

Developmental processes in understanding the perception of eating behaviors in preschool children:
A study of the influences of different eating experiences in early childhood

Tomoko SENOO

This study was an attempt to elucidate the effects of preschool children's eating experiences on the development process of understanding eating perception in preschool children using data collected by various methods, including questionnaire surveys of mothers, observations of eating situations in kindergartens, nursery schools and other preschools, and selection task experiments in preschool children.

The first chapter of this paper discussed problems revealed in overviews of earlier studies and in this study. The second chapter then shed light on the relationship between mothers' attitudes towards child rearing and mothers' eating perception and dietary upbringing in a first study, and compared the linguistic approaches adopted by childcare workers in eating situations in kindergartens, nursery schools and other preschools based on differences between kindergartens that require lunch boxes and nursery schools that provide a lunch service in a second study. The third chapter was regarding a study that focused on understanding biological meaning of eating in preschool children. This third study investigated what effects differences in mothers' eating perception have on the development process of understanding biological meaning of eating in preschool children through questionnaire surveys of eating perception in mothers and a selection task experiment in preschool children. A fourth study examined the effects of different attitudes towards eating of preschools on the development process of understanding eating perception in preschool children through a selection task experiment in children going to kindergartens that require lunch boxes and children going to nursery schools that provide a lunch service. The results of the third and fourth studies revealed whether differences in early childhood eating experiences had any effect on the development process of understanding biological meaning of eating in preschool children. The fourth chapter discussed a study that focused on understanding social meaning of eating in preschool children. This fifth study investigated the relationship between understanding social meaning of eating in preschool children and the eating situation at home, i.e., whether or not the family ate together, through a selection task experiment in preschool children. A sixth study investigated the relationship between understanding social meaning of eating in preschool children and differences in mothers' eating perception and attitudes towards child rearing through a selection task experiment in preschool children similar to that in the fifth study. An additional seventh study was conducted into whether understanding social

meaning of eating in preschool children differed between children going to kindergartens and children going to nursery schools. The results of the fifth, sixth and seventh studies revealed that early childhood eating experiences had an effect on the development process of understanding social meaning of eating in preschool children.

The fifth chapter used the findings obtained from these seven studies to comprehensively discuss several factors. The first factor was how eating experiences in early childhood differ depending on differences in mothers' attitudes towards child rearing and the type of eating. The second factor was how different eating experiences at home and at preschool affect understanding biological meaning of eating in preschool children. The third factor was how different eating experiences at preschools do not affect the understanding of social meaning of eating in preschool children, whereas eating experiences at home do affect the understanding of social meaning of eating in preschool children. The fourth factor was how mothers and childcare workers should convey information about eating to children when children are learning about the meaning of eating, such as why eating is necessary for growth and health and why they should eat communally, and what effect this has on social customs and values and experiences of eating.

The significances of this study were firstly, to clarify the developmental process of the understanding of eating behaviors in preschool children, which had not been clarified to date. Understanding of eating perception was established when children reached 4 years of age and a causal explanation of the meanings of eating became possible. Moreover, by 5 years of age, this explanation was further elaborated. Secondly in order to investigate the developmental process of understanding of eating perception from the standpoint of eating experiences in preschool children, it was found that eating experiences at home and at preschool had effects on understanding biological meaning of eating ; however, eating experiences at preschool were found to have no effect on understanding social meaning of eating .

This study indicated that socioeconomic status and mothers' eating perception were associated with mothers' approaches to eating situations, while the type of eating at preschool was associated with childcare workers' approaches to eating situations in preschools, thereby (this study) contributed to expanding the scope of research on eating in early childhood from new perspectives. Thirdly to investigate how preschool children perceive communal eating from the perspective of recognizing its perception, this study demonstrated that mothers' commitment to providing opportunities for communal eating affects understanding social meanings of eating in preschool children. Finally this study indicated the importance of dietary education through communication in everyday eating situations, by making these eating situations at home and at preschool into learning opportunities

for children.

Shedding light on the development process of understanding eating perception in preschool children who will develop their own lifelong eating patterns in this study provided important findings for future dietary education in preschool children.