

Centre for Food Policy

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*Full Study Title:* What policy options will be effective in encouraging healthy feeding practices among infants and

young children?

*Short Title:* The Feeding infants study

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1. **Introduction**

This project is intended to address the UK Department of Health and Social Care’s concerns related to young children’s consumption of follow-on milks and commercial toddler foods. Although there are clear restrictions on the marketing of infant formula (IF) [1], IF manufacturers also produce other categories of milks, including “follow-on formulas”, “growing up milks”, and “toddler milks”, with packaging and labelling designed to look like IF [2]. These milks are not considered to confer any benefits to young children [3], and contain higher levels of sugar than cow or breast milk [4]. Commercial snacks and baby foods are also widely promoted. While they often fail to meet nutritional recommendations for the intended age group, they imply benefits to the child that can confuse and mislead caregivers [5]. Considerable evidence underscores the importance of establishing healthy feeding practices early to protect against obesity and related chronic diseases later in life [6,7]. Given this, it is important to understand what influences caregivers’ decisions about what to feed their children in the period where infants are transitioning from breast milk or IF to solid food. There is currently limited research in the UK or internationally that considers, in-depth, the transition from breast milk or IF to solid food. This is especially problematic since contextual factors have been shown to be more important than nutritional ideals in shaping feeding practices [8]. There is, therefore, an opportunity to use qualitative methods to explore the variety of factors that may influence infant feeding transitions. These include: labelling and claims on packaging; engagement with health professionals; familial and social context; and the influence of existing policies such as the Healthy Start scheme. Furthermore, including a range of income groups will allow a comparison to be drawn between various socio-economic contexts. Given that this research will be carried out during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is also important to understand how this context is shaping feeding decisions that might have long-term implications.

1. **Aims and objectives**

Aims:

1. To provide insights into the complex range of factors that influence caregivers across the socioeconomic spectrum when deciding what food and drink to purchase for their infant children.
2. To generate evidence that will enable us to identify policies that can create the necessary conditions to support healthy infant feeding practices.
3. **Research questions**
4. How do parents of infants across the socio-economic spectrum experience the transition from milk to solid food?
5. What influences the food and drink parents across the socioeconomic spectrum choose for their infants?
6. What are the implications for public health policies that aim to facilitate healthy childhood diets?
7. **Plan, methods, expertise available, statistical power**

This project is a qualitative longitudinal study that will take place remotely over the period of a year. We intend to recruit approximately 60 parents, living in England, who have a baby that is 4-6 months old at the start of the study. After participants complete an online survey, the researchers will engage with the participants three times over the course of the study: at baseline, six months, and 12 months. Each research engagement will comprise one semi-structured interview, and a photo-elicitation exercise. By engaging with the participants over the course of a year, we will be able to explore how feeding practices form, while they are in the process of forming, and understand what changes as infants get older.

We aim to recruit participants from across the socioeconomic spectrum in order to understand how

socioeconomic position may influence infant feeding practices. Thus we will recruit an equal number of participants of high, middle, and low SEP. We will do this by asking all participants to initially fill out an online Qualtrics survey using a validated tool developed by Kininmoth et al (2020)that will determine SEP. Once we have recruited enough individuals of a particular SEP we will stop recruiting from that group. Any data we receive from people in those groups filling out surveys at that point will be deleted.

The methodology is designed to elicit information on a) parents experiences of feeding their infants over the first year of weaning b) how these experiences are shaped by individual, social, cultural, and economic factors.

Sample & Setting

This is an in-depth qualitative study. We aim to recruit 60 parents (20 each of high, middle and low SEP) of infants age 4-6 months living across England. Interviews will take place over Zoom or telephone, with participants most likely in their own homes.

Recruitment

All recruitment will take place virtually using a multi-pronged strategy. Recruitment material

comprises a poster and short blurb (both attached) both of which provide a link to the Qualtrix survey

and researcher contact details so that interested participants can find out more. These will be

distributed through a variety of channels, with interested parents asked to fill out the survey or

contact the researchers. Recruitment channels are as follows:

1. We have generated a list of baby-related Facebook groups across the country (attached). We will

contact the administrators of these groups to ask if we are able to post about the study. This will

enable us to recruit from a wide geographical area.

2. We will utilise our own Twitter Feeds to advertise the study and encourage others to share details

3. We will disseminate the advert through contacts at the National Children's Bureau, and other

public health contacts whose remit involves parents and infants.

4. Finally, we will utilise a process of snowball sampling where we will ask participants to share

information about the study with their friends and acquaintances.

In the event that we are unable to recruit through these means we will develop an alternative plan

which we will submit to the ethics committee.

Once the study commences, further participants will be recruited through a snowballing method, where participants are asked to identify other potential participants. Participants will be provided with the survey link to give to their contacts. In such cases new participants will fill out the survey independently.

Consent

Given the challenges related to remote working and the lack of access to a printer, consent during

the study will be established in the following ways.

1. Consent to fill out the online survey will be established by participants filling out the online survey

and pressing enter. This is described at the beginning of the survey. Additionally a link to the

participant information sheet for the whole study will be provided in the intro to the survey. It will be

up to the participant to decide how long to take between reading the PI sheet and filling out the

survey. In the event that a participant asks us to fill out the online form on their behalf, we will send

this PI sheet to them via Whattsap or email.

2. After participants fill out the online survey, consent to take part in the full longitudinal study will be

established by the researcher (either Anna Isaacs or Kimberley Neve) sending the PI sheet and

consent form to participants either via email or Whattsap (in pdf format). The PI sheet will be sent at

the point where we have an initial conversation with the participant about arranging the interview.

This will be at least one day before the interview but likely more than this. We can inform participants

that they can ask us questions over Whatssap or by telephone. We will also ascertain at this point

whether they would like us to send the consent form over Whatsap or via email.

Just prior to the start of the interview we will send the consent form according to participant's

preferred means of receipt. The participant will indicate consent by sending a 'yes' or 'no' back in a

whattsap or email reply. We will then take a screenshot of this correspondence to save in a consent

file. We want to minimise the burden or participation as much as possible and therefore do not think it

right to ask participants to scan signatures or print and post consent forms.

Consent at this stage will be applied to the full longitudinal study. However we will reiterate to

participants that they are not obligated to remain involved should to decide they don't want to.

Additionally we will re-establish consent verbally before each follow up interview.

**Methodology**

Three methods will be used to conduct this longitudinal study:

**Qualtrix survey**

Interested participants will be asked to fill out a short online survey (if an individual does not have internet access or feel comfortable using the survey form) we can also fill this out for them over the phone). The survey contains demographic questions that will allow us to calculate socioeconomic position (as validated by Kinnimouth et al 2020), additional demographic information such as age, gender, and ethnicity, and receive contact details from participants. Once participants have filled out this form,the researchers will use their data to calculate their SEP. Providing there are still spaces left within their SEP recruitment bracket. The researcher will send a text message/ Whattsap to the participant to check if they are interested in participating in the full study. They will follow this up with a short phone call to discuss the research and arrange a time for the first interview. Alternatively if the participant prefers this initial conversation will take place over Whattsap/ text message. If the participant is from an SEP bracket that is already full, the researcher will contact the participant to let them know. If the participant is no longer interested, or their SEP category has already been filled, all the data provided through the Qualtrix survey will be immediately and permanently deleted.

**Semi-structured interview**

We will conduct a semi-structured interview with each participant at the study outset, and then at six

months and one year later. The purpose of these interviews is to elicit data on how infant feeding

practices are formed, while they are forming, and explore how these practices change over time and

what influences them. Thus the topic guides will cover comprise questions about the purchasing and

feeding practices that participants are engaged in, their experiences of these practices, and the

broader life context in which participants are embedded. Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all

the interviews will be carried out remotely, and participants will be given the option of whether they

prefer a phone call or video call.

**Photo elicitation.**

At the end of the semi-structured interview, we will ask participants to spend a week taking

photographs of things related to feeding their infants. While we are currently unable to engage in

participant observation, photo-elicitation is intended to provide additional insight into the context in

which feeding practices are formed. Photo-elicitation is a participatory, photo-based method in which

the participant takes photos related to a specific topic over a set period of time (in this case a week),

and the photos and their meanings are subsequently discussed with the researcher [1]. Since

participants are able to photograph what they wish, when they wish, the participant, rather than the

researcher, is able to control the research narrative. During the first and second follow up we will ask

if participants want to combine the photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews rather than do

them separately.

We will provide guidelines, sent over email or via Whattsap. These will provide some technical advice

(e.g., not to take photos into the sun) and outline confidentiality related issues (e.g., not taking photos

in private spaces, or of individuals without their consent). The guidelines are not intended to influence

the subject matter of the photos.

The participant will send the photos to the researcher over email or Whattsap and then arrange a

second interview, where each photo will be discussed in turn with the participant describing why they

took the photo and what it is intended to depict.

With the participants' consent, all semi-structured and photo-elicitation interviews will be recorded

and the recordings stored on a City University owned and encrypted laptop. They will be transcribed

verbatim by the transcription company Way With Words.

Participants will be re-contacted 6 months after the photo-elicitation interview to organise a follow up

interview and photo elicitation. This will also be repeated at 12 months.

Data recording and storage

A robust procedure will be put in place to safeguard the confidentiality of the participants.

All photographs and interview transcripts will be de-identified and assigned a code that links it to the individual. Photos will be kept in separate encrypted files and any identifying photos removed or blurred prior to analysis. The photos will only be used for the purposes of analysis and not shared outside of the research team.

Consent forms will be stored in a separate encrypted file

Analysis

We will take a cross sectional approach to data analysis, which will allow us both to analyse each

part of the research separately as well as compare and contrast the findings across set of interviews

and photo-elicitation activities. Data at base line, six, and 12 months will be analysed thematically

using inductive approach. We will then compare the themes across the study period to understand

how experiences of infant feeding change over time.

End of study definition

Production of report for DHSC

Ethics

Ethical approval has been obtained from City, University of London School of Health Sciences proportionate review committee.

The CI will be responsible for updating the Ethics committee of any new information related to the study.

Funding

The study is funded through the NIHR as part of work for the Obesity Policy Research Unit

Reports

The research will presented in a series of reports to the UK Department of Health and Social Care. Additionally a report will be prepared for the participants.

Publication

Findings from the study will be published in peer–reviewed publications.

1. **Key references**
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