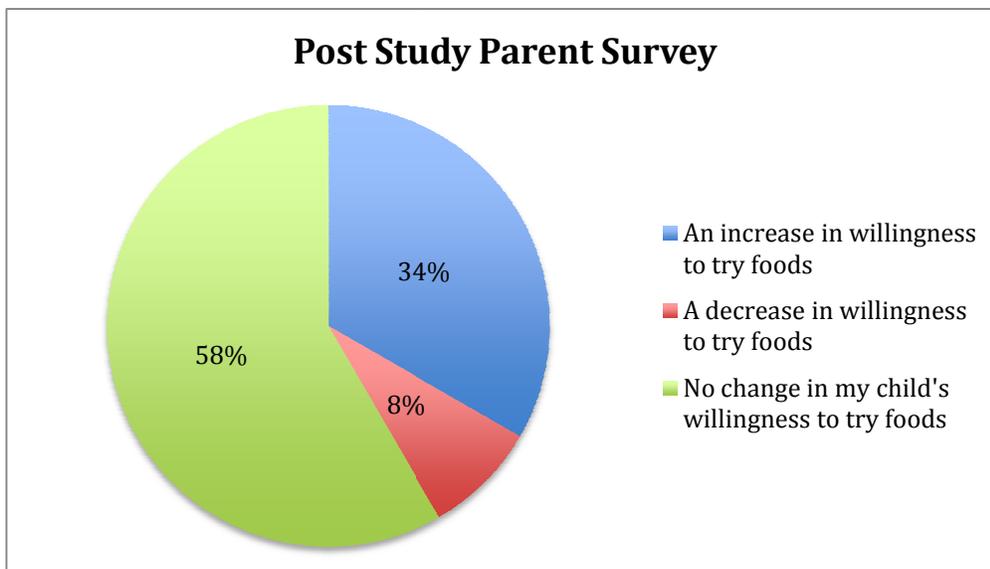


Figure 8. Over the past six weeks I have noticed...

In addition to the survey question asked in Figure 8, parents were also asked to comment on any mealtime routine changes. Along with an increase in willingness to try foods the following comment was made, “tried and ate new food items.” One parent responded with “over the past few weeks we have made an effort to serve her what we are also eating.” This parent also reported an increase in willingness to try foods. The same parent reported that the child wanted to role-play a teacher presenting a new food and the entire family would take a bite.

Action Plan

Providing a child with nutritious food choices during the preschool years is a vital aspect of paving the way for future healthy eating habits. Determining which setting would be most likely to encourage a child to try a food will provide ideas for parents to use during mealtimes at home as well as during classroom food activities. Trying new things can be anxiety provoking for children, causing the promotion of a well-balanced diet to be challenging. In that children are most likely to eat a food when influenced by an adult modeling with positive language or by a peer, children can be encouraged to eat certain foods.

Through the pre study parent survey I was able to determine that many children always refuse to eat certain foods and most children at least sometimes refuse to eat certain foods. A goal of the study was to provide parents with solutions to avoid picky eating and mealtime frustrations in order to promote long-term health. The results of the study can be used to aid parents in encouraging their children to eat certain foods. The results show that children are most likely to consume a certain food when under the influence of an adult modeling with positive language or when a peer is present. The findings also show that children are very likely to consume a food if they have helped with its preparation. The sessions can easily be duplicated in the home to encourage food consumption.

The results of the research are compound. I was surprised by how willing children are to consume the food during the adult modeling, peer influence, and preparation sessions. The study found that when pre-school aged children are presented a food with adult modeling and positive language, children are more likely than not to eat the food. When children are involved in the preparation of the food, they are more likely than not to consume the food. When dissecting the peer influence sessions, the results show that children are more likely to consume the food than

not when a peer is present. During the one-on-one peer session the margin of difference between instances of children eating the food versus instances of children not eating the food is smallest. This says that children are least likely to consume the food when there is no adult modeling with positive language, no peer influence and no involvement with preparation. There were zero instances recorded when a child ate a food during the one-on-one session with an adult but not with their peers present. Along with the observational notes, the data shows that the most impactful settings were the sessions involving a peer influence and the sessions where an adult modeled using positive language. Children were more likely than not to consume the foods during these sessions over the course of the six-week study. However, peer influence is more likely than adult modeling with positive language to encourage a child to eat a certain food by 5 percent. In a study of this size, 5 percent is noteworthy but not conclusive.

The final data source, the post study parent survey, showed that most of the children had no change in their attitude towards food during at home meal times. The collected post study surveys showed that thirty four percent of children demonstrated an increase in their willingness to try foods in the home during the course of the classroom research. Parents can use the findings to continue to encourage their children to eat in the home. Parents can involve their children in the preparation of the food and they can model consumption of the food using positive language.

As determined in this study, food choices of pre-school aged children are impacted by peer influence. Children were 34 percent likely to consume a food in the presence of a peer but not alone with a teacher during the one-on-one session. The study found zero instances when the child consumed the food during the one-on-one with the teacher but not with their peers. The anecdotal notes were most impactful when analyzing the peer aspect of the study. The statements made by child 16 to child six during week one show that peer influence had a greater impact than

involvement with the preparation. The conversation ignited by child 20 during the adult modeling session with the celery shows that peer influence can have a negative effect on a child's willingness to try a food. A positive impact was then witnessed as child 16 ate the celery and influenced the majority of the class to then eat the celery despite the initial negative influence.

I was surprised by the examples of peer influence that arose outside of the peer influence sessions. The data shows that children are more willing than not to try foods during each of the sessions. The observational notes show the positive and negative impact of peer influence on a pre-school aged child's willingness to try a certain food. In two cases, child 16 had a direct impact on positively influencing a child to eat the offered food. The child's impact was greater than the involvement with preparation with the golden tomato and greater than the adult modeling with positive language with the celery and cream cheese.

The knowledge gained during this study can aid teachers in future studies and activities involving food. A follow-up study could be used to determine who has the greatest peer influence during food activities, boys or girls, older children or younger children, out-spoken children or quiet children, new students or returning students. Determining who has the greatest impact can then be used to help support the implementation of activities focusing on nutrition and healthy food choices. In the future, I would also like to focus on the instances that children did not choose to eat the food and closely examine their at home mealtime routines to correlate any connections between parental attitudes towards food and the child's tendency not to eat an offered food.

Knowing that children establish eating habits during the preschool years, educators can use the classroom setting as a place to positively influence these habits (Bauer, et al., 2009).

Establishing healthy eating habits early on can fend off the likelihood of unhealthy habits in the future. This study provides a framework for encouraging food consumption among pre-school aged children with long-term health as the main goal.

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Appendix A Pre-study Parent Survey

Food Choices

Please choose an answer that best fits your experiences.

What is your child's name?

Does your child refuse to eat particular foods?

Always

Sometimes

Never

If your child refuses to eat particular foods do you offer them something else instead?

Always

Sometimes

Never

My child does not refuse foods

Do you eat meals with your child?

Always

Sometimes

Never

How often do you involve your child with food preparation?

Always

Sometimes

Never

Do you and your child eat the same foods during meal times?

Always

Sometimes

Never

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Appendix B Structured Student Interview

1. Do you enjoy eating foods?
2. What is your favorite kind of food?
3. What is your favorite fruit?
4. What is your favorite vegetable?
5. During breakfast/lunch/dinner do you eat the same food that your parents eat?
6. What do you eat for breakfast/lunch/dinner?
7. Do you like to help make the food you eat?
8. If you don't like a food, do you still eat it?
9. If you don't like a food, do you ask for something new?

Appendix C Observational Notes

		WEEK 1 - GOLDEN TOMATO	WEEK 2 - HARD BOILED EGG	WEEK 3 - PEPPER	WEEK 4 - CANTELOUPE	WEEK 5 - CELERY WITH CREAM CHEESE	WEEK 6 - PERSIMMON
CHILD 1	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 2	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 3	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 4	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 5	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 6	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 7	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 8	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 9	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 10	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 11	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 12	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 13	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 14	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 15	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 16	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 17	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 18	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 19	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						
CHILD 20	PEER INFLUENCE NO PEER INFLUENCE ADULT MODELING WITH POS LANGUAGE INVOLVEMENT WITH PREP						

Appendix D Post-study Parent Survey

Parent Post Study Survey

Please provide an answer that best fits your experiences.

What is your child's name?

Over the past six weeks I have noticed...

- An increase in willingness to try foods.
- A decrease in willingness to try foods.
- No change in my child's willingness to try foods.

Over the past six weeks my child's mealtime routine has changed in the following ways...

If no change please leave blank.

Submit

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