

# **Investigating the Intergenerational Links Between Parental Eating Disorders and Children's Eating Behaviours: A Systematic Review**

## **Introduction and rationale**

Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions that can affect an individual's physical health, psychological wellbeing and relationship with food (NHS,2026). Conditions such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder can have lasting consequences for individuals and their families. An important area of research is the potential intergenerational transmission of eating disorders, which examines how vulnerability to eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours may be associated with experiences and influences passed between generations.

Although eating disorders are influenced by multiple factors, family environments may play an important role in shaping children's attitudes towards food, body image and weight. Children may learn behaviours by observing their parents, including how they discuss their bodies, respond to food and express concerns about weight. Parental dieting, negative body image and restrictive eating practices may therefore be relevant to understanding how disordered eating behaviours develop.

Chapman et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of parenting attitudes, behaviours and parent-child interactions among parents with eating disorders. The review included 33 studies and identified evidence of increased parenting stress, greater concern about children's weight and difficulties during some parent-child interactions. The authors suggested that parenting practices may be one potential environmental mechanism involved in intergenerational transmission.

Similarly, a systematic review by Martini et al. (2020) examined maternal eating disorders and children's development. The findings suggested that children of mothers with eating disorders may experience difficulties with eating behaviours, socio-emotional development and other aspects of psychological functioning. However, the authors also highlighted the need for further research into protective factors that may support positive outcomes.

More recent research by Throm et al. (2024) examined parental communication and modelling behaviours during mealtimes. The review suggested that parental eating behaviours and communication patterns may influence children's relationship with food, although findings relating to controlling speech and other communication practices were inconsistent.

These findings demonstrate the importance of investigating how family environments may contribute to disordered eating. However, it is essential to distinguish between an increased risk of developing an

eating disorder and direct transmission. Children do not inevitably develop an eating disorder because a parent experiences one. Genetic influences, peer relationships, social media, cultural expectations and individual psychological characteristics may also contribute.

Therefore, this project will critically examine existing research to improve understanding of the possible pathways through which eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours may be associated across generations. The findings may help identify opportunities for early prevention and family support.

Further evidence highlights the importance of examining intergenerational influences across multiple generations. Arroyo, Segrin and Andersen (2017) investigated disordered eating among 242 grandmother–mother–daughter groups and found associations between mothers' and daughters' disordered eating, alongside indirect relationships involving maternal communication and modelling. This suggests that attitudes towards food, weight and appearance may be communicated through both direct comments and behaviours observed within the family. However, these findings do not establish that family communication independently causes eating disorders. Chapman et al. (2021) similarly identified potential differences in parenting practices and parent-child interactions among parents with eating disorders, while Throm et al. (2024) highlighted inconsistencies in the evidence surrounding mealtime communication. Hart et al. (2015) further demonstrated the relevance of examining parent-focused prevention strategies. Collectively, these studies support investigating both potential risk factors and protective influences, while recognising the roles of genetic vulnerability, social pressures and individual differences.

## **Research question, aim and objectives**

### **Research question:**

How are parental eating disorders, attitudes towards body image and family eating behaviours associated with the development of disordered eating behaviours in children and adolescents?

### **Research aim:**

To critically review existing literature exploring the intergenerational transmission of eating disorders, with particular attention to parental modelling, body image attitudes and family eating environments.

### **Research objectives:**

1. To examine associations between parental eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours in children and adolescents.

2. To investigate the potential influence of parental attitudes towards food, weight and body image.
3. To explore how family relationships, mealtime interactions and parental modelling may contribute to disordered eating.
4. To identify protective factors and limitations within the existing research.

## **Proposed methodology**

This project will adopt a structured literature review to identify, evaluate and synthesise existing academic research on the intergenerational transmission of eating disorders. A review-based approach is appropriate because the topic involves complex psychological and family-related influences that have already been investigated through observational studies, interviews and systematic reviews.

Conducting a new experimental study would be unsuitable because researchers cannot ethically assign families to potentially harmful eating behaviours or expose children to risk factors for eating disorders. Recruiting participants with diagnosed eating disorders could also involve sensitive personal information and require substantial ethical safeguards. Reviewing existing evidence provides a feasible way to investigate the research question within the dissertation timeframe.

Studies published between January 2000 and October 2026 will be prioritised, alongside earlier foundational studies where relevant. Peer-reviewed studies published in English will be considered if they investigate parental eating disorders, parental attitudes towards food or body image, or family eating practices in relation to children's or adolescents' eating behaviours. Quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method studies will be eligible, as each can provide different insights into the research question. Relevant systematic reviews will also be used to identify key findings and additional primary studies.

Studies that do not examine intergenerational influences, focus exclusively on adult eating disorders without a family-related component, or do not report relevant outcomes will be excluded.

The screening process will involve reviewing titles and abstracts before assessing potentially relevant full-text articles against the inclusion criteria. Information will be recorded in a data extraction table, including authors, publication year, research design, sample characteristics, measures used and principal findings. The methodological quality and limitations of the selected studies will also be assessed.

## **Data analysis**

The collected evidence will be analysed using narrative and thematic synthesis. This approach is appropriate because the literature is likely to include different research designs, participant groups and measures of eating disorders, making a single statistical analysis unsuitable.

Findings will be organised into three main themes: parental modelling and eating behaviours; body image, weight-related attitudes and family communication; and protective factors within family environments.

Studies will be compared to identify consistent findings, contradictory evidence and gaps in the literature. Particular attention will be given to whether studies demonstrate an association or provide evidence of a possible pathway of influence. For example, if a study identifies a relationship between parental dieting and adolescent disordered eating, this does not necessarily establish that parental dieting caused the behaviour.

The analysis will also consider potential confounding factors, including genetic vulnerability, socioeconomic circumstances, gender, social media exposure and wider cultural influences. This will help ensure that conclusions reflect the complexity of eating disorder development rather than attributing responsibility solely to parents.

## **Potential problems and ethical considerations**

One potential difficulty is that studies may define and measure eating disorders and disordered eating differently. Some may examine clinically diagnosed disorders, while others focus on body dissatisfaction, dieting or food-related concerns. These outcomes will therefore need to be distinguished during analysis.

Another limitation is the possibility of publication bias and a lack of longitudinal evidence. Many studies may identify associations without establishing how behaviours develop over time. Furthermore, existing research may overrepresent mothers and certain eating disorder diagnoses, limiting the generalisability of findings.

To address these problems, the review will use transparent selection criteria, consider different study designs and critically evaluate the quality of the evidence. Ethical considerations will include respectful, non-stigmatising language and avoiding the implication that parents are responsible for their children's eating disorders. As the study will use published research, direct recruitment of participants will not be required, although university guidance on literature-based research will be followed.

## Conclusion

This research will critically explore how parental eating disorders, body image attitudes and family eating behaviours may be associated with disordered eating across generations. By identifying potential risk factors alongside protective influences, the review may contribute to a better understanding of early prevention and family support. Importantly, it will recognise that eating disorders have complex causes and that intergenerational associations do not determine an individual's future mental health.

Furthermore, the research will examine how parental modelling, comments about weight and appearance, and attitudes towards food may influence children's perceptions of their bodies and eating habits. It will also consider how positive family relationships, open communication and supportive mealtime environments may help protect against the development of disordered eating. By evaluating existing research critically, the study aims to identify gaps in current knowledge and highlight areas for future investigation. Ultimately, the findings may help inform parental awareness, early intervention strategies and support for families affected by eating disorders.

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