Introduction to a Supplement on Responsive Feeding: Promoting Healthy Growth and Development for Infants and Toddlers

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Deviations in infant/toddler growth patterns can lead to both under- and overweight and are global public health concerns that can have long-lasting impacts on children’s growth, health, and development (1,2). Although access to food plays a central role in children’s postnatal growth, variability in the feeding context also influences children’s eating behavior and growth (3).

The epidemiology of under- and overweight highlights the importance of incorporating parental feeding practices into nutritional recommendations early in life. In some low- and middle-income countries, stunting begins before or shortly after birth (4) and approaches 45% among children under 5 years of age (2). Many stunted children retain their shortened stature throughout life (5) and are at risk for poor cognition and academic performance during childhood and low productivity and human capital during adulthood (6). Recommendations are to initiate programs to prevent stunting early in life (5).

In high-income countries, childhood overweight/obesity is a serious public health problem that is increasing in prevalence, particularly among minority and/or low-income children (7). Data from the 2007–2008 NHANES-IV show that the prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents has reached 17.7%, a 3-fold increase over the past 3 decades (7). Not only does childhood obesity track to adult obesity, but it can lead to long-lasting negative health and developmental consequences (8), emphasizing the need to intervene early in life.

The goal of this supplement is to examine the association between parental feeding practices and children’s growth from a global perspective. Responsive feeding is embedded in anthropological and psychological constructs that require multidisciplinary investigation and intervention. A diverse group of authors representing psychology, nutrition, anthropology, and child development present issues related to responsive feeding among infants and toddlers from multiple countries. The first paper reviews the theoretical foundation linking responsive parenting to children’s psychosocial, cognitive, and language competence, thereby laying the theoretical foundation for applying responsive parenting to the feeding context as responsive feeding (9). The second paper reviews studies that have applied responsive and nonresponsive feeding to issues of overweight/obesity in high-income countries (10). The third paper reviews the application of responsive and nonresponsive feeding to children’s growth in low- and middle-income countries, focusing on prevention of underweight (11). The final paper examines the programmatic and policy implications of responsive feeding from a global perspective (12).

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Literature Cited

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