



# Exploring the influence of context on social norms around Australian parents' food provision using story completion

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To explore the differences in social norms around parents' food provision in different provision contexts and by demographics.

**Design:** Qualitative study using story completion methodology via an online survey in September 2021. Adults 18+ with or without children were randomised to one of three story stems focusing on food provision in different contexts; food provision at home (non-visitor), with visitors present and with the involvement of sport. Stories were coded and themed using thematic analysis. A content analysis was performed to determine count and frequency of codes in stories by participant demographics and story assumptions.

**Setting:** Australia.

**Participants:** Adults ( $n$  196).

**Results:** Nine themes were identified from the data resulting in four social norms around providing healthy foods and justifying non-adherence to healthy eating guidelines, evolution of family life and mealtime values, the presence of others influencing how we engage with food provision and unhealthy foods used as incentives/rewards in sport. Following content analysis, no differences of themes or norms by participant demographics or story assumptions were found.

**Conclusions:** We identified pervasive social norms around family food provision and further identified how contextual factors resulted in variations or distinct norms. This highlights the impact context may have on the social norms parents face when providing food to their children and the opportunities and risks of leveraging these social norms to influence food choice in these contexts. Public health interventions and practitioners should understand the influence of context and social environments when promoting behaviour change and providing individualised advice. Future research could explore parents' experiences of these norms and to what extent they impact food choice.

**Keywords**  
Social norms  
Caregiver  
Children  
Home  
Visitors  
Sport  
Qualitative

Parents/caregivers are a key influence on children's food intake<sup>(1)</sup>, yet their provision is also influenced by a multitude of factors, including their own values, knowledge, preferences, family circumstances, as well as the social and physical environment<sup>(2–6)</sup>. In addition, there are different social and physical environmental contexts that can impact provision and subsequent intake, i.e. who is involved or present, what else is happening and where the food provision takes place. For example, provision practices and intake can differ when involving other people<sup>(7)</sup> including grandparents<sup>(8)</sup> and friends<sup>(5,9–11)</sup>, or in different settings such as eating out<sup>(12–15)</sup>, on weekends<sup>(10,16)</sup>, at school<sup>(17,18)</sup> or sport<sup>(19,20)</sup>.

Social norms are one inter-related factor of the social and physical environment, which have been found to impact food choice and behaviours<sup>(21–24)</sup>. Social norms are defined as 'implicit codes of conduct that provide a guide to appropriate action<sup>(21)</sup>'. As such, social norms provide unwritten rules that parents may orient to when providing food to their children based on what they perceive as the norm in their network or society more broadly. Previous research has demonstrated that social norms impact both food choice and intake<sup>(21)</sup>. It is suggested that eating norms are followed as they enhance affiliation with a social group and result in eating that is perceived as 'correct'<sup>(21)</sup>. The influence of social norms may arise from the desired social

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approval gained from following the norm, or fear of social exclusion from not conforming<sup>(21)</sup>. Due to the potential of social norms to improve eating behaviours, it is crucial we develop an understanding of the social norms existing within society surrounding food provision<sup>(22)</sup>. Our previous research with Australian adults used story completion method to explore the social norms regarding parental food provision in the home context<sup>(25)</sup>. We identified two social norms, one being a norm to provide healthy foods and justify non-adherence to healthy eating guidelines and a second norm around the evolution of family life, with changes in family dynamics but maintenance of other traditional mealtime values<sup>(25)</sup>. While this previous work provided the first insights into the social norms in Australian society within the family home food environment, there is a lack of understanding of how these social norms differ by different populations or contexts, or what additional norms may exist.

Previous research conducted using interviews and focus groups in the USA has shown that social norms differ in youth sports, with parents of 4–12-year-old children feeling as though rules around food provision can be relaxed and sugar-sweetened beverages and unhealthy snacks are more accepted<sup>(19,20)</sup>. This research also determined that social pressure from other parents influenced the types of foods provided<sup>(19,20)</sup>, and that parents of older children were more accepting of unhealthy snacks than those with younger children<sup>(19)</sup>. Furthermore, grandparents in a USA study using interviews have been perceived as both most accepting and most disapproving of sugar-sweetened beverage consumption in pre-schoolers<sup>(26)</sup>, while a mixed-methods study in Nepal found that grandmothers are more likely than mothers to offer a snack or beverage to a child when they will not eat anything else<sup>(8)</sup>.

Researching social norms is challenging and may be influenced by social desirability bias. Story completion method provides a unique approach to examining social discourses, including social norms and the ability to compare multiple contexts through scenarios and examine story character and/or participant characteristics<sup>(27,28)</sup>. Despite being an underutilised method in nutrition, it is increasingly used in health research<sup>(28)</sup>. Furthermore, the research to date on social norms has sought to describe or test norms. We wanted to make a novel contribution to this area of research by looking at how these social norms are built up and manifest in different participant or character types and scenario assumptions.

To address the aforementioned gap, this study aimed to explore the differences in social norms around parents' food provision by provision context and demographics, using story completion method. Specifically, we sought to determine if there are differences in social norms around parents' food provision (1) in different food provision contexts, (2) by demographics of participants in our sample and (3) by characters and assumptions in the story.

## Methods

### *Study design and participants*

This cross-sectional study used qualitative story completion method<sup>(29)</sup> to explore Australian family food provision in three contexts. This method allowed us to understand how Australian participants made sense of family food provision in differing contexts. Reporting guidelines for qualitative research were used, namely Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research<sup>(30)</sup>. Eligible participants were adults aged  $\geq 18$  years and residing in Australia. Participants were not limited to only parents, as we were interested in the norms and expectations produced by the broad Australian public, as experienced by Australian parents. This is because parents do not exist in a vacuum and are influenced by their context, which is varied and includes non-parents. Participants were recruited via paid Facebook® advertisements including a link to the online survey and offered an AUD\$10 voucher for their contribution. Data were collected in September 2021 using an online survey (Qualtrics, Provo, UT).

Given the novelty of this study as highlighted in the introduction, we drew on different types of qualitative methods to develop a unique understanding of social norms. To determine the social norms existing in different contexts, we drew on a form of thematic analysis informed by reflexive thematic analysis<sup>(31)</sup> and codebook thematic analysis<sup>(32)</sup> to ensure our analysis fit within our broader approach. This has been supplemented with content analysis<sup>(33)</sup> which enabled us to understand if there was variation in which participants or characters these social norms manifest. Whilst content analysis does quantify and count data, it is a qualitative methodology that seeks to provide new insights and find explanation and nuance within data<sup>(33)</sup>. As such, the approach we have undertaken is unique to examining social norms and falls under broader qualitative methodology. To support this, our study takes a critical realist perspective<sup>(34)</sup>. Aligning with story completion method, which focuses on the discourses participants draw on when making sense of a particular scenario within reality<sup>(29)</sup>, we take the ontological position of realism and the epistemological position of social constructionism<sup>(35)</sup>. We acknowledge the tangible differences in people's demographics, but aim to understand how these factors influence people's perceptions of family food provision. A social constructionist epistemology allows us to understand family food provision as influenced by social discourses and what is positioned as socially normative or acceptable. Therefore, we analysed participants' responses to understand what the Australian public discursively position as normative or expected of parents in relation to family food provision. All authors are Australian women without children with backgrounds in dietetics (AGS, BJJ) and social psychology (SCH).



### **Data collection**

Story completion method<sup>(29)</sup> involves participants being given a story 'stem' consisting of at least one complete sentence. Participants are invited to finish the story in their own words. This method differs from self-reporting techniques in that instead of describing personal experiences, participants are writing about a hypothetical scenario, which allows exploration of their perceptions and understandings surrounding a specific topic.

The survey included three story stems focused on different aspects of family food provision: (1) family food provision in the context of the family home with no one outside of the immediate family present (referred to as the non-visitor stem), (2) family food provision in the context of the family home with visitors present (visitor stem) and (3) family food provision in no disclosed context but following children completing sport for the day (sport stem). Several stems were drafted by the first author (AGS) based on previous literature, and the research team came together to workshop and determine the final wording for each stem. The survey, including demographic questions and the story completion task, was pilot tested for comprehension, length, and usability with a convenience sample of four Nutrition and Dietetics honours students. In all story stems, the main protagonist was 'Ash', this was intentionally non-gender specific to allow participants to interpret the stem in their own way in relation to gender roles.

Participants were asked to complete demographic questions, including age, gender, education, country of birth, current location, relationship status, sexual orientation, number of adults and children in household, employment status and income. Participants were then randomised to one of three story stems to complete the story task, and several follow-up questions related to details or assumptions made within their story. Table 1 provides the story stems and instructions given to participants within the survey, along with the follow-up questions.

### **Data analysis**

Quantitative data analyses were conducted in SPSS version 26 (IBM, US). Descriptive statistics were performed for demographic and follow-up question data, presented as mean (SD) or count and percentage. The qualitative story completion data were analysed using a form of thematic analysis<sup>(36)</sup> and content analysis<sup>(33)</sup>. Thematic analysis, in which we drew on reflexive thematic analysis<sup>(31)</sup> and codebook thematic analysis<sup>(32)</sup>, was used to explore objective one, which focused on determining if there are differences in social norms around family food provision in different food provision contexts. All participant stories were manually coded and analysed using thematic analysis via the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke<sup>(31,36)</sup>. First, the transcripts were read thoroughly for data immersion. Initial inductive coding was conducted by

the first author (AGS) where segments of data were applied a code label until no new codes were generated and checked with two senior researchers (BJJ, SCH). The first author (AGS) collated the codes into potential themes, building up themes within and across the story stems, which were discussed and refined with the senior researchers (BJJ, SCH). The themes were reviewed by the research team and then named and defined. Finally, the themes were written up as results. Content analysis was used to explore objectives two and three, which focused on determining differences in social norms based on the demographics of participants and by characters and assumptions in the story. A content analysis was performed by the first author (AGS) to determine count and frequency of story completion codes based on demographic and follow-up data. For example, did participants who were parents describe Ash offering healthier snacks than non-parents?

## **Results**

### **Participant characteristics**

A total of 196 participants took part in the study, with 75 responding to the non-visitor stem, 54 responding to the visitor stem, and 67 responding to the sport stem. Demographic characteristics are summarised in Table 2. Most participants identified as a woman (85%), had completed a bachelor or postgraduate degree (58%) and were born in Australia (70%). A third of participants had one or more child(ren) aged 0–18 years at home (32%). These participants are described as parents for the purposes of this study. The remainder did not have a child living at home, described as non-parents (noting they may have adult children). In response to the story stems, participant stories were a median length of 48 words, ranging from 1 to 289 words.

### **Summary of themes**

A total of nine themes were identified surrounding family food provision across the non-visitor, visitor and sport stems (Fig. 1). Themes from the non-visitor stem surrounding food provision at home have been reported previously<sup>(25)</sup>. The theme identified across all three stems was 'Providing a healthy snack'. The theme identified in the visitor and non-visitor stems was 'Providing justifications for the provision of unhealthy convenience foods'. Two themes were identified specifically in the visitor stem including 'Providing baked treats to visitors' and 'Considering the visitors' needs and expectations'. Finally, two themes were identified specifically in the sport stem including 'Hydration' and 'Sport as a trade-off for unhealthy food'.

### **Themes identified across all stems**

**Providing a healthy snack.** Participants described Ash providing the child(ren) with a healthy snack, as also outlined in our complementary paper<sup>(25)</sup>. This theme was

**Table 1** Story completion tasks and follow-up questions provided to participants

	Non-visitor Stem	Visitor Stem	Sport Stem
Introduction	We invite you to read through the following scenario and then write a story that follows this scenario. There is no right, or wrong response and your language can be as informal as you like. This method is not about getting your personal experience or opinion, but rather we want to know how you think this hypothetical scenario might play out. There is no limit to how long or short the story should be but should take no longer than 10–20 min.		
Story Stem	<b>Ash is at home with their child(ren). The child(ren) say they are hungry.</b>	<b>Ash is at home with their child(ren) and visitors. The child(ren) say they are hungry.</b>	<b>Ash and their child(ren) have finished sport for the day. The child(ren) say they are hungry.</b>
Prompt	Describe what food Ash provides. <i>You could consider the type of food, the time of day, the day of the week, the age of the child(ren) and/or what everyone was doing prior to the child(ren) saying they are hungry.</i>	Describe what food Ash provides. <i>You could consider the type of food, the time of day, the day of the week, the age of the child(ren), what everyone was doing prior to the child(ren) saying they are hungry and/or who the visitors are.</i>	Describe what food Ash provides. <i>You could consider the type of food, the time of day, who they are with, the age of the child(ren) and/or the type of sport.</i>
Follow up questions instructions	Please answer the following questions in relation to your response to the story. There are no right or wrong answers.		
Question 1	Did you consider: The gender of Ash? a. Did not consider b. Yes – female c. Yes – male d. Yes – non-binary		
Question 2	If Ash had a partner? a. Did not consider b. Yes – female c. Yes – male d. Yes – non-binary If yes, was their partner present in the scenario? a. Did not consider b. Yes c. No		
Question 3	How many children there were? a. Did not consider b. Yes – 1 child c. Yes – 2 children d. Yes – 3 children e. Yes – 4+ children		
Question 4	The age of the child(ren)? a. Did not consider b. Yes		
Question 5	If yes, please describe the child(ren)'s age (free text answer) What eating occasion Ash was providing for? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Breakfast c. Yes – Morning tea d. Yes – Lunch e. Yes – Afternoon tea f. Yes – Dinner g. Yes – Supper h. Yes – Brunch i. Yes – Snack j. Yes – Beverage/drink k. Yes – Other (please describe)	Who the visitors were? a. Did not consider b. Yes If yes, who were the visitors? (free text answer)	If they were with other people? a. Did not consider b. Yes, they were with other people c. No, they were not with other people If yes, who? (free text answer)
Question 6	What day of the week it was? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Monday c. Yes – Tuesday d. Yes – Wednesday a. Yes – Thursday b. Yes – Friday e. Yes – Saturday f. Yes – Sunday	The number of visitors? a. Did not consider b. Yes If yes, please describe how many visitors were present (free text answer) How many adults were present? How many children were present? (free text answer)	What eating occasion Ash was providing for? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Breakfast c. Yes – Morning tea d. Yes – Lunch e. Yes – Afternoon tea f. Yes – Dinner g. Yes – Supper h. Yes – Brunch i. Yes – Snack j. Yes – Beverage/drink k. Yes – Other (please describe)

**Table 1** *Continued*

	Non-visitor Stem	Visitor Stem	Sport Stem
Question 7	The time of day? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Morning c. Yes – Midday d. Yes – Evening e. Yes – Night-time	Why the visitors came over? a. Did not consider b. Yes If yes, please describe why the visitors came over (free text answer)	What day of the week it was? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Monday c. Yes – Tuesday d. Yes – Wednesday e. Yes – Thursday f. Yes – Friday g. Yes – Saturday h. Yes – Sunday
Question 8		If the visitors were expected? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Expected c. Yes – Unexpected	The time of day? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Morning c. Yes – Midday d. Yes – Evening e. Yes – Night-time
Question 9		If the visitors brought food? a. Did not consider b. Yes – they did bring food c. No – they did not bring food If yes, what food did they bring? (free text answer)	How often the child(ren) play sport? a. Did not consider b. Yes If yes, how often (free text answer)
Question 10		What eating occasion Ash was providing for? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Breakfast c. Yes – Morning tea d. Yes – Lunch e. Yes – Afternoon tea f. Yes – Dinner g. Yes – Supper h. Yes – Brunch i. Yes – Snack j. Yes – Beverage/drink k. Yes – Other (please describe)	
Question 11		What day of the week it was? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Monday c. Yes – Tuesday d. Yes – Wednesday e. Yes – Thursday f. Yes – Friday g. Yes – Saturday h. Yes – Sunday	
Question 12		The time of day? a. Did not consider b. Yes – Morning c. Yes – Midday d. Yes – Afternoon e. Yes – Evening f. Yes – Night-time	

prevalent across all three stems, with participants describing the provision of foods such as ‘fruit’ (sport, G.H.S), ‘yoghurt’ (non-visitor, O.H.), ‘vegetable sticks’ (visitor, Q.S.) and ‘nuts’ (non-visitor, S.D.H.) across all contexts. It was observed that provision of an unhealthy snack came through in the stories as more acceptable in the visitor and sport contexts than in the non-visitor context. This did not surprise us given treat foods are often considered more acceptable in social situations, such as birthday parties<sup>(37)</sup> and youth sport<sup>(19,20)</sup>. Despite this, across all contexts, it was uncommon for participants to speak about Ash providing unhealthy snacks without a healthy snack also present, as illustrated by G.M.D:

*‘The visitors are Ash’s adult sister and her son, who is 2 years old. It’s mid-morning, and the children have eaten breakfast but it’s a couple of hours before lunch. Ash and her sister prepare a couple of plates of cut up fruit (apple, orange, strawberries) and some crackers. Ash’s sister had made some banana bread and brought it over so they have some of that as well. Ash and her sister ask the children to eat some fruit before they have the banana bread. Ash and her sister each have a cup of tea.’ - Visitor stem, G.M.D.*

The discourses surrounding the healthy snack in the sport stem focused on providing nourishment, such as snacks containing ‘protein’ (sport, E.R.S), ‘vitamins’ (sport, S.J.M)

**Table 2** Characteristics of the sample (*n* 196)

Characteristics	Stems							
	Non-visitor stem ( <i>n</i> 75)		Visitors stem ( <i>n</i> 54)		Sport stem ( <i>n</i> 67)		Total ( <i>n</i> 196)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender identity*</i>								
Male/men	11	15 %	6	11 %	10	15 %	27	14 %
Female/women	62	83 %	48	89 %	57	85 %	167	85 %
Non-binary	1	1 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	1	1 %
<i>Age (mean ± SD)</i>	51.6	15.6	48.4	17.6	48.2	16.2	49.5	16.3
<i>Highest level of education completed</i>								
Did not finish secondary school	0	0 %	1	2 %	2	3 %	3	2 %
Up to and including year 12 (or equivalent)	6	8 %	4	7 %	4	7 %	14	7 %
Certificate level	6	8 %	4	7 %	4	7 %	14	7 %
Advanced diploma/ diploma	7	9 %	6	11 %	6	11 %	19	10 %
Graduate diploma/ certificate	7	9 %	7	13 %	7	13 %	21	11 %
Bachelor degree	21	28 %	19	35 %	19	35 %	59	30 %
Postgraduate degree	28	36 %	13	24 %	13	24 %	54	28 %
<i>Aboriginal and/or torres strait islander†</i>								
Aboriginal	6	8 %	7	13 %	6	9 %	19	10 %
Neither	69	92 %	47	87 %	61	91 %	177	90 %
<i>Country of birth</i>								
Australia	52	69 %	40	74 %	45	67 %	137	70 %
UK	6	8 %	10	19 %	9	13 %	25	13 %
USA	3	4 %	1	2 %	2	3 %	6	3 %
China	3	4 %	2	4 %	1	2 %	6	3 %
New Zealand	0	0 %	0	0 %	2	3 %	2	1 %
Other	11	15 %	1	2 %	8	12 %	20	10 %
<i>State/Territory</i>								
South Australia	20	27 %	9	17 %	15	22 %	44	22 %
New South Wales	17	23 %	12	22 %	18	27 %	47	24 %
Victoria	18	24 %	15	28 %	13	19 %	46	24 %
Queensland	10	13 %	7	13 %	13	19 %	30	15 %
Australian Capital Territory	1	1 %	1	2 %	5	8 %	7	4 %
Western Australia	6	8 %	9	17 %	2	3 %	17	9 %
Northern Territory	0	0 %	0	0 %	1	2 %	1	1 %
Tasmania	3	4 %	1	2 %	0	0 %	4	2 %
<i>Location</i>								
Urban	49	65 %	37	69 %	43	64 %	129	66 %
Regional	19	25 %	12	22 %	15	22 %	46	24 %
Rural	7	9 %	5	9 %	9	13 %	21	11 %
<i>Relationship status</i>								
Single	12	16 %	13	24 %	23	34 %	48	25 %
Married	48	64 %	32	59 %	33	49 %	113	58 %
De facto	6	8 %	4	7 %	3	5 %	13	7 %
Widowed	2	3 %	1	2 %	3	5 %	6	3 %
Divorced/separated	7	9 %	4	7 %	5	7 %	16	8 %
<i>Sexual orientation‡</i>								
Heterosexual	64	85 %	51	94 %	53	79 %	168	86 %
Homosexual	3	4 %	0	0 %	2	3 %	5	3 %
Bisexual	1	1 %	1	2 %	4	6 %	6	3 %
Asexual	2	3 %	1	2 %	2	3 %	5	3 %
Other	2	3 %	0	0 %	2	3 %	4	2 %
<i>Total number of other people in household</i>								
0	16	21 %	7	13 %	18	27 %	41	21 %
1	42	56 %	31	57 %	31	46 %	104	53 %
2	9	12 %	11	20 %	8	12 %	28	14 %
3+	7	11 %	5	9 %	10	15 %	22	11 %
<i>Total number of children in household</i>								
0	53	71 %	40	74 %	41	61 %	134	68 %
1	17	23 %	9	17 %	13	19 %	39	20 %
2	4	5 %	5	9 %	7	10 %	16	8 %
3+	1	1 %	0	0 %	6	9 %	7	4 %
<i>Employment Status</i>								
Employed full time	23	31 %	24	44 %	23	34 %	70	36 %
Employed part time	20	27 %	8	15 %	15	22 %	43	22 %
Unemployed	4	5 %	3	6 %	1	2 %	8	4 %
Non-paid home duties	2	3 %	2	4 %	4	6 %	8	4 %



Table 2 Continued

Characteristics	Stems							
	Non-visitor stem (n 75)		Visitors stem (n 54)		Sport stem (n 67)		Total (n 196)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Retired	18	24 %	15	28 %	17	25 %	50	26 %
Student	6	8 %	2	4 %	5	8 %	13	7 %
Disabled or too ill to work	1	1 %	0	0 %	2	3 %	3	2 %
Volunteering/unpaid work	1	1 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	1	1 %
<i>Individual gross income per year (AUD)§</i>								
\$1–\$29 999	18	24	12	22 %	15	22 %	45	23 %
\$30 000–\$59 999	24	33 %	17	32 %	23	34 %	64	33 %
\$60 000–\$99 999	11	15 %	12	22 %	13	19 %	36	18 %
\$100 000 or more	13	17 %	8	15 %	9	13 %	30	15 %

\*One participant from the non-visitor stem responded with gender not listed (1 %).

†No participants identified as Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

‡In the non-visitor stem n 3 (4 %), in the visitor stem n 1 (2 %) and in the sport stem n 4 (6 %) preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation.

§In the non-visitor stem n 9 (12 %), in the visitor stem n 5 (9 %) and in the sport stem n 7 (10 %) preferred not to disclose their individual income per year.

and/or 'carbohydrates' (sport, J.A.N) for the purposes of nutrient replenishment:

*'I'd want to make sure the kids had a good meal following strenuous exercise so would provide something hearty. I would want to make sure that they had a good amount of protein for muscle recovery, carbs wouldn't be so important at this stage...'* – Sport stem, H.E.S.

Although participants demonstrated good knowledge of healthy eating recommendations by describing healthy foods within their responses, this theme highlights that knowledge does not always result in adherence. The context in which food provision occurs adds nuance and may influence what is considered appropriate food provision for a particular scenario. Based on what was identified in this theme around the provision of healthy snacks, it is apparent that across contexts there is a consistent expectation that parents should be providing healthy foods to children. Within the context of sport and physical activity, parents either orient towards providing food for nourishment, or conversely perceive the provision of less healthy snacks as more acceptable.

#### *Themes identified in the visitor and non-visitor stem*

*Providing justifications for the provision of unhealthy convenience foods.* Participants gave justifications for Ash providing the child(ren) with unhealthy convenience foods, as outlined in our complementary paper<sup>(25)</sup>. These justifications were presented differently for each stem. In the non-visitor stem, there were justifications around Ash being a tired, busy or working parent<sup>(25)</sup>. In the visitor stem, justifications were provided around wanting to provide food quickly so the visitors were not left hungry, or providing food quickly so Ash could return to entertaining the visitors:

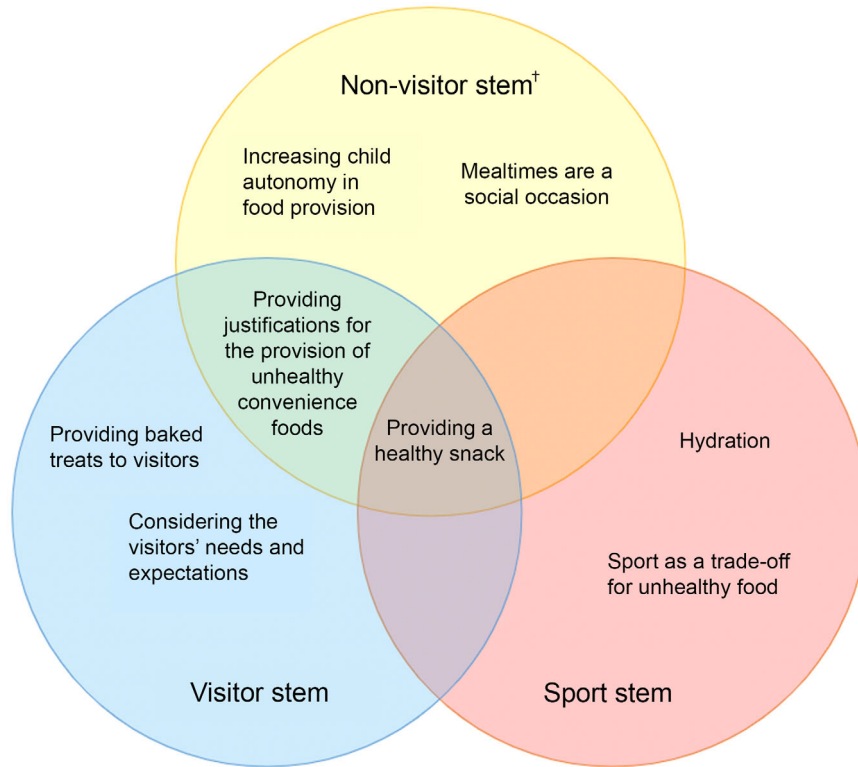
*'Ash whips up something quick for the children because he has visitors over. He looks in the fridge to*

*see if there are any leftovers that he can quickly heat up in the microwave. Nothing. He looks in the pantry and finds packets of 2-minute noodles. He asks his two children, a little boy and a girl, whether they would like 2-minute noodles. The children who are busily playing with their friends, the visitors children, reply with a yes. Ash overs to cook for the visitors and the children. They all agree to joining the children in eating. So Ash cooks up a big batch of 2-minute noodles and adds some asian greens and fishballs to it yo make it more of a meal.'* – Visitor stem, D.D.

This finding highlights the influence of visitors on food provision, where participants described Ash prioritizing providing food quickly and being present and attentive over adhering to healthy eating norms. Furthermore, given that unhealthy foods are often perceived as more acceptable in social contexts<sup>(20,37)</sup>, participants may have believed the visitors would be expecting treat foods to align with the special occasion of their visit. Despite the differences in justification type across contexts, it is apparent that from Australian adults' perspectives, there is an expectation around providing justifications when providing child(ren) with unhealthy convenience foods, regardless of context.

#### *Themes identified in the visitor stem*

*Considering the visitors' needs and expectations.* A theme derived specifically from the visitor stem is around considering the visitors' needs and expectations. While we have identified in a previous paper that participants' stories detailed the child(ren) having an influence on food provision<sup>(25)</sup>, the presence of external guests created a new dynamic. In the visitor stem, participants described the visitors influencing the types of food Ash provided with their preferences and requirements. Participants spoke about providing foods that they knew the visitors would like or aligned with the visitor's



**Fig. 1** Themes identified by story stem context\*. \*Overlap in stem circles highlight themes expressed in multiple stems. † For the non-visitor stem, an additional theme of ‘contextual factors influencing food provision and social norms’ was identified which did not contribute to the identified social norms<sup>(25)</sup>.

‘special dietary requirements’ (sport, A.L.). We did not find this unexpected given that special diets such as veganism and vegetarianism are becoming more prevalent<sup>(38)</sup>. Furthermore, there is an increasing prevalence of food allergies in Australia<sup>(39)</sup>, resulting in increased consideration of what foods are appropriate to provide to visitors.

The influence of the visitors was also seen in stories where participants described Ash asking the adult visitors if they would like food, despite the provided story stem only mentioning the child(ren) being hungry:

*‘Ash asked the visitors if they want to eat together too. The visitors said yes. Then Ash asked if they have any special dietary requirements such as vegetarian or HALAL etc. Then Ash started preparing some lunch for sharing. Ash cooked the kids’ favourite baked pasta with tuna and baby spinach salad. They had lunch together at home.’* - Visitor stem, O.F.

Participants also spoke in their stories about providing a range of food options, such as a ‘platter’ (visitor stem, E.S.A). This indicates the influence participants perceive visitors have on the types or range of food that should be provided:

*‘Rather than asking the visitors if they are hungry, she begins to prepare some finger food for the group. She puts together a platter that includes some dips and crackers, chopped up vegetables and fruit and some dark chocolate.’* - Visitor stem, E.A.P

The influence of the visitors was also seen in stories where participants spoke about foods and behaviours that would indicate higher status or class, such as providing ‘seafood’ (P.H.) and using ‘fancy cutlery’ (A.F.). These demonstrate that participants were orienting Ash’s food provision to visitors as an opportunity to impress, or may indicate that there are certain expectations or norms around what foods or food presentations are appropriate to serve within this social group.

*‘Ash knew the family was coming, prepared the seafood ahead of time, cleaned the house and dressed the children in new clothes’* - Visitor stem, G.P.

It was noted that in the non-visitor stem where no mention was made of visitors being present, some participants included visitors in their stories:

*‘On Friday morning, a family of four of my colleagues came home to visit me, brought me precious wine, played for a while the child said she was hungry, I prepared a cake for the child, but also prepared snacks’* - Non-visitor stem, D.M.

This highlights that participants significantly oriented their hypothetical stories towards the presence of visitors and the impact that other people can have on our food provision.

*Providing baked treats to visitors.* Significantly, participants described the provision of baked treats to visitors. Whilst the above theme identified the influence of visitors





on the types of foods and the ways in which foods were provided, this theme identified participants describing Ash explicitly providing the visitors with baked treats. These treats included 'banana bread' (visitor stem, J.R.), 'muffins' (visitor stem, K.P.) and 'cake' (visitor stem, E.H.).

*'Its the weekend and aunt and cousins visiting and its coming up to lunchtime. Ash makes cheese and salad sandwiches for everyone. Grown ups have tea or coffee and kids have juice boxes or water. There is banana cake for dessert made because visitors were expected'* - Visitor stem, E.R.S

This specific extract is interesting as baking became more popular during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>(40)</sup>. We acknowledge the influence that COVID-19 may have had on our results, given that it was prevalent at the time of the survey with multiple states in lockdown. Notionally, baking can be used as a demonstration of love, a means of providing sustenance to visitors, or as seen via social media during COVID-19 lockdowns, a means of building and demonstrating skill to overcome boredom and pass time<sup>(40)</sup>. Unlike the other story stems where the notion of baking did not come up in participant stories, the expectation of parents to provide baked treats is unique to the visitor context.

#### Themes identified in the sport stem

**Hydration.** The first theme identified specific to the sport stem is around hydration. In their stories, participants described providing the children with a beverage, such as 'water' (sport, F.D.), 'fresh fruit drinks' (sport, A.D.C.), 'juice' (sport, A.M.) or 'flavoured milk' (sport, I.N.). Participants often emphasised the importance of hydration following sport by prioritising the beverage before food:

*'Ash and the kids pick up their water bottles and have a nice big drink of water first to quench their thirst. As it is mid morning, they have a snack to keep them going. This is a piece of fruit and a handful of nuts. Ash let's the kids choose what piece of fruit they'd like (there's apples, mandarins, bananas, oranges, pears and kiwi fruit to choose from) and some mixed nuts in a jar (dry roasted almonds and casbeus).'*' - Sport stem, A.S.B.

Hydration was not as prominent in both the visitor and non-visitor stems, suggesting that hydration is often not considered as part of family food provision in day-to-day life. Based on participants' responses around providing the child(ren) with a beverage following a sporting activity, it is apparent that Australian adults recognise the importance of hydration in a sporting context, but less so in non-sporting contexts. It is interesting that water/beverage intake is not a prominent norm in the home contexts given how critical hydration is. However, given increased thirst during sport and that sport often occurs out of home, it is normative to take a water bottle. Therefore, this theme highlights the influence context has on which norms are at play.

**Sport as a trade-off for unhealthy food.** In the sixth theme identified, participants gave justifications for Ash providing the children with unhealthy foods before or after sport. This included unhealthy snacks such as 'ice cream' (sport, B.G.) and takeaway foods such as 'McDonalds' (sport, O.W.) and 'Domino's' (sport, E.G.S.). Participants described the provision of unhealthy foods as an incentive or reward for sport, as described by J.H:

*'Normally after playing their game of hockey, which goes for about an hour, Ash will serve them & their team mates a big fruit salad . . . however . . . Today is a Competition day! Ash has told the kids that if their team "The Hockey Hawks" win he will shout all the kids on the team ice cream after their fruit salad . . . Just like he promised Ash & the whole team of Hockey Hawks & their parents went to the ice cream store & celebrated their awesome win! . . .'*' - Sport stem, J.H.

Another participant described McDonald's food being provided 'after a great game of tennis' (sport, S.H.J.), demonstrating that the food is a reward for playing well.

Participants also described the challenges Ash experienced in the out of home context and used these to justify the provision of unhealthy or takeaway foods to the child(ren). Justifications included the food being 'quick and easy for Ash' (sport stem, O.S), the family needing time to prepare for work/school the following day, the child(ren) being hungry and transport time:

*'It is Saturday morning and Sally has just finished playing hockey. Ash and Sally get in the car and collect Peter from rowing training. Ash has water and bananas in the car and the kids have these. The kids say they are still hungry and it is still a 25 min drive [un]til they get home and a couple of hours til lunch time. Ash pulls into the bakery and the kids get themselves a milkshake and a bread scroll to have on the way home. Ash has a scroll and a coffee.'* - Sport stem, R.M.S

This theme is interesting as it contrasts previous themes of providing a healthy snack and, in particular, providing food for nourishment in a sport context. Furthermore, in their story one participant positioned a 'good parent' to pack 'a picnic lunch with sandwiches ham and cheese, peanut butter, salad, fruit and bottled water and homemade cake.' (sport, D.D). However, many participants described parents in their stories providing children with takeaway foods. This suggests there are ideals around the 'perfect parent' who provides healthy foods, meanwhile in reality 'real' parents take short cuts and utilise convenience or unhealthy foods within specific contexts. The complex relationship between family food provision and unhealthy foods is further exacerbated within the sporting context by using unhealthy foods as an incentive or reward. Within this context, unhealthy food provision becomes more 'normal' and justified because the children have 'earned' it

through sport. Here the influence of context on the perception of what is considered normative can be seen.

#### *Follow-up questions*

A series of follow-up questions were asked to participants to gather any assumptions made about the hypothetical scenarios posed to them (see online supplementary material, Supplementary File 1). Relating to all three stems, nearly half of all participants (45%) assumed Ash was female; meanwhile, 41% did not consider Ash's gender. Most participants (70%) did not consider whether Ash had a partner; meanwhile, 16% assumed Ash had a male partner. When asked about the child(ren) present, 41% assumed there were three children, and 54% of participants assumed the children were between the ages of five and twelve. The most commonly assumed mealtime was afternoon tea (21%), while the most commonly assumed day of the week was Saturday (23%) and time of day was afternoon (35%). Of those who considered why the visitors were present in the visitor stem, 25% assumed it was for the parents to catch up. Approximately half of participants did not consider if the visitors were expected (44%) or if the visitors brought food (50%). Of those who responded to the sport stem, 13% assumed other people were present and of those who considered sport frequency, 35% assumed sport was played twice per week.

#### *Content analysis examining differences by participant demographics*

Content analysis was performed to see if there were any differences in codes based on participant demographics (see online supplementary material, Supplementary File 2). Following analysis, no major differences were found. For example, 24% (15 of 62) of parents and 32% (43 of 134) of non-parents described Ash providing a healthy snack. Furthermore, data analysed investigating assumptions made about the scenarios by participant demographics did not find any major differences. Therefore, the social norms previously established are mostly pervasive regardless of the demographics of participants in our sample.

#### *Content analysis examining differences by characters and assumptions*

Content analysis was performed to examine any differences in codes based off participants' assumptions around the scenario (see online supplementary material, Supplementary File 2). Following analysis, no major differences were found. For example, 30% (32 of 109) of participants who did not consider the child's age/considered multiple ages described Ash providing a healthy snack, while 32% (19 of 68) of participants who assumed the child was aged between 5–12 and 14% (1 of 7) of those who assumed the child was aged 13+ described the provision of a healthy snack. Those who assumed the child was aged 2 years ( $n = 2$ ) or aged 3–4 years ( $n = 4$ ) did not describe providing a healthy snack, however the sample size of respondents was

much smaller for these child age groups. Therefore, the social norms previously established are mostly pervasive regardless of the assumptions that participants made about the scenarios.

## **Discussion**

Our study aimed to explore if there are differences in social norms around parents' food provision (1) in different food provision contexts, (2) by demographics of participants in our sample and (3) by characters and assumptions in the story. Across all stems (non-visitor, visitor and sport) we identified nine themes: (1) Providing a healthy snack (non-visitor, visitor and sport stems), (2) providing justifications for the provision of unhealthy convenience foods (non-visitor and visitor stems), (3) increasing child autonomy in food provision (non-visitor stem), (4) mealtimes are a social occasion (non-visitor stem), (5) contextual factors influencing food provision and social norms (non-visitor stem), (6) Providing baked treats to visitors (visitor stem), (7) considering the visitors' needs and expectations (visitor stem), (8) hydration (sport stem) and (9) sport as a trade-off for unhealthy food (sport stem). There were no major differences in the assumptions participants made about the scenarios, or their demographics. From the themes stated above and the lack of differences resulting from further analysis, we propose four social norms: (1) Expectation of providing healthy foods and justifying non-adherence to healthy eating guidelines, (2) evolution of family life, (3) the presence of others influences how we engage with food provision and (4) unhealthy foods are used as rewards or incentives in sport.

Across all three contexts, participants expected parents to provide the child(ren) with a healthy snack and provide justifications for non-adherence to healthy eating guidelines. The existence of this norm across three different food provision contexts indicates that this social norm is pervasive across contexts. Although this norm holds true, different elements of this norm present in different ways depending on the situation. For example, in the sport stem, healthy food was provided for the specific purpose of nourishment, a purpose which was not mentioned in the other stems. This finding is consistent with research conducted in the UK that found parents recognise nutrition as an important factor in adolescents' performance in swimming, but also within the context of development, growth and health<sup>(41)</sup>. Therefore, although this norm is pervasive across contexts, the ways in which it presents itself can vary. Furthermore, the lack of differences seen following our content analysis of codes by participant demographics and scenario assumptions further highlights these norms are present across different groups of participants. This is interesting as existing literature contradicts our finding with research showing that social norms can differ within different social groups<sup>(42)</sup>, cultures<sup>(43)</sup>, races<sup>(44)</sup> and



based on context, such as child age<sup>(19)</sup> and food type<sup>(24)</sup>. Our contradictory finding may have been due to a lack of diversity in our sample and participants likely orienting to perceptions of a 'normative Australian family'.

Although we have identified this pervasive healthy eating norm, our research has found that the food provision context adds a layer of nuance. In our earlier paper<sup>(25)</sup>, we found a norm in the immediate family context around the evolution of family life where child autonomy is increasing through increasing child choice during food provision. However, when visitors were present, the visitors' needs and preferences become a priority, as demonstrated in our theme around considering the visitors' needs and expectations. Furthermore, food provision becomes more performative when visitors are present, as seen in the theme around providing baked treats to visitors. This demonstrates how food provision is influenced by the context it occurs in. While the literature on food provision to others in a home environment is scarce, there is copious literature around the impact that other people have on our own food choices<sup>(45)</sup>. Research has shown that people alter their food practices depending on what is perceived to be socially acceptable<sup>(21,46,47)</sup>. This suggests that people may adapt the type of food provided based on what they perceive as accepted by the visitors, highlighting the strong impact social context has on food provision and how the expectations of others can override our own attitudes towards food.

Our study found a social norm that in a sport context unhealthy foods are used as rewards or incentives. The identification of this norm further highlights the nuances arising from food provision context. This norm aligns with two studies in the USA finding that parents of children (4–12 years) perceive snacks or sugar-sweetened beverages to be rewards for sport participation and effective to enhance team bonding<sup>(19,20)</sup>. This is concerning from a public health perspective, given unhealthy food marketing/sponsorship in sport<sup>(48)</sup>, which may be more effective given this norm. Conversely, a study conducted in the USA found that parents hold the belief that children 8–18 years in the USA should not receive food as a reward or consolation as often as it currently occurs in sport; however, parents felt uncomfortable not allowing their children to take part in an unhealthy team snack<sup>(49)</sup>. Therefore, our findings and the literature demonstrate that the context in which food provision occurs is nuanced and where people are will impact choices around food provision.

Our study is not without limitations. Due to our recruitment method of Facebook®, participants may have had a higher interest in nutrition; however, reimbursement was provided to facilitate a broader range of people to participate. Additionally, while our sample varied in diversity, it was predominantly female with a higher education level than national average<sup>(50)</sup>. However, content analysis was conducted using a range of characteristics (such as by education level) to determine whether the

themes from the entire sample still held true. This study was strengthened by the use of comparative stems, which allowed us to examine the influence of different contexts on social norms. Follow-up questions allowed us to understand the assumptions made about the scenarios and compare the themes that came through in the stories based on these assumptions. Future research could explore parents' perceptions and experiences of these norms to determine whether and how they are experienced. Our participants were likely orienting to a normative family type as opposed to exploring diverse family types. Therefore, future research could explore how these norms present in various population groups and to what extent these norms impact food choice.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we identified some pervasive social norms that Australian adults constructed and reproduced when describing family food provision. We further identified how contextual factors, such as visitors being present, or participation in sport, resulted in variations or entirely distinct norms. Therefore, context may significantly impact on the social norms Australian parents face when providing food to their children. This provides a unique opportunity to strategically leverage social norms in various contexts to support healthy eating, whilst also remaining aware of the risks of social norms, such as marketing campaigns, and how they may negatively leverage these norms.

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### **Conflict of interest**

None.

### **Authorship**

B.J.J. and S.C.H. conceived the study. A.G.S., B.J.J. and S.C.H. designed the study. A.G.S. collected, analysed, interpreted the data and prepared the draft manuscript.

S.C.H. provided methodological expertise, B.J.J. provided content expertise and both provided supervision and contributed to data analysis and interpretation, reviewed and critically edited manuscript drafts. All authors have approved the final article.

### Ethics of human subject participation

This study was conducted according to the guidelines laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki, and all procedures involving research study participants were approved by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (project no. 4537). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### Supplementary material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980024000806>.

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