

# WHY DO MOTHERS' VIEWS OF CHILD HEALTH AND FEEDING MATTER?

## Symposium Overview

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Key Words: Child Health, Child Feeding, Nutrition

**Purpose:** The purpose of this symposium is to present a variety of research papers concerning mothers' views of how their children should grow, how they should be fed, how their health should be protected and what the consequences are of child rearing practices that are not recognized by maternal/child health professionals. Childhood overweight (BMI > 95<sup>th</sup> percentile) is recognized as an epidemic by the health professions. However parents, who have control over the kinds of food their children eat, have not been asked how they feed their children and what they perceive as healthy weight for their children. Without understanding the parents' perspective on child health and growth, interventions to reduce childhood overweight will not be successful in the long term.

**Method:** The papers include qualitative methods such as explanatory models, and longitudinal ethnography, and quantitative methods such as chart reviews and examination of children's anthropometrics and teeth. The papers are based in clinical practices of the authors and reflect the client populations served by the authors. The authors conducted their studies with a variety of populations, including Head Start mothers along the Texas Mexico border, rural Appalachian mothers, Hispanic mothers in Texas, and African American mothers in Georgia. All the mothers were from low income populations.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that a wide variety of foods are given to infants, and solid food is introduced much earlier than is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The reasons given for early introduction of solid food include "to make the baby happy and help the baby sleep through the night". Mothers do not consider infant cereal, especially in bottles, to be solid food, and solid food is interpreted as table food. Breastfeeding is not widely practiced, and exclusive breastfeeding, where no other food or fluid is given, is relatively rare in the low income populations studied. Mothers do not consider oral health to be a significant concern. Mothers do not consider their children to be overweight, when by BMI calculations they are.

**Discussion:** Poverty has cultural implications as well as economic indications. These mothers had similar views of child health, child feeding and child growth, regardless of their ethnicities, and they shared the culture of poverty. Nurses need to be culturally competent when working with differing income levels and educational levels as well as with diverse ethnicities. The first step to altering detrimental practices is to understand why they occur. By attending to the practices currently used by mothers to keep their children healthy and growing, we can understand how to alter these detrimental practices.

