Reviewer's report

Title: What strategies perceive parents as effective or ineffective in promoting a healthy diet, physical activity, and less sitting in children: findings from focus groups with parents

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Reviewer: Simon Sebire

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Major Compulsory
1) Page 5, line 87: Some key literature is neglected in the introduction. For example Jago and colleagues have recently published papers reporting the Teamplay physical activity parenting trial (IJBNPA), and Bentley et al have reported qualitative interviews with parents about physical activity parenting (BMC Pediatrics). In addition, Hesketh et al (Health Promotion International 2005) reported qualitative work with parents about obesity-related behaviours and Power’s work (J Sch Health, 2012) also seems relevant. It would be advisable to represent the literature more fully and in doing so try to justify further how the present research adds to the existing literature and the exact ways that it is novel and therefore necessary.

2) SDT and SCT are clearly embedded in the study which is positive in my opinion. But this raises a question of the degree to which these theories influenced data collection, questions asked in focus groups, follow ups on topics which may have been viewed by the interviewers as theoretically informative, data analysis etc. The role of the theories should be acknowledged. This is related to a later point referring to trustworthiness and quality criteria in qualitative work.

3) Page 4, line 75: SCT is introduced here but this seems overly brief and only focusses on one aspect (rewarding). It may be worth considering broadening out the description of the theories as they are being considered separately at present whereas in reality they overlap in some respects (e.g., competence and self-efficacy) and disagree in others.

4) Page 5, line 101: How was SES measured and how were participants recruited based on SES? Were all participants screened for SES and selected into focus groups based on this? What was the baseline number of participants who volunteered and how many of these were involved in focus groups? If SES was used as a stratification / recruitment factor then it would seem relevant to explore this in the data analysis and discussion. The authors presumably thought that SES may influence the parent’s views, so it would be prudent to examine if it did.

5) Page 6. The authors used hypothetical situations to stimulate discussion. While this is a common technique and clearly stimulated discussion can the
authors comment on the degree to which parents’ responses reflected their likely actions in real situations? A potential limitation of using hypothetical questions rather than having parents reflect upon their own real lived experiences is that they also give hypothetical answers. Parent-child communication is contextual and likely is influenced in the moment by a multitude of contextual, daily fluctuating factors. Can responses to hypothetical situations really represent the reality of parent-child communications and to what extent are parents referring to what they hope they would do rather than what actually happens?

6) Page 8. The analysis section is currently very brief and provides too little information to judge whether the methodology was appropriate. For example what analysis was conducted? Did the authors follow a published analysis technique, if so, what were the steps in this analysis? Exactly how were codes and themes developed? What quality / trustworthiness criteria were used in the data collection, analysis and write up? With only 4 focus groups, it would be appropriate for all of them to be coded by multiple analysts. At present the discussion of inter-rater reliability takes a quantitative and positivistic view which seems to be in conflict with the qualitative methodology. I would recommend embracing the qualitative methodology more which will allow the authors to get more out of their data.

7) Page 9, Results. It was encouraging to see the presentation of long quotes rather than short snippets. However the results seem very descriptive at the cost of making meaningful and informative interpretations of the data. I would like to see the authors move beyond the descriptive to the interpretative. For example in the quote supporting “time out” there are lots of interesting interpretations in here that could be made; “wherever you are” suggests that the rule is portable, not restricted to home and something the parent seems to have embedded in their life whatever the situation. On Page 14, the quote supporting “monitoring” refers to a very interesting combination of autonomy support and parental control which seems to have been neglected. In addition, some themes (e.g., giving an explanation) are not supported by any quotes and many themes are only supported by a single quote. It appears that due to the complex nature of some of the parenting strategies (time out, rewards etc) the depth of the theme and the parents’ experiences are not likely to be represented by a single quote. At present the descriptive nature of the results seems to prevent the study from adding a great deal to the literature beyond what is already known and does not capitalise on the rich qualitative data.

8) Discussion: The discussion links the findings to SDT and SCT. However I felt that there was some reason behind using SDT and SCT that has not been presented. It seems that all of the results found are supportive of these theories and are being use to persuade the reader about the theory in some way or for some reason. For example, Page 23, line 489 seems to suggest that this work is being used to develop a theory-based parenting intervention. If this is the case then links to the theories could be made clearer by stating how the knowledge and interpretation in terms of theory might inform intervention content but it is necessary to be transparent about this aim from the outset. It is also necessary
to bolster the novelty in the findings and what it adds specifically to our knowledge of parenting strategies. Further, statements such as “this is right up the street of SDT” are not appropriate (P22, line 482).

Minor Essential

9) The title does not read well, consider revising. Perhaps this is a question “what strategies do parents perceive as…”?

10) Page 3, line 54: A general point is to avoid referring to “evidence” in a vague manner, rather stating what the level/strength of the evidence is.

11) Page 3, line 51. Please present evidence to support statements suggesting that PA is associated with prevention of cancer and diabetes among children. Is there not a lack of evidence for this as cancer and diabetes manifest later in life?

12) Page 4, line 70: Selected components from SDT are introduced here without definition (e.g., the three needs). Readers not familiar with the theory will find this difficult.

13) Page 15, line 298. It is suggested that parents claimed that household chores are a valued alternative to screen-time for children, yet no data is presented to support this. I am not convinced that children would buy in to such a strategy and our research suggests that parents find it challenging to think of truly engaging and realistic home-based alternatives to screen-time (especially in bad weather or times of stress).

14) Page 16, line 333. The authors discuss the use of the parent’s “tasting rule” as a form of obligation. Although I can see the authors point, an alternative interpretation is that this is indicative of clear rules, structure and autonomy support. The family rule is that foods are at least tried. The child knows this rule and then has choice if they don’t like it to decline eating it. The end result is that the child is not obliged to eat anything that they do not like the taste of. I would suggest that this is not a purely controlling strategy.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests’