



## 'It's not worth the fight': Fathers' perceptions of family mealtime interactions, feeding practices and child eating behaviours

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### ABSTRACT

Fathers' perceptions of feeding children are rarely considered in the literature, yet there is growing recognition of their unique contribution to the family feeding environment. This study aimed to explore fathers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and lived experiences of mealtime interactions with children and other family members. Fathers (N = 27) of children aged  $\leq 12$  years old were recruited from occupationally diverse workplaces and participated in six focus groups on-site at the fathers' workplaces. Using grounded theory, we show that fathers' *connection* to children at mealtimes influenced how they *perceived* and *responded* to child eating behaviours. Three major themes were identified in fathers' experiences of mealtime interactions: (i) valuing connection and communication; (ii) expectations and perceptions of child eating behaviours, and (iii) feeding practices used in an attempt to align their mealtime expectations to reality. Fathers' connections were informed by their mealtime goals, historical feeding interactions with their child and intergenerational transmission of cultural values. These values were communicated between father and child through verbal (e.g. conversations) and structural (e.g. being present at meals) cues. Fathers described challenging child behaviours that disrupted mealtime connections, such as food refusal or the use of digital devices. Awareness of child food preferences, distractors, time, personal or child mood, and guilt triggered fathers' adjustment of their feeding practices, often in an effort to avoid mealtime conflict. Fathers tended to describe their feeding practices within the context of mothers' feeding practices and mealtime participation. The values that underpin fathers' connection to family mealtimes can be leveraged to inform culturally-appropriate interventions that facilitate positive, shared family meals to support child health and development.

### 1. Introduction

Generally, shared family meals are associated with positive child outcomes, including healthy diets, and the reduced risk of obesity and eating disorders (Dallacker, Hertwig, & Mata, 2018; Hammons & Fiese, 2011). However, the quality of interpersonal interactions that occur within family meals may be a more nuanced predictor of child health (Fiese, Jones, & Jarick, 2015; Fiese, Winter, & Botti, 2011). Feeding practices describe one type of mealtime interaction identified as a potentially modifiable determinant of child food preferences (Vollmer & Baietto, 2017), eating behaviours (Gregory, Paxton, & Brozovic, 2010) and weight (Birch & Fisher, 2000). Responsive feeding practices, characterised by parents' prompt and appropriate responses to child hunger and satiety cues, is thought to support children's appetite self-

regulation (DiSantis, Hodges, Johnson, & Fisher, 2011). Structured and regular mealtimes may also facilitate parents' attention and response to children's appetite cues (Jansen, Mallan, Nicholson, & Daniels, 2014) and create a space for positive social interactions to occur. Non-responsive, controlling feeding practices may override the child's autonomy of food intake (Birch & Davison, 2001) and generate mealtime conflict (Harris, Ria-Searle, Jansen, & Thorpe, 2018). Feeding practices occur within the broader context of the family meal and are underpinned by personal goals, beliefs and values (DiSantis et al., 2011) and their child's characteristics (Harris, Fildes, Mallan, & Llewellyn, 2016). However, the parent feeding literature has primarily focused on mothers, and fathers' perspectives of child feeding and family meals are lacking. To extend the literature, the current qualitative study aimed to explore fathers' beliefs and attitudes towards child feeding and family

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meals.

Mothers and fathers make unique contributions to child rearing (Hallers-Haalboom et al., 2016) and feeding (Khandpur, Charles, Blaine, Blake, & Davison, 2016), therefore maternal-focused research cannot be generalised to fathers. Scant evidence suggests that mothers and fathers may approach child feeding differently (Tan, Lumeng, & Miller, 2019). For example, some observational (Orrell-Valente et al., 2007; Wendt et al., 2015) and cross-sectional survey (Tschann et al., 2013) studies show that fathers use more non-responsive feeding practices than mothers. However, these associations are inconsistent; with other studies reporting that fathers use less non-responsive feeding practices than mothers (Walton et al., 2019) or null associations (Haycraft & Blissett, 2008). Moreover, how mothers and fathers coordinate feeding efforts together could also be a pertinent factor related to family mealtime interactions (Harris, Jansen, Mallan, Daniels, & Thorpe, 2018). Qualitative research has shown that, while parents often share feeding goals and roles, perceived discordance in feeding practices between parents may be due to differing dietary perspectives and child feeding philosophies (Khandpur, Charles, & Davison, 2016; Thullen, Majee, & Davis, 2016). Some fathers believe that discordant feeding approaches between caregivers may lead to child food refusal and tantrums (Khandpur, Charles, & Davison, 2016). Additional evidence from fathers' individual perspectives could provide context for the climate in which feeding interactions take place.

The underrepresentation of fathers in the feeding literature is contradictory to fathers' present-day involvement in feeding children. A majority of fathers report being responsible for feeding-related tasks, such as grocery shopping, meal planning and preparation, cleaning up and food socialisation (Jansen, Harris, & Rossi, 2019; Mallan et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2017). Yet in a recent review, Rahill, Kennedy, and Kearney (2020) identified a lack of qualitative studies that examine how fathers' position their own feeding behaviours in relation to children's eating behaviours. Rahill et al. (2020) go on to propose a need to understand fathers' beliefs and attitudes toward child feeding in the broad context of family meals, including fathers' responses to children's eating. Additionally, Khandpur, Charles, Blaine, Blake, and Davison (2016) reported that fathers with lower educational levels tend to engage in non-responsive feeding practices, like letting a child dictate food decisions and using food as a means to bond with children. Gaining a foundational understanding of fathers' attitudes and values towards child feeding and family meals, particularly in fathers with lower educational levels, could inform interventions that support positive mealtime interactions.

Inclusive, family-based feeding interventions would benefit from being informed by a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of fathers (Peeters, Davison, Ma, & Haines, 2019). While research related to fathers' influence on child eating behaviours and dietary intake is expanding (Litchford, Savoie Roskos, & Wengreen, 2019), less is known about how fathers perceive feeding interactions in the context of family meals (Rahill et al., 2020). This qualitative study was focused on fathers with diverse education and occupational backgrounds and aimed to explore their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and lived experiences of mealtime interactions with children and other family members. Based on the lack of current theory around fathers' responses to feeding children at mealtimes, we attempt to gauge a complex portrait of fathers' perceptions of mealtime interactions using a grounded theory analytic approach.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Setting, recruitment and participants

The current study draws on data from the 'What Fathers Want' Study (Jansen, Harris, Daniels, Thorpe, & Rossi, 2018) which aimed to (i) explore fathers' involvement in their child's mealtimes; and examine fathers' workplaces as a potential setting for (ii) recruitment and (iii)

implementation of family-focused nutrition interventions. Aims (ii) and (iii) have been addressed (Jansen et al., 2018), therefore aim (i) is the focus of the current study. Another paper has dealt with fathers' perceptions of structuring meals and the division of family food labour (Jansen et al., 2019), while this current paper focuses specifically on what happens *during* mealtimes. This study was approved by the human research ethics committee of the Queensland University of Technology.

Recruitment procedures of 'What Fathers Want' participants have been reported elsewhere (Jansen et al., 2018). Briefly, the study team approached male-dominated workplaces within 'blue collar occupations' and 'service industries' as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2011) including technicians and trades workers, machinery operators, drivers, social assistance, postal and warehousing, and accommodation and food services. Such workplaces were targeted to recruit fathers directly (rather than through mothers or children) and obtain an occupationally diverse sample. Fathers with children aged 0- to 12-years old were invited to participate in focus groups held within their workplace. A total of six focus groups took place in six different workplaces to yield a sample of  $N = 27$  fathers. Fathers (mean  $\pm$  SD,  $41 \pm 6$  years old) were mostly the child's biological father (93%), living with their child every day (82%) and married (86%). Fathers worked on average  $40 \pm 7$  h of paid work per week and 36% had a university degree.

### 2.2. Qualitative interviews

The semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted by the research team (HH, EJ and TR) and lasted approximately 60 min. Earlier focus groups were led by a male, senior researcher experienced in interviewing in the areas of education, sport, and workplace learning (including within allied health and medical education) (TR) with the other female team members present (HH, EJ) who were early career researchers with backgrounds in nutrition and parenting research. Progressively, the female team members took the lead of focus groups at different settings with the male interviewer present for the majority of the focus groups. Interview questions used in the current study were pilot tested with one father for comprehension and flow, and have been published (Jansen et al., 2018). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### 2.3. Analysis

A detailed description of data analysis is reported in Jansen et al. (2019). Briefly, the data were organised, coded and analysed following the principles of grounded theory (GT; Charmaz, 2008). GT is an inductive methodology with an acknowledged propensity for rigour (Gray, 2009) and is considered compelling especially when an iterative rather than solely an inductive approach to theory building is undertaken (Orton, 1997). Support for GT stems from the systematised approach to research design and data analysis, as well as the capacity to generate theory (Neuman, 2006; O'Leary, 2017). Goulding (2017) claims GT can be "used as a methodology to develop new theoretical insights, build alternative frameworks, and challenge the doxa of established conventional wisdom" (p.62). Hence, this iterative qualitative approach enables the poorly understood phenomena to be more comprehensively described and analysed, particularly where current theorising is considered to be deficient (Foley & Timonen, 2015). Themes and eventually theories are, as Charmaz (2008) argues, constructed by researchers who discuss and share their interpretations constantly to such a point that a shared interpretation is reached and ultimately agreed upon. Such an approach guided the data analysis for this paper and for the broader project of which it is a part.

The research team completed a thorough familiarisation process of the transcribed data and then coded the data to create initial 'meaning units' (MU) as the smallest component of analysis (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). Tesch (1990) describes MU as a section of text that

contains a single idea such that the MU can stand alone or out of the context of the textual data. These two steps (familiarisation and the creation of initial MU) were crucial to establish full immersion in and early descriptions of the data. Weed (2017) argues that it is the principles of coding that define GT rather than the *actual* coding method. Weed (2017) goes on to argue that early and initial descriptions of the data form the basis before moving to higher order analysis and overarching categories and themes.

To ensure rigor, each author independently coded the transcript of the first focus group undertaken. The researchers then collaboratively reviewed the MU across a further analysis session of three hours to establish agreement in observations, tags and codes that formed the MU. The MUs were then clustered to create categories. With these agreed and refined categories, each researcher was then allocated an equal share of the remaining transcripts to analyse independently. Once completed, the researchers collaborated again to create larger overarching categories that then enabled the identification of themes and sub-themes, creating a hierarchical structure similar to that described by Côté et al. (1993). Agreement across the research team was established through extended negotiation. The ensuing thematic structure enabled the construction of the storyline for the data. There are competing and contested discourses associated with what Braun and Clarke (2019) refer to as ‘mash-ups’, that is a mixing of qualitative methods that they argue are incompatible. However, the identification of thematic structures as a methodological component of grounded theory provide the means by which the building of new theory can be generated (see Jansen et al., 2019). Others have voiced support for mixing methods, specifically grounded theory approaches (particularly the detailed systematic coding) and thematic analysis. Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, and Townsend (2010) for example, argue that thematic analysis and grounded theory have increasingly been drawn together for their collective power rather than be kept apart because of perceived antagonistic differences. In their now oft cited paper, Braun and Clarke (2006) do refer to the flexibility of thematic approaches though advocated against an ‘anything goes’ attitude to analysis. However the analyses of these data was informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) argument that themes do not simply ‘exist’ in the data to be discovered or to magically emerge. Rather, in this study, themes were consciously constructed from the codes and categories, in the later stages of the analytical process, to assist with the creation of a narrative that described the family mealtime experiences of the fathers in the current study. Hence, the current study had some similarities with the six steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) including the recursive visits to the data as part of a constant comparison process. This included repeated photographing our developing themes on a white board as a way of archiving our ongoing analytical processes. However, it is important to stress Braun and Clarke’s (2006) ideas did not provide the original analytical impetus for this study and hence were not followed precisely.

### 3. Results

Overall, fathers’ *connection* to children at mealtimes influenced how they *perceived* and *responded* to child eating behaviours. In other words, fathers’ connection and communication acted as a fluid conduit between child eating and father feeding. Reciprocal transactions between fathers and children were underpinned by the values fathers ascribed to mealtimes, which transcended satiating hunger. Three main themes were identified with descriptions provided in Table 1. Supporting data for each theme is provided in the text below. Textual data are labelled with abbreviations to highlight the member and the focus group to which they belonged (e.g. M3, G1 indicates member 3 of focus group 1). Where applicable, pseudonyms are used.

#### 3.1. Connection and communication

##### 3.1.1. Mealtimes as a social occasion

Fathers valued mealtimes as a platform to anchor social interactions with their children. Most fathers shared the view that mealtimes were an event to ‘catch up’ with family members outside the confines of work hours. In one father’s words, discussing “anything and everything” was just “a part of the meal” (M6, G6). However, fathers ascribed a deeper meaning to mealtimes beyond obtaining nutrition or even conversing; they valued this setting as a means of bonding with the whole family. The physical presence of family members at mealtimes was an integral part of connecting together as a family unit.

... it's probably a bonding time actually for us like sitting down, eating, because it is one of the times that you are actually all together really ... Yeah outside of your days off and stuff like that. Mealtimes would be the time that everybody is there. (M3, G1)

Fathers were pragmatic about the types of mealtimes (breakfast vs. dinner) within the day of a working week which best lent themselves to meaningful connections. Fathers appeared to adjust their expectations of connections that could be forged at any given mealtime. Creating connections at mealtimes required fathers to be present, but not necessarily eating too. Simply being present for family meals enabled connection between father and child(ren). However, mealtimes for the purpose of communication was not a unanimous view shared by all fathers in the sample. A few fathers and their children were motivated to reach the end of the mealtime, often to move onto chores or activities such as bathing, watching TV or using devices. For example, one father reasoned that “Oh, [the kids] don’t talk. They know the faster they eat, the faster they can leave” (M2, G7). Nevertheless, fathers still valued these mealtimes as a point of connection with other family members, even without small talk.

##### 3.1.2. Transgenerational values for social connection at mealtimes

Fathers drew on traditional values relating to family mealtimes from their own experiences growing up. Furthermore, fathers enacting mealtimes which are familiar from their own childhood demonstrated their values for passing on traditions and culture within the family. However, the ubiquity of modern-day technology (i.e., electronic devices) has added an element of complexity for fathers to navigate mealtime rules which invariably impact social connections with children. Maintaining traditional values in communicating with children at mealtimes proved to be challenging in the present-day environment.

One day, I said to him, if you don't stop that iPad, I'm going to break that in front of you .... it's mainly communication, because we got told, you know, if you're around the table, you're supposed to face each other, talk to each other. (M4, G3)

I suppose one thing I try to do, make a conscious effort everyday – probably because of my upbringing – was to eat at the kitchen table .... So more of an effort now to sit at the table and talk to the kids about their day because I think obviously ... I think they talk to their mum probably a lot more than they would to me.. (M1, G4)

The quote above speaks to the view that mealtimes are one of the few opportunities afforded to fathers to bond with children. Interestingly, this father draws a comparison to his children’s mother to demonstrate differential opportunities to communicate with children, potentially reflecting differences in caretaking roles. Communication during a meal may be a ‘naturalistic’ and regular event in which fathers can talk with their children, within the context of a full and busy working week.

Electronic devices, interactions with siblings and domestic pets facilitated or interfered with fathers’ connection to children at mealtimes. In contrast to those who drew on traditional mealtime values, some fathers felt that informal mealtime arrangements, such as eating in front

**Table 1**  
Descriptions of themes related to fathers' perspectives of mealtime interactions.

Theme	Description
<i>Connection and communication</i>	This overarching theme was woven through all child and father mealtime interactions. The two concepts of 'connection' and 'communication' are inextricably linked; 'connection' refers to the value fathers assign to mealtimes, while 'communication' refers to how this value is transmitted. Fathers' connections to family members at mealtimes were informed by the belief that mealtimes enabled socialisation, intergenerational transmission of values of family meals and their previous and present interactions with their children (across ages and stages). Communication refers to the reciprocal verbal or physical cues between father and child(ren) and other family members at mealtimes.
<i>Child eating behaviours</i>	This theme described how fathers perceived their child's eating, viewed through the prism of fathers' values and expectations of acceptable mealtime behaviour. In the context of mealtime challenges, fathers mainly described difficult child eating behaviours such as food refusal, but also concerns about their child's eating and weight.
<i>Feeding practices</i>	This theme encompasses the strategies fathers employed to manage children's eating to align with their ideal standards of mealtime behaviour, whether that be achieving pleasant mealtimes (i.e., through anticipatory catering) or ensuring food intake (i.e., 'getting' a child to eat). However, standards of acceptable mealtime behaviours were dynamic, changing according to the time of the day/week, or father's mood. This theme also captures how fathers compensated for mothers' feeding practices at mealtimes where feeding values were discordant. Through connection and communication, fathers observed the impact of their feeding practices on child eating behaviours.

of the TV, enabled relaxing interactions with their children. Specifically, one father said that eating in front of the TV allowed them to sit and "relax there with them" (M1, G2). Another father of an only child provided an electronic device to their child as a means of entertainment during mealtimes because, without siblings, "... they have to be entertained" (M1, G7). As such, this father may have used devices as an entertainment tool to keep the child at the table. However, more often than not, fathers mentioned electronic devices or TV as a hindrance to mealtime connection and communication. Fathers reported aiming to switch off or keep devices out of reach during mealtimes to facilitate communication.

... like when the TV's on, he'll just be there, just blankly staring at it and he doesn't really interact. Once you turn the TV off, he'll have a little bit of a tantrum, but after that's past, he becomes really interactive and really funny ... (M1, G3)

Distractors extended beyond technology to family pets. One father talked about the addition of a family cat which negatively impacted mealtime interactions between family members. This father had to constantly police children's behaviour.

[The cat is] a distraction, because normally when we sit down there's no radio or TV or anything, it's just us at the table having a conversation ... It's my time as well. (M3, G6)

### 3.1.3. Observing and responding to child development and characteristics

Fathers appeared to be sensitive to children's evolving development through social interactions occurring within family meals. For example, they reflected on the content of mealtime conversations as evolving in relation to their child's developmental stage. They appreciated that the content of conversations would become more sophisticated as children grew older and developed complex communication skills. As such, mealtimes grew 'richer' over time. However, one father mentioned that communication recoiled with his child approaching adolescence. In some cases, fathers used mealtime conversations as an opportunity to model mature conversations to their children.

I guess as the kids get older you see the conversations change. You're modeling conversations but then their input into the conversations is interesting as well. (M5, G4)

Mealtimes also appeared to present an opportunity for fathers to observe and evaluate their child's moods, energy levels and behaviours. These observations influenced how fathers interacted with children at mealtimes. Over time, fathers observed patterns of child behaviour across the day, recognised inconsistencies and responded to aberrations. Gauging children's moods helped fathers manage their own expectations for mealtime connection and communication.

Pretty intimate time. It can't always be counted because every single time it's different, but the wind-up period at the end of the day, I

find it more challenging ... The mornings are far more consistent – their mood, they've had their sleep, they're relaxed but I find that is very, very intimate like in terms of just, they'll be close to you, they're happy for cuddles while their having it, or they want to eat your meal. (M2, G2)

We make sure we have good communication all the time to see what he wants to eat or what he ate for lunch ... we try to make a variety of food [available] as well. (M2, G3).

In the quote above, a father generates discussion based on the food the child has consumed during the day to 'monitor' his eating behaviours and to tune into his son's nutritional intake or health. Fathers corroborated information about their own and their child's moods to inform how they connected with children at the table. In doing so, fathers demonstrated self-awareness in their responses to children at mealtimes. For example, one father said that communication at the dinner table was dependent on "what they're eating and how frustrated we are" (M4, G2). Another father who was aware of his 'hangry' tendencies spoke about his partner taking control of mealtimes as a contingency to avoid escalation in mealtime conflicts ("If they're fussing, my wife's probably more responsive to that than I am" [M4, G4]).

Fathers perceived mealtimes as a setting to communicate and connect with children. The process of building connections was unique for each father, and varied across the child's development and mood, and presence of distractors. Family mealtimes were often arranged to facilitate this bonding experience. Settings which facilitated this bonding experience varied between fathers, from sitting down and being present, to relaxing in front of the TV. Both connection and communication 'coloured' how fathers interpreted their child's eating behaviours, and how they responded or enforced rules (feeding practices). How communication manifested between child eating and father feeding interactions at mealtimes will be demonstrated in the next two sections.

## 3.2. Child eating behaviours

### 3.2.1. Difficult eating behaviour

Perceptions of child eating behaviours informed fathers' approach to mealtime interactions with children. Difficult child eating behaviours presented a challenge for fathers to forge connections with children during mealtimes. Fathers often labelled children's unpredictable eating behaviours or food preferences as being 'fussy' or 'picky'. The majority of fathers who labelled their child as a fussy eater described their dissatisfaction with meals or unwillingness to try new foods. These descriptions from fathers reinforce that perceptions of child fussy eating are "unpredictable" (M1, G3) and dependent on the food served. Other fathers rationalised unpredictable eating behaviours as a reflection of the child's changing mood and even expected frequent inconsistencies in children's food preferences. These fathers had a more accepting attitude towards deviations in food preferences; two fathers said with

respect to evolving food preferences: “that’s kids” (M1, G1) and “kids are kids” (M5, G4).

When my son was young, he ate a lot of vegetables, fruits, even ate his grandmother’s plants ... Then when he started eating solid food that’s when the moods came on, I won’t eat this, I don’t like it, then I like it. (M4, G3)

In this last quote, the father benchmarks his child’s present eating behaviour to previous behaviours. Fathers’ awareness of children’s changing eating behaviours allowed them to evaluate ‘where their child is at’ in terms of development. Therefore, connection is not only important for bonding (as demonstrated section 3.1), but also for reading and responding to children’s developing autonomy. One father expressed an understanding of children’s rejection of food as asserting their autonomy in the mealtime context.

In the context of children’s fussy eating, fathers sometimes felt that the effort they put into cooking was not equivocal to children’s enthusiasm about the food. Fathers appeared to internalize this rejection. They described a tension between wanting their children to eat the same things as the rest of the family, with “everyone eating everything on their plate” (M2, G1) while being satisfied with the meal. Accompanying these descriptions were fathers’ expression of frustration and disappointment.

Fussiness is what really gets me. Now I understand how frustrating that is. My wife used to get so frustrated. I kind of understood, but nowhere as near as I understand now. I spend an hour cooking something, you put it down and they just look at it and turn their noses up. (M2, G1)

Fathers also described their child’s eating in terms of the length of time it takes them to eat meals. The frame of reference was how long fathers took to finish a meal, with children eating comparatively slower compared to fathers (and mothers). Some fathers felt frustrated by mealtimes which were dragged out, possibly due to competing schedules that need to be completed at the end of the day (e.g. sleeping, bathing).

### 3.2.2. Concern for child eating and weight

Few fathers raised concerns about their child’s fluctuating or avid appetite. These descriptions also enmeshed feelings of frustration or confusion. Fathers described concerns about the child’s eating behaviours with reference to their (perceived) weight status. But notable in fathers’ descriptions are erroneous interpretations of growth charts or benchmarking with siblings. These comments were underscored with fathers’ fears of their child overeating and gaining excess weight.

So the middle child – all she wants to eat is rubbish ... You put veggies out and chicken and she’ll just eat the chicken and leave all the veggies there. And you always worry that she’s going to have this big blowout and be obese and all those things. That does definitely play on my mind. So a lot to be concerned about. (M2, G1)

These perspectives of child eating behaviours highlight a contradiction for fathers wanting their child to be a good eater by accepting the food provided, yet fearing that overeating or eating ‘unhealthy’ food may impact their growth.

## 3.3. Feeding practices

### 3.3.1. Anticipatory catering

A common thread underlying fathers’ descriptions of their feeding behaviours was the desire to reduce mealtime conflict, and in turn, improve family connections. While fathers often described a premeditated plan for feeding, many fathers diverged from this plan in response to fluctuating momentary factors, particularly children’s eating behaviours (see section 3.2). Premeditated plans often involved the type of food offered to the child. Few fathers did not deviate from

their premediated plan, and did not cater to their children’s food preferences: “... if they don’t like it, they starve. We’re not a restaurant” (M2, G7).

Most often in the evening mealtimes, fathers had preconceived ideas about whether the child would reject the food served, based on past experiences. To avoid children’s food rejection, some fathers prepared separate meals for children or opted for fast food. Other fathers reported providing children with a variety of ‘guided choices’ that they felt comfortable with. From fathers’ perspectives, both options prevented mealtime struggles, reduced the fear that the child will ‘go hungry’ and dissipated feelings of frustration. However, catering to children was described as a “bit of a production” (M6, G4), with increasing effort for larger families and for divorced/separated fathers.

Having something that they universally like is probably my biggest challenge. So you’d love to be able to make 3 different meals and sort them out with what they like and you know they are going to eat, but that is just not going to happen. So I find that clearly the biggest challenge ... And also if they don’t eat or if they are not eating well, you start cutting corners and getting takeaways and things like that, it just makes things worse on top of everything else. You think ‘Oh my god what are you doing, you’re not eating, you’re going to die’. It does play on your mind definitely ... So, it’s probably all mixed up, but when they come to my place, I want them to have a good time. And I’m more than happy for them to go and have a bit more fun at Dad’s and you probably shouldn’t do it but ... (M2, G1)

The quote above describes, from a recently divorced fathers’ perspective, a ‘guilt-feeding cycle’. When this father’s effort into building mealtime structure and limits (including the provision of healthy meals) was met with the child’s dissatisfaction with the meal, he relaxed the mealtime structure (“cutting corners and getting takeaways”). However, tension between his role as a caregiver and a playmate (“have a bit more fun at Dad’s”) evoked feelings of guilt about providing unhealthy foods to children. To uphold the moral code of a parent providing healthy foods to children, this father returned to his original intention. Other instances of the ‘guilt-feeding cycle’ were evident in other fathers’ accounts:

I’m making this great food. I’m grating up zucchini and carrots and I’m hiding it in the Bolognese ... I have tried some things and have said, that’s your breakfast for tomorrow and I’ll hold out the plate. And I’ve done those kinds of things. But I guess at the end of the day, I just sit there and look at them and they have tears rolling down their cheeks and you say, yeah, right. Whatever. Let’s get some fish and chips and pizza. So I give in to that. (M3, G7)

### 3.3.2. Strategies to ‘get’ children to eat

Fathers described a variety of strategies to ‘get’ children to eat. Some described varying degrees of pressuring children to eat to follow through with the premediated plan. For example, some fathers described pressuring their children to eat a certain type or amount of food (“you don’t get into bed until it’s eaten” [M5, G6]) but acknowledged the ineffectiveness of this practice. Other methods of ‘getting’ a child to eat particular foods or finish a meal included providing or withholding dessert, or bargaining with non-food rewards, such as TV or devices. Fathers clued onto what motivated children to finish eating: two fathers found that bargaining with TV shows (by turning ‘off’ during meals in response to food refusal or ‘on’ to encourage eating) was “the most effective tool” (M4, G2). However, there was also a common understanding that fathers would ‘pick their battles’ when it came to arguments over food, because they saw the futility in pressuring, and understood children’s developing autonomy over their food preferences.

You sort of feel like you should be doing that as well [referring to pressuring], but then you give up sometimes. It’s like forcing someone to eat something. They’re not going to eat it so what’s the

point? (M2, G1)

I think they taste things differently than us. Their taste buds are brand new. I think it tastes completely different, so those foods like Brussel sprouts, particularly ... I don't push that kind of thing. (M5, G6)

The quote above points out this fathers' understanding of his child's developing food preferences, recognising unique differences in taste and experience with food. In another example, this father continued to offer curry to his child by gradually increasing the intensity of the flavours. The father supported the child's autonomy by 'meeting the child where they are'.

### 3.3.3. Food co-parenting

Fathers recognised that their feeding practices did not occur in a vacuum; fathers acknowledged that communication and interaction between caregivers play a critical role in the mealtime process. Fathers compared and contrasted their own feeding practices to other caregivers within the family, in most instances, the child's mother. Fathers who were discordant with mothers in their approach to feeding felt that this stemmed from a disagreement between overarching feeding beliefs, goals or concerns in response to child characteristics or eating behaviours. For example, one father described differences in how he and his wife interpret their child's weight and weight issues: "My wife sometimes worries that she's getting too thin but really she's not. She's quite tall. She's not too thin at all" (M3, G3). Discordant feeding practices were salient where fathers identified as having shared custody of the children.

I know with their mother, it's very strict where, 'That's what you get and that's all you get,' but they tend to play it up a lot more at my house. They tend to throw a little more of a temper tantrum. (M3, G7)

Although not consistently observed, there was a reoccurring theme of fathers having a 'softer touch' in their feeding, while mothers were "the ultimate decision-maker" (M1, G6). The 'softer touch' tended to emerge through catering to the child's preferences. But interestingly, some fathers felt that what they fed children, and how they negotiated what went on the table, as a connection.

I also think fathers are much softer than mothers, personally, because if you go shopping and if I take my son with me, it will always be 'what do you want?' And we buy specifically whatever he wants. Whereas my wife would do that quite differently. (M1, G7)

Children also understood how to individually test their mother's and father's boundaries. Fathers observed their children's changing behaviours depending on who was present at the mealtime. Some children appeared to have 'clued' onto how fathers may undermine mothers, or vice versa.

Yeah, she's [mother] very strict. So he won't choose to argue when she's around; with me, he'll only have what he will have. Otherwise, he won't eat at all, that sort of thing. So, yeah, there's a big difference. (M1, G7)

Fathers rationalised their feeding practices based on their expectations for children's eating and their need to connect with children at mealtimes. Incongruence between these two aspects presented mealtime conflict, which resulted in non-responsive feeding practices or 'giving up' to 'keep the peace'.

## 4. Discussion

This paper responds to a call to action to engage fathers into research pertaining to children's weight-related behaviours (Peeters et al., 2019), and the need to understand fathers' beliefs and attitudes in the context of family mealtimes (Rahill et al., 2020). Evidence generated

from the current study lays a foundation for understanding fathers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and lived experiences regarding mealtime interactions with their children. We present the views of fathers from diverse backgrounds, with various working arrangements and family structures, which has been identified as a key research priority (Peeters et al., 2019). How fathers connected to children at mealtimes provided a framework for how they fed and responded to child eating. These findings offer fundamental perspectives of why fathers feed the way they do, through the prism of their values and challenges related to family mealtimes. Findings from this research could be leveraged in the design of future child feeding interventions to engage fathers in family mealtimes.

Fathers' mealtime interactions with children are influenced by the diversity of family structures (*who* is there), contexts (*when* they are there) and the developmental stages of children. Fathers valued mealtimes as a setting to create strong social bonds with not only children, but the whole family. This corroborates findings from a recent qualitative study where having "family meals to enhance family relationships" (p.118; Schuster, Szpak, Klein, Sklar, & Dickin, 2019) was the most common food-related goal described by low-income parents ( $n = 20$  mothers;  $n = 1$  father). This perspective raises an interesting question about how families, rather than parent-child dyads, interact with each other at mealtimes, across time and context. Fathers viewed mealtimes as a regular event to 'catch up' with their family across a variety of meals that falls outside of work hours. Fathers appreciated that the maturity of social interactions increased with children's development and age. In interviews of mother-father pairs of infants and toddlers aged 6-to 36-months old, fathers felt that they became more active in feeding processes as children developed (Thullen et al., 2016). Tuning into children's developmental stage supports the view that fathers, just like mothers, are sensitive to developmental changes in children (Hallers-Haalboom et al., 2016). However, one part of child development is increasing autonomy – often expressed in the mealtime context through food rejection. Dealing with children's food rejection may present a challenge for fathers in supporting developing autonomy. Taken together, this highlights that mealtimes may serve as a 'barometer' for fathers to monitor and enhance child development through socialisation.

Fathers identified the intricate dynamics of the feeding environment, recognising differences in feeding practices compared to mothers. Although not directly asked in the semi-structured interviews, fathers in the current study voluntarily compared their feeding approach to their partners (i.e., the child's mother). Recent literature suggests that fathers and mothers may approach child feeding differently, including how to manage portion size, mealtime behaviours and food rules (Khandpur, Charles, & Davison, 2016; Thullen et al., 2016). Some fathers in the current study described themselves as having a 'softer touch' compared to the child's mother at mealtimes, and the reasoning for this was because mealtime conflict was not 'worth the fight'. This finding is somewhat at odds with previous studies showing that fathers use more non-responsive, 'controlling' feeding practices than mothers (Orrell-Valente et al., 2007; Tschann et al., 2013; Wendt et al., 2015). However, an observational study suggests that mothers may simply interact with children more at mealtimes, including engaging in both responsive and non-responsive feeding practices (Walton et al., 2019). The current findings suggest that fathers valued family meals as an opportunity to connect and communicate with children, and as a result, less emphasis may be placed on directing children's eating behaviours. Whether differences in the types or intensity of feeding practices used within mother-father pairs impacts child nutrition or weight-related outcomes is unknown. For example, one caregiver's compensation for the other's laxness could either enable or buffer against unhealthy child eating behaviours. Socioeconomically diverse fathers in Khandpur et al.'s study (2016) reported that "dissimilarities in food parenting practices [between mothers and fathers] led to child tantrums and refusal to eat" (p. 5). Understanding fathers' perspectives of mealtime experiences

relative to other caregivers can inform inclusive, family-based obesity prevention interventions. In addition, interventions must tailor strategies and messages to the specific structure of the family (i.e., two-parent vs. one-parent families).

An interesting perspective raised by fathers in the current study is the role of guilt as a driver for inconsistent feeding practices. Despite well-meaning intentions to provide healthy mealtimes to their children, some fathers appeased to their child's food requests to prevent mealtime conflict and connect with their children. A by-product of these seemingly contradictory forces was guilt, and fathers' intentions returned back to providing healthy food. The scant literature on guilt in the feeding context has largely relied on mothers' perspectives (Pescud & Pettigrew, 2014). In the current study it is difficult to ascertain why fathers diverge from premeditated feeding intentions, however the parenting literature offers some suggestions. Guilt could be triggered by work-related absence (Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2017) and therefore time constraints when fathers are present with children render the desire for quality interactions over quantity. Furthermore, fathers may fear that children will go hungry if food is rejected or desire to give and receive affection from children through providing liked foods (Pescud & Pettigrew, 2014). These triggers are perhaps magnified in circumstances where fathers have recently separated from the child's mother. While Lamb (2000) positions mothers as 'caretakers' and fathers as 'playmates', fathers of single-headed households may experience cognitive dissonance between the two. Feelings of guilt are often followed by reparative behaviour (Borelli et al., 2017), which could mean cycling between healthy and unhealthy food provision and thus unintentionally using inconsistent feeding messages. This is a concern because parenting inconsistency has been shown to predict increased child weight status (Jansen, Giallo, Westrupp, Wake, & Nicholson, 2013). Additionally, parents feeding children for reasons beyond appetite (i.e., emotional feeding or using food as a reward) may be associated with negative physical and socio-emotional consequences such as emotional eating (Blissett, Haycraft, & Farrow, 2010) and overweight (Hughes, Power, O'Connor, Orlet Fisher, & Chen, 2016).

In addition to guilt, fathers described several other factors that interfered with developing family mealtime connections, such as distractions, conflict with siblings and mood of both parent and child. These 'momentary factors' appeared to impact fathers' responses to transgressions in child behaviours at mealtimes. Loth, Uy, Neumark-Sztainer, Fisher, and Berge (2018) described momentary factors that parents believed to influence their feeding practices such as limited time, changing work schedules, their own mood, physical health and energy levels, and their child's behaviour. These momentary factors influenced feeding by shifting a structured environment towards a more indulgent or coercive one (Loth et al., 2018). One poignant example of fathers' deviation from premediated feeding practices was selecting and preparing the child's liked foods in order to prevent conflict. This shows, from the perspectives of fathers, why they may engage in anticipatory catering (Loth et al., 2018). Some parents may be more susceptible to the influence of momentary factors, for example, single parents who may have less support to carry out mealtimes. Further research could examine stable versus momentary factors related specifically to fathers' feeding practices.

Fathers' current beliefs regarding mealtimes were predicated on their own upbringing, as a form of 'inherited advice'. This is consistent with the parenting literature, whereby recollections of the fathering experienced by men as children and intergenerational traditions filter through to the present day (Lamb, 2000). For example, fathers valued being present at mealtimes if family meals were enforced during their own childhood. While parents are recommended to eat the family meal together (Berge et al., 2015), this paper highlights the invariably challenging aspects of fathers eating the family meal with children. Nevertheless, fathers overcame these challenges by eating meals with children outside of the traditional night-time family dinner (i.e., breakfast or weekends) or simply sat with children during meals.

Recognising the diversity of what is considered shared family meals could be explored in further research to avoid rigid prescription of shared family meals.

#### 4.1. Strengths and limitations

This study presents rich descriptions of the meanings that fathers ascribe to interactions within family mealtimes. To the authors' knowledge, this has not been explored in a sample of occupationally diverse fathers. We strategically recruited fathers by approaching workplaces of 'blue collar occupations' and 'service industries' (ABS, 2011) which is an acceptable setting to engage fathers in child health research (Jansen et al., 2018). There were two reasons for using this approach. First, evidence of fathers' involvement in child feeding is generally derived from intact families with relatively advantaged/well-educated backgrounds (Fielding-Singh, 2017). Those engaged in 'blue collar occupations' and 'service industries' are typically harder to reach, may work unsociable shift hours, and have on average a lower education than those in professional occupations (Joseph, Keller, & Ainsworth, 2016; ABS, 2015). Indeed, the proportion of university educated fathers in our sample was comparable to the national average for men in the 35–44 years age group (36% vs. 33%; ABS, 2016). Secondly, previous research has typically recruited fathers through the child or the child's mothers (Khandpur, Blaine, Fisher, & Davison, 2014; Mallan et al., 2014). Such recruitment strategies may bias the sample towards including more socioeconomically advantaged fathers who are in a positive relationship with the child's mother (Cabrera et al., 2004; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). We circumvented this by engaging fathers directly through their workplace. Although we had a relatively small sample of fathers, we obtained rich data. However, we only investigated fathers' perceptions of mealtimes, and we do not have information on mothers or other caregivers in the family. Furthermore, our findings must be considered in light of the questioning schedule and prompts used during the focus groups and interviews. For example, we attempted to understand how fathers respond to children's food rejection at mealtimes, assuming they do (which is common in childhood), which may have influenced how participants responded.

## 5. Conclusion

Fathers in the current study valued mealtimes as a means of bonding with family members through social interactions. This connection intersected how fathers both perceived and responded to child eating behaviours, particularly difficult eating behaviours such as food refusal. Fathers identified enablers (goals, inherited values) and challenges (distractors, food rejection) to creating a positive mealtime environment that facilitated connection and communication with other family members. Future research examining strategies to bolster fathers' involvement in family mealtimes could leverage their values for mealtime connections within the family, or create flexible solutions for approaching mealtime challenges.

#### Author contributions

HAH conceptualized this study, collected and analysed the data, interpreted the analysis and drafted this manuscript. EJ led the What Fathers Want Study. EJ and TR participated in data collection, data coding, analysis and interpretation of results. All authors were involved in writing the paper and approved the final manuscript as submitted.

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## Ethical statement

This study was approved by the human research ethics committee of the Queensland University of Technology.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104642>.

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