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Information seeking behaviours of parents engaging with information about complementary feeding in the southwest of England

K Spurlock¹, Dr Toity Deave¹ and Dr Sally Dowling²

¹School of Health and Social Wellbeing, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

²Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

Complementary feeding describes the transition from milk feeding to family foods or ‘solids’ and should occur around six months of age⁽¹⁾. Diet in the early years can influence health in later life by shaping food preferences¹ and may increase the risk of obesity and metabolic disorders later in life^(2,3). Parents can find the period of complementary feeding stressful due to experiencing a lack of support for parents during this stage⁽⁴⁾. This study investigated how parents of infants under two years of age engaged with information about complementary feeding using qualitative methods informed by critical realism and information behaviour theories.

Dyadic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of infants aged four to twentyfour months in southwest England to explore their information needs. Interviews were conducted in person or online at the convenience of the participant. Data were recorded and transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis.

Ten interviews were conducted and four overarching themes were identified:

1) *“I don’t really remember them giving advice about weaning”*

Although parents initially relied on NHS resources, gaps led them to seek additional guidance from online platforms or commercial sources. They required both practical support for infant feeding but also emotional support as transitioning onto solids could be a stressful experience.

2) *“Just done what you’re expected to do”*

Parents’ perceptions of societal expectations regarding infant feeding could influence their feeding practices. This sometimes conflicted with their knowledge of complementary feeding, leading to dual beliefs and behaviours, such as altering feeding behaviours in public to adhere to social norms.

3) *“This is what works for us”*

Parents found that following complementary feeding guidance was challenging. Many parents followed their child’s appetite and discussed finding balance in their children’s diets. Parents also referred to balancing the idealised version of complementary feeding they strived for while remaining realistic to practicalities.

4) *“I had done the research and he just kinda went along with it”*

Complementary feeding practices were linked to perceptions of good parenting. Mothers, in particular, adhere to societal norms and ideals of infant care, which influenced their informationseeking patterns. This adherence to societal constructs often resulted in gendered disparities, with mothers primarily responsible for seeking information while fathers played a supportive role.

Findings suggest that current services are not meeting parents’ information needs about complementary feeding. Accessible information from credible sources is required to enable parents to make informed feeding decisions and to follow them confidently during the critical phase of complementary feeding. Policymakers should address the impact of social media and commercial baby food companies, considering parental emotional well-being and ensuring information accessibility regardless of gender.

References

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