

Towards obesity resistance in children:
Assessing the predictors of healthy behaviours
within the family environment

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<u>1</u>	<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>2</u>	<u>LITERATURE REVIEW OF FAMILY FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILDHOOD OBESITY</u>	<u>4</u>
2.1	INTRODUCTION	4
2.2	DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT OF OBESITY	4
2.3	THE POPULATION PROBLEM OF OBESITY	6
2.3.1	ADULT POPULATION PREVALENCE AND TRENDS IN AUSTRALIA	6
2.3.2	CHILDHOOD OBESITY	7
2.3.3	THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN AS A TARGET GROUP	8
2.4	THE IMPACTS OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY	9
2.4.1	HEALTH CONSEQUENCES	9
2.4.2	PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES	10
2.4.3	ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES	10
2.4.4	TRACKING OF WEIGHT STATUS	11
2.5	USING THEORY TO GUIDE THE SOLUTION	12
2.5.1	THEORY AND FRAMEWORKS USED IN OBESITY PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS	13
2.5.2	EXAMPLES OF MODELS DEVELOPED FOR CHILDHOOD OBESITY	14
2.6	PRIMARY RISK FACTORS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBESITY IN CHILDREN	18
2.6.1	INCREASED ENERGY CONSUMPTION	18
2.6.2	DECREASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY	20
2.6.3	INCREASED SEDENTARY BEHAVIOURS	21
2.7	FAMILY INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S ENERGY BALANCE BEHAVIOURS	23
2.7.1	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBESITY	23
2.7.2	RECOGNITION OF THE PROBLEM	24
2.7.3	THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE IN WEIGHT-RELATED HEALTH BEHAVIOUR	25
2.7.4	EARLY LIFE HOME ENVIRONMENT	27
2.7.5	THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S FOOD PREFERENCES AND CHOICES	28
2.7.6	PARENTS AS ROLE MODELS	30
2.7.7	PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO HEALTHY BEHAVIOURS	33
2.7.8	GENERAL PARENTING STYLE	34
2.7.9	CHILD FEEDING PRACTICES	36
2.7.10	PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY AND SUPPORT	38
2.8	FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH WEIGHT MAINTENANCE	40

2.9	SUMMARY AND THESIS AIMS	42
3	<u>VALIDATION OF THE GENERAL NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE</u>	
	<u>QUESTIONNAIRE IN AN AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY SAMPLE</u>	47
3.1	INTRODUCTION	47
3.2	BACKGROUND LITERATURE.....	47
3.3	CHAPTER AIMS.....	50
3.4	METHODS	50
3.4.1	QUESTIONNAIRE REFINEMENT	50
3.4.2	MEASURES	51
3.4.3	SAMPLE SELECTION.....	52
3.4.4	DATA COLLECTION.....	53
3.4.5	DATA MANAGEMENT	53
3.4.6	STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	53
3.5	RESULTS	55
3.5.1	DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE	55
3.5.2	DISTRIBUTION OF SCORED DATA	56
3.5.3	INTERNAL RELIABILITY	58
3.5.4	TEST-RETEST RELIABILITY	59
3.5.5	CONCURRENT VALIDITY	61
3.5.6	COMPARISON BETWEEN THE ORIGINAL QUESTIONNAIRE AND THE AUSTRALIAN SAMPLE	61
3.6	DISCUSSION.....	62
3.7	CONCLUSION	66
4	<u>EXPLORING NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC</u>	
	<u>VARIATION IN KNOWLEDGE LEVELS IN A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN</u>	
	<u>COMMUNITY SAMPLE</u>	67
4.1	INTRODUCTION	67
4.2	BACKGROUND LITERATURE.....	67
4.2.1	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE.....	70
4.3	CHAPTER AIMS.....	71
4.4	METHODS	71
4.4.1	MEASURES	71
4.4.2	SAMPLE SELECTION.....	72
4.4.3	DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE SAMPLING AREAS.....	72

4.4.4	DATA COLLECTION.....	73
4.4.5	STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	73
4.5	RESULTS	73
4.5.1	DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE	73
4.5.2	DETAILED EXAMINATION OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE.....	76
4.5.3	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE.....	78
4.5.4	MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF DEMOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE	80
4.5.5	THE EFFECT OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS ON NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE	82
4.6	DISCUSSION.....	84
4.6.1	GENERAL NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE	84
4.6.2	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE.....	86
4.7	CONCLUSION	87
5	<u>NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE AND DIETARY INTAKE: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP?.....</u>	<u>89</u>
5.1	INTRODUCTION	89
5.2	BACKGROUND LITERATURE.....	89
5.2.1	WHAT IS THE CURRENT EVIDENCE?.....	89
5.3	THE MEASUREMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND DIETARY BEHAVIOURS	91
5.3.1	METHODS FOR MEASURING DIETARY INTAKE.....	91
5.3.2	DIETARY INTAKE IN AUSTRALIA	92
5.4	CHAPTER AIMS.....	93
5.5	METHODS	94
5.5.1	MEASURES	94
5.5.2	AUSTRALIAN NUTRITION RECOMMENDATIONS	94
5.5.3	SAMPLE SELECTION.....	95
5.5.4	DATA COLLECTION.....	96
5.5.5	STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	96
5.6	RESULTS	97
5.6.1	DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE	97
5.6.2	THE INFLUENCE OF KNOWLEDGE LEVEL ON DIETARY INTAKE	98
5.6.3	COMPLIANCE WITH CURRENT AUSTRALIAN NUTRITION RECOMMENDATIONS.....	101
5.6.4	RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE AND DIETARY INTAKE	104
5.7	DISCUSSION.....	109
5.8	CONCLUSION	111

6 MODIFICATION OF A DIET QUALITY INDEX TO MEASURE COMPLIANCE WITH THE CURRENT AUSTRALIAN DIETARY GUIDELINES 113

6.1	INTRODUCTION	113
6.2	BACKGROUND LITERATURE.....	113
6.2.1	DIET QUALITY INDEXES	114
6.3	CHAPTER AIMS.....	117
6.4	METHOD PART 1: MODIFICATION OF THE HEI CRITERIA TO AUSTRALIAN NUTRITION GUIDELINES	117
6.4.1	COMPONENTS 1-5: FOOD GROUPS.....	118
6.4.2	COMPONENTS 6-9: NUTRIENTS.....	121
6.4.3	COMPONENT 10: DIET VARIETY	122
6.5	METHOD PART 2: APPLYING THE MODIFIED HEI CRITERIA TO AUSTRALIAN NUTRITION GUIDELINES	122
6.5.1	SAMPLE AND MEASURES	122
6.5.2	STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	123
6.6	RESULTS	123
6.6.1	DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE HEI.....	123
6.6.2	HEI COMPONENT SCORES	124
6.6.3	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN HEI SCORES	127
6.6.4	THE ROLE OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE IN DIET QUALITY	128
6.7	DISCUSSION.....	130
6.7.1	THE APPLICATION OF THE HEI IN AN AUSTRALIAN SETTING	130
6.7.2	NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE AND DIET QUALITY	136
6.8	CONCLUSION	136

7 HEALTHY KIDS: THE FAMILY WAY – METHODOLOGY AND JUSTIFICATION FOR MEASUREMENT TOOLS 138

7.1	INTRODUCTION	138
7.2	CHAPTER AIMS.....	140
7.3	HEALTHY KIDS: THE FAMILY WAY METHODOLOGY	140
7.3.1	RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES.....	140
7.3.2	RECRUITMENT STRATEGY	141
7.3.3	DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE	141
7.3.4	RECRUITMENT FLOWCHART.....	143
7.3.5	DATA MANAGEMENT	144
7.4	HEALTHY KIDS: THE FAMILY WAY – JUSTIFICATION FOR MEASUREMENT TOOLS	144

7.5	INDIVIDUAL MEASURES	144
7.5.1	ANTHROPOMETRIC MEASUREMENTS	145
7.5.2	ENERGY INTAKE	146
7.5.3	ENERGY EXPENDITURE.....	147
7.6	PARENTAL CHARACTERISTICS	149
7.6.1	KNOWLEDGE.....	149
7.6.2	PARENTING STYLES	150
7.6.3	FOOD INVOLVEMENT	153
7.6.4	FOOD ENVIRONMENT.....	153
7.6.5	PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT.....	156
7.7	DISCUSSION	157
7.8	CONCLUSION	159
8	<u>HEALTHY KIDS: THE FAMILY WAY, RESULTS PART 1 – PARENT AND CHILD CHARACTERISTICS</u>	<u>161</u>
8.1	INTRODUCTION	161
8.2	CHAPTER AIMS	161
8.3	METHODS	161
8.4	RESULTS	162
8.4.1	DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE	162
8.4.2	PARENTS’ ANTHROPOMETRIC INFORMATION	165
8.4.3	CHILDREN’S ANTHROPOMETRIC INFORMATION.....	167
8.4.4	PARENTS’ NUTRIENT AND FOOD GROUP INTAKE.....	170
8.4.5	PARENTS’ PHYSICAL ACTIVITY	172
8.4.6	CHILDREN’S FOOD AND NUTRIENT INTAKES	176
8.4.7	CHILDREN’S ENERGY EXPENDITURE.....	177
8.4.8	PARENTS’ NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE	179
8.4.9	PARENTS’ PHYSICAL ACTIVITY KNOWLEDGE.....	180
8.5	DISCUSSION	181
8.5.1	SAMPLE CONSIDERATIONS	181
8.5.2	CHILDREN’S DIETARY INTAKES AND ACTIVITY HABITS	183
8.5.3	FAMILIAL BEHAVIOUR PATTERNS.....	184
8.6	CONCLUSION	185
9	<u>HEALTHY KIDS: THE FAMILY WAY, RESULTS PART 2 – FAMILY FOOD AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENTS</u>	<u>186</u>

9.1	INTRODUCTION	186
9.2	CHAPTER AIMS.....	186
9.3	METHODS	186
9.4	RESULTS	188
9.4.1	GENERAL PARENTING STYLES	188
9.4.2	CHILD FEEDING PRACTICES.....	189
9.4.3	FOOD INVOLVEMENT	191
9.4.4	FACTOR ANALYSIS OF FOOD ENVIRONMENT QUESTIONS.....	192
9.4.5	FOOD ENVIRONMENT FACTOR SCORES	196
9.4.6	FACTOR ANALYSIS OF THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENTS	199
9.4.7	PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT FACTOR SCORES	201
9.4.8	DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HEALTHY WEIGHT AND OVERWEIGHT CHILDREN.....	204
9.5	DISCUSSION.....	206
9.5.1	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN FAMILY ENVIRONMENT MEASURES	211
9.5.2	WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HEALTHY AND OVERWEIGHT CHILDREN?	211
9.6	CONCLUSION	213
10	<u>CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE OBESITY RESISTANCE MODEL</u>	<u>215</u>
10.1	INTRODUCTION.....	215
10.2	METHOD.....	215
10.2.1	CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS	215
10.3	RESULTS	216
10.3.1	FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT LATENT VARIABLE	216
10.3.2	FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT LATENT VARIABLE	218
10.3.3	DEVELOPMENT OF THE OBESITY RESISTANCE MODEL	219
10.3.4	THE OBESITY RESISTANCE MODEL	225
10.3.5	BMI Z-SCORE CHANGE	228
10.3.6	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN BODY COMPOSITION CHANGE	229
10.3.7	PREDICTIVE ABILITY OF THE OBESITY RESISTANCE MODEL FOR WEIGHT STATUS CHANGE	230
10.4	DISCUSSION	230
10.4.1	LIMITATIONS OF THE OBESITY RESISTANCE MODEL	237
10.4.2	CONCLUSION	239

<u>11</u>	<u>CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE OBESITY RESEARCH</u>	
	.....	240
<u>12</u>	<u>REFERENCES</u>	249
APPENDIX 1	.....	278
APPENDIX 2	.....	285
APPENDIX 3	.....	300
APPENDIX 4	.....	308
APPENDIX 5	.....	335
APPENDIX 6	.....	384

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1	RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE GENERAL NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPED BY PARMENTER AND WARDLE (1999)	49
TABLE 2	SUMMARY OF THE RECRUITMENT LOCATION OF THE STUDY SAMPLE	53
TABLE 3	DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY SAMPLE	56
TABLE 4	MEAN AND RANGE OF CORRECT SCORES OBTAINED FROM THE TWO SAMPLE GROUPS.....	57
TABLE 5	INTERNAL RELIABILITY FOR THE FOUR KNOWLEDGE COMPONENTS AND THE MODIFIED QUESTIONNAIRE OVERALL.....	58
TABLE 6	MEAN SCORES FOR THE SAMPLE AT THE TWO OCCASIONS OF TEST-RETEST ADMINISTRATION	59
TABLE 7	TEST-RETEST RELIABILITY COEFFICIENTS FOR THE STUDY SAMPLE	60
TABLE 8	MEAN SCORES, STANDARD DEVIATION AND STANDARD ERROR OF THE MEAN OF THE NUTRITION AND NON-NUTRITION EDUCATED GROUPS	61
TABLE 9	COMPARISON OF THE INTERNAL RELIABILITY AND TEST-RETEST RELIABILITY MEASURES IN THE ORIGINAL PARMENTER AND WARDLE (1999) SAMPLE AND THE CURRENT STUDY SAMPLE.....	62
TABLE 10	DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY SAMPLE	75
TABLE 11	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE.....	80
TABLE 12	MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE ON AGE, EMPLOYMENT STATUS, EDUCATION AND GENDER.....	81
TABLE 13	SUMMARY DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE LEVELS BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	82
TABLE 14	INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	84
TABLE 15	DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY SAMPLE	98
TABLE 16	ONE-WAY ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN THE THREE SUB-GROUPS.	99
TABLE 17	DIETARY INTAKE (KILOJOULE, MICRONUTRIENT AND MACRONUTRIENT, FRUIT AND VEGETABLES) BY KNOWLEDGE LEVEL.....	100
TABLE 18	PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE AND DIETARY INTAKE, CONTROLLING FOR DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION	105
TABLE 19	SUMMARY OF HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF DIETARY INTAKE ON DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES (MODEL 1) AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES WITH NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE (MODEL 2)	107
TABLE 20	SUMMARY OF THE MODIFIED HEALTHY EATING INDEX SCORING CRITERIA	119
TABLE 21	SERVE SIZES OF FOOD ITEMS INCLUDED IN THE CEREAL FOOD GROUP.....	120
TABLE 22	SERVE SIZES OF FOOD ITEMS INCLUDED IN THE FRUIT FOOD GROUP	120
TABLE 23	SERVE SIZES OF FOOD ITEMS INCLUDED IN THE DAIRY FOOD GROUP	121
TABLE 24	SERVE SIZES OF FOOD ITEMS INCLUDED IN THE MEAT AND ALTERNATIVES FOOD GROUP	121
TABLE 25	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN THE HEALTHY EATING INDEX SCORES	128
TABLE 26	SUMMARY OF HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF HEALTHY EATING INDEX ON DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES (MODEL 1) AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES WITH NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE (MODEL 2)	129
TABLE 27	INTERNAL RELIABILITY (CRONBACH'S ALPHA) FOR THE GENERAL PARENTING PRACTICES QUESTIONNAIRE AND THE MODIFIED VERSION FOR THE HEALTHY KIDS: THE FAMILY WAY STUDY	151

TABLE 28	INTERNAL RELIABILITY (CRONBACH'S ALPHA) FOR THE CHILD FEEDING QUESTIONNAIRE (BIRCH ET AL., 2001) AND FOR THE HEALTHY KIDS: THE FAMILY WAY SAMPLE.....	153
TABLE 29	PARENT AND HOUSEHOLD DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS (N=157)	164
TABLE 30	SUMMARY OF PARENTS' ANTHROPOMETRIC MEASUREMENTS.....	165
TABLE 31	CLASSIFICATION OF PARENTAL BODY MASS INDEX (BMI) AND WAIST CIRCUMFERENCE USING THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION CUT-OFFS	165
TABLE 32	SUMMARY OF CHILDREN'S ANTHROPOMETRIC MEASUREMENTS	167
TABLE 33	WEIGHT STATUS CLASSIFICATION OF CHILDREN USING THE INTERNATIONAL OBESITY TASK FORCE CUT-OFFS FOR AGE AND GENDER.....	168
TABLE 34	PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S BODY MASS INDEX (BMI) AND WAIST CIRCUMFERENCES CONTROLLING FOR EDUCATION, ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND MARITAL STATUS	169
TABLE 35	CROSS-TABULATIONS OF PARENTS' BODY MASS INDEX (BMI) AND WAIST CIRCUMFERENCE CLASSIFICATIONS AND CHILDREN'S BMI CLASSIFICATIONS	170
TABLE 36	SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR MACRONUTRIENT COMPOSITION OF PARENTS' DIETARY INTAKES	171
TABLE 37	MEAN MINUTES FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY DURING THE PREVIOUS WEEK BY TYPE OF ACTIVITY.....	173
TABLE 38	PARENTS' DIETARY INTAKE PATTERNS BY EXERCISE CLASSIFICATION	175
TABLE 39	CHILDREN'S KILOJOULE AND MACRONUTRIENT INTAKES	176
TABLE 40	CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS' FRUIT AND VEGETABLE INTAKES AND DIET QUALITY.....	177
TABLE 41	CHILDREN'S TIME SPENT IN SEDENTARY BEHAVIOURS.....	177
TABLE 42	CHILDREN'S TIME SPENT BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE.....	178
TABLE 43	CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS' EXERCISE AND SEDENTARY BEHAVIOURS.	178
TABLE 44	PARENTS' NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE.....	179
TABLE 45	PARENTS' PHYSICAL ACTIVITY KNOWLEDGE LEVELS.....	180
TABLE 46	DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR GENERAL PARENTING STYLE TYPOGRAPHIES.....	188
TABLE 47	DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE CHILD FEEDING QUESTIONNAIRE FACTORS.....	189
TABLE 48	DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE FOOD INVOLVEMENT SCALE FACTORS	192
TABLE 49	SUMMARY OF THE PRINCIPAL AXIS FACTOR ANALYSIS WITH VARIMAX ROTATION FOR THE FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT FACTORS	194
TABLE 50	SUMMARY OF FACTOR SCORES FOR THE FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT.....	196
TABLE 51	CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT FACTORS AND CHILDREN'S ENERGY BALANCE BEHAVIOURS.....	198
TABLE 52	SUMMARY OF THE PRINCIPAL AXIS FACTOR ANALYSIS WITH VARIMAX ROTATION FOR THE FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT FACTORS.....	200
TABLE 53	SUMMARY OF FACTOR SCORES FOR THE FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT.....	201
TABLE 54	CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT FACTORS AND CHILDREN'S ENERGY BALANCE BEHAVIOURS.....	202
TABLE 55	CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FAMILY FOOD AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT FACTORS.....	204
TABLE 56	SUMMARY STATISTICS OF INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TESTS OF PARENT, FAMILY AND CHILD CHARACTERISTICS BY CHILD'S WEIGHT STATUS.....	205

TABLE 57	CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS STANDARDISED REGRESSION WEIGHTS FOR FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT.....	216
TABLE 58	CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS STANDARDISED REGRESSION WEIGHTS FOR FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT.....	218

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1	ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF PREDICTORS OF CHILDHOOD OVERWEIGHT (DAVISON AND BIRCH, 2001, PG 161).....	17
FIGURE 2	SUMMARY OF RESEARCH OUTLINE FOR THIS THESIS	44
FIGURE 3	DISTRIBUTION OF NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE CODED BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	83
FIGURE 4	PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE IN EACH KNOWLEDGE LEVEL GROUP COMPLYING WITH AUSTRALIAN NUTRIENT RECOMMENDATIONS	103
FIGURE 5	PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE IN EACH KNOWLEDGE LEVEL GROUP COMPLYING WITH AUSTRALIAN NUTRIENT AND FRUIT AND VEGETABLE RECOMMENDATIONS	104
FIGURE 6	CLASSIFICATION OF THE SAMPLE’S DIETS USING THE HEALTHY EATING INDEX CATEGORISATION DEFINITIONS.....	124
FIGURE 7	HEALTHY EATING INDEX COMPONENT MEAN SCORES	125
FIGURE 8	PERCENTAGE OF THE SAMPLE SCORING A MAXIMUM SCORE FOR EACH COMPONENT	126
FIGURE 9	FLOWCHART OF PARTICIPATION THROUGHOUT THE 12-MONTH STUDY	143
FIGURE 10	INTERPRETATION OF PARENTS’ INTAKES: PERCENTAGE OF THE SAMPLE SCORING THE MAXIMUM FOR EACH HEALTHY EATING INDEX COMPONENT	172
FIGURE 11	SUMMARY OF FACTOR LOADING FOR FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT CONSTRUCTS.....	217
FIGURE 12	SUMMARY OF FACTOR LOADING FOR FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT CONSTRUCTS..	218
FIGURE 13	FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT MEDIATES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS’ DIET QUALITY AND CHILDREN’S FRUIT AND VEGETABLE INTAKE.....	219
FIGURE 14	PARENTAL ACTIVITY AND SEDENTARY LEVELS CREATE A FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT, WHICH SUPPORTS MORE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND LESS SEDENTARY BEHAVIOURS IN CHILDREN.....	220
FIGURE 15	CHILD FEEDING PRACTICES INFLUENCE THE FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT AND NOT CHILDREN’S FRUIT AND VEGETABLE INTAKE DIRECTLY.....	221
FIGURE 16	THE FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT MEDIATES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTING STYLE AND CHILDREN’S FRUIT AND VEGETABLE INTAKES	222
FIGURE 17	PARENTING STYLE INDIRECTLY INFLUENCES CHILDREN’S SCREEN TIME THROUGH THE FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT	222
FIGURE 18	PARENTS’ KNOWLEDGE INFLUENCES THEIR OWN BEHAVIOURS (INTAKE AND CHILD FEEDING PRACTICES), WHICH IN TURN INFLUENCES THE FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT	223
FIGURE 19	PARENTS’ KNOWLEDGE INFLUENCES THEIR OWN DIETARY INTAKE BEHAVIOUR, WHICH IN TURN INFLUENCES THE FAMILY FOOD ENVIRONMENT.....	224
FIGURE 20	PARENTS’ BEHAVIOURS – NOT THEIR KNOWLEDGE – INFLUENCE THE FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT.....	224
FIGURE 21	PARENTS’ WEIGHT HAS A DIRECT INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN’S WEIGHT STATUS AND THE FAMILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ENVIRONMENT	225
FIGURE 22	OBESITY RESISTANCE MODEL: A SUMMARY OF THE INTERACTIONS OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN’S WEIGHT STATUS	227

FIGURE 23	HISTOGRAM OF CHILDREN'S BMI Z-SCORE CHANGE OVER 12 MONTHS	228
FIGURE 24	HISTOGRAM OF WAIST CIRCUMFERENCE CHANGE OVER 12 MONTHS	229

SUMMARY

Understanding the determinants of behaviour in children is crucial to curb the current population obesity trends. Children's behaviour develops within the home, making it a target for obesity prevention efforts. Previous research has identified a network of parental factors that are thought to influence children's health-related behaviour including weight, health-related knowledge and behaviour, parenting styles and practices, to name but a few. This complexity makes it important to use theory or models to guide research and to determine the relative importance of factors within the home environment to improve the effectiveness of future obesity prevention interventions.

Embedded in psychological theory and nutrition education principles is the concept that knowledge is required for behaviour change. This thesis provides much-needed support for the theoretical foundation that nutrition knowledge is a determinant of dietary intake behaviour. The measurement of knowledge and the collection and interpretation of intake data are often cited as limitations to research – issues this thesis aimed to address. Modifications were made to an existing measure of nutrition knowledge, and a validation exercise conducted within a heterogeneous Australian community setting provided a valid and reliable assessment tool to measure knowledge.

Single nutrient or food group analysis omits the synergistic nature of whole diet. A key component of this thesis was the modification of the United States Department of Agriculture's Healthy Eating Index to be consistent with Australian dietary guidelines and its application to the interpretation of dietary intake. An exploratory study, using the validated knowledge tool and modified diet quality index, revealed that some of the basic nutrition guidelines, such as eat more vegetables and less fatty foods, are reaching the community, but detailed knowledge of the nutrient content of foods, diet-disease relationships and making healthier food choices is poor. Indeed, knowledge was shown to be a significant independent predictor of dietary intake and diet quality. Knowledge was shown to be a stronger predictor of overall diet quality than of any single nutrient or food group.

The second aim of this thesis was to disentangle the relative importance of family environmental factors in the context of obesity resistance in children. A 12-month longitudinal study involved 154 South Australian families with primary school-aged children, and used structural equation modelling and previous research to present a model of obesity resistance. The proposed model showed an acceptable fit (NFI=0.458; CFI=0.741; RMSEA=0.045). Parents' BMI ($\beta=0.34^*$) and knowledge ($\beta=-0.21^*$) had the strongest direct associations with children's obesity risk. Parents' intake and expenditure behaviours were indirectly associated with children's behaviours through the creation of the home environment. The physical activity environment was associated with children's sedentary ($\beta=-0.44^*$) and activity habits ($\beta=0.29^*$). The food environment was associated with fruit and vegetable intake ($\beta=0.47^*$). General parenting styles ($\beta=0.63^*$) and child feeding practices ($\beta=-0.74^*$) were associated with the family environment. Parents' knowledge also had a direct influence on their parenting practices – parenting style ($\beta=0.25^*$) and feeding practices ($\beta=-0.50^*$). The proposed model provided a comprehensive insight into the potential avenues for intervention within the complex network of factors that make up the family home environment.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where the reference is made in the text.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jilly Attends".

Date: May 21st, 2010

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Peer-reviewed publications arising from this thesis:

Hendrie, G.A., Cox, D.N., & Coveney, J. (2008). Validation of the General Nutrition Knowledge Questionnaire in an Australian community sample. Nutrition & Dietetics, 65: 72-77.

Hendrie, G.A., Coveney, J., & Cox, D. (2008). Exploring nutrition knowledge and the demographic variation in knowledge levels in an Australian community sample. Public Health Nutrition, 11(12): 1365-1371.

Hendrie, G.A., Coveney, J., Cox, D.N. The family activity environment as an influence on children's physical activity and screen behaviours. Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport [Under review].

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National and international conference presentations/posters arising from this thesis include:

Public Health Advocacy Conference: *What familial practices encourage a healthy energy balance in children? Development of a conceptual model.* Adelaide 2005.

Australian Society for the Study of Obesity, 14th Annual Scientific Meeting: *What familial practices encourage a healthy energy balance in children? Building a conceptual framework.* Adelaide 2005.

10th International Congress of Obesity: *Coping with the obesogenic environment: Development of a conceptual model to explain the family factors associated with children's healthy weight status.* Sydney 2006.

10th International Congress of Obesity: *Nutrition knowledge and dietary intake: What is the relationship within an Australian population?* Sydney 2006.

30th Nutrition Society of Australia Annual Scientific Meeting: *Nutrition knowledge and dietary intake: Exploring the differences and relationships within a South Australian Community Sample.* Sydney 2006.

32nd Nutrition Society of Australia Annual Scientific Meeting: *Modification of the USDA's Healthy Eating Index for the Australian nutrition guidelines.* Adelaide 2008.

32nd Nutrition Society of Australia Annual Scientific Meeting: *Family environmental predictors of children's energy balance behaviours and weight status.* Adelaide 2008.