

Monsters don't eat broccoli – a pilot and feasibility study on play and food acceptance in preschoolers

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Neophobia: The rejection of foods that are novel or unknown (Dovey et al., 2008)

Food acceptance: The level of which a particular food is enjoyed (Meiselman & Bell, 2003).



Background

- The preschool years signify a unique period of development during which children begin engaging in pretend play and during which food rejection is common
- Neophobia presents many challenges for children and their parents during meal-time, resulting in unbalanced, habitual diets that may lack the proper nutrients a child needs to grow (Dovey et al., 2008)
- It is important to study what factors may inhibit food acceptance and what behaviors promote it, in order to foster healthy and varied eating in children



INTRODUCTION

Pretend Play & Child Development

- Pretend play has a significant role in both cognitive and socioemotional development during early childhood (e.g., Rosen, Schwebel, & Singer, 1997)

Parenting and Child Eating Behaviors

- It is important for young children to eat fruits and vegetables in order to maintain a healthy and balanced diet
- Many parents find it challenging to encourage their children to eat these foods

Play and Eating

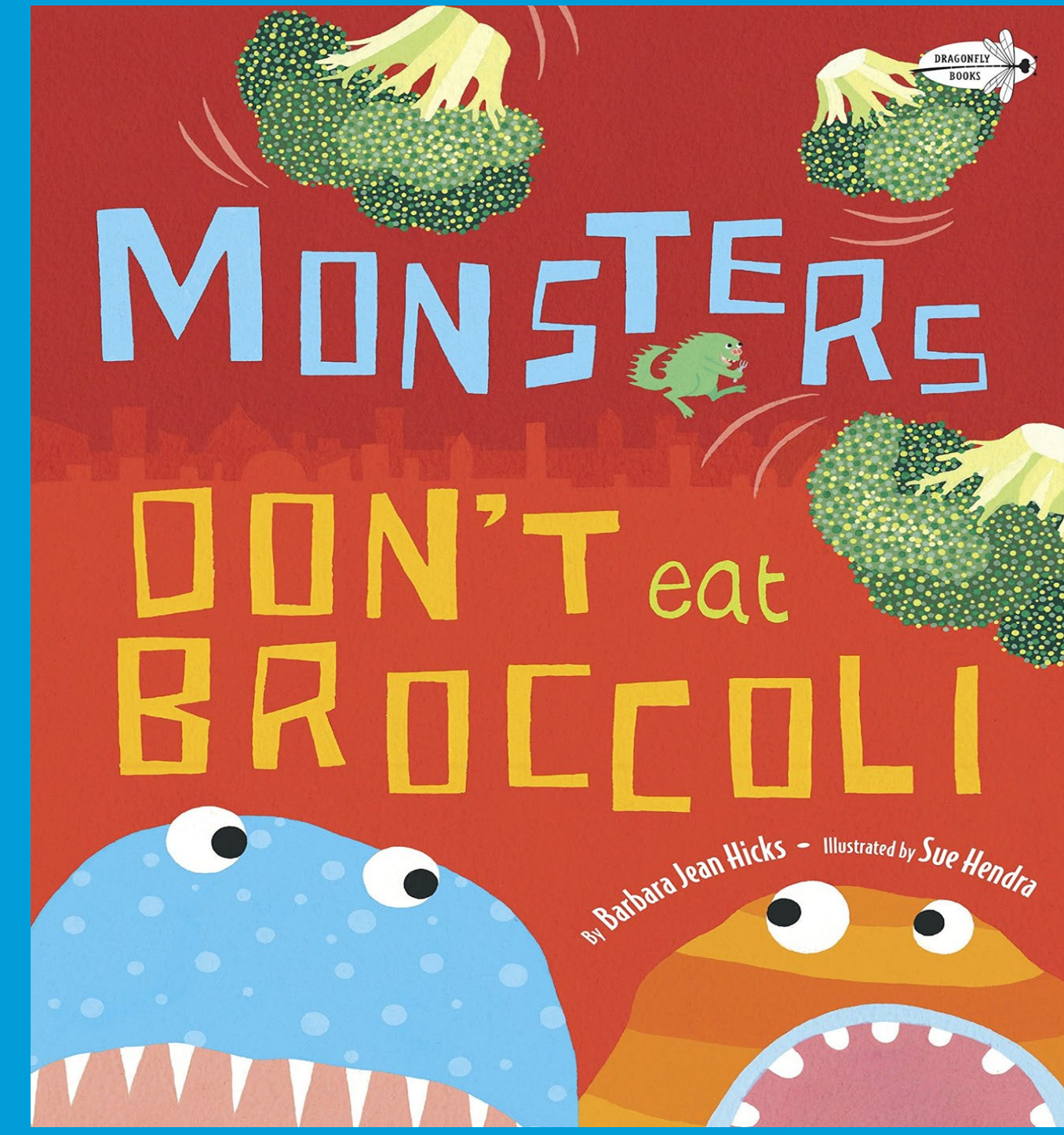
- Recent studies have shown that when parents read picture books that expose unfamiliar food to their children, they become more open to exploring the food from the book (Heath et al., 2014, Houston-Price et al., 2019)

Purpose

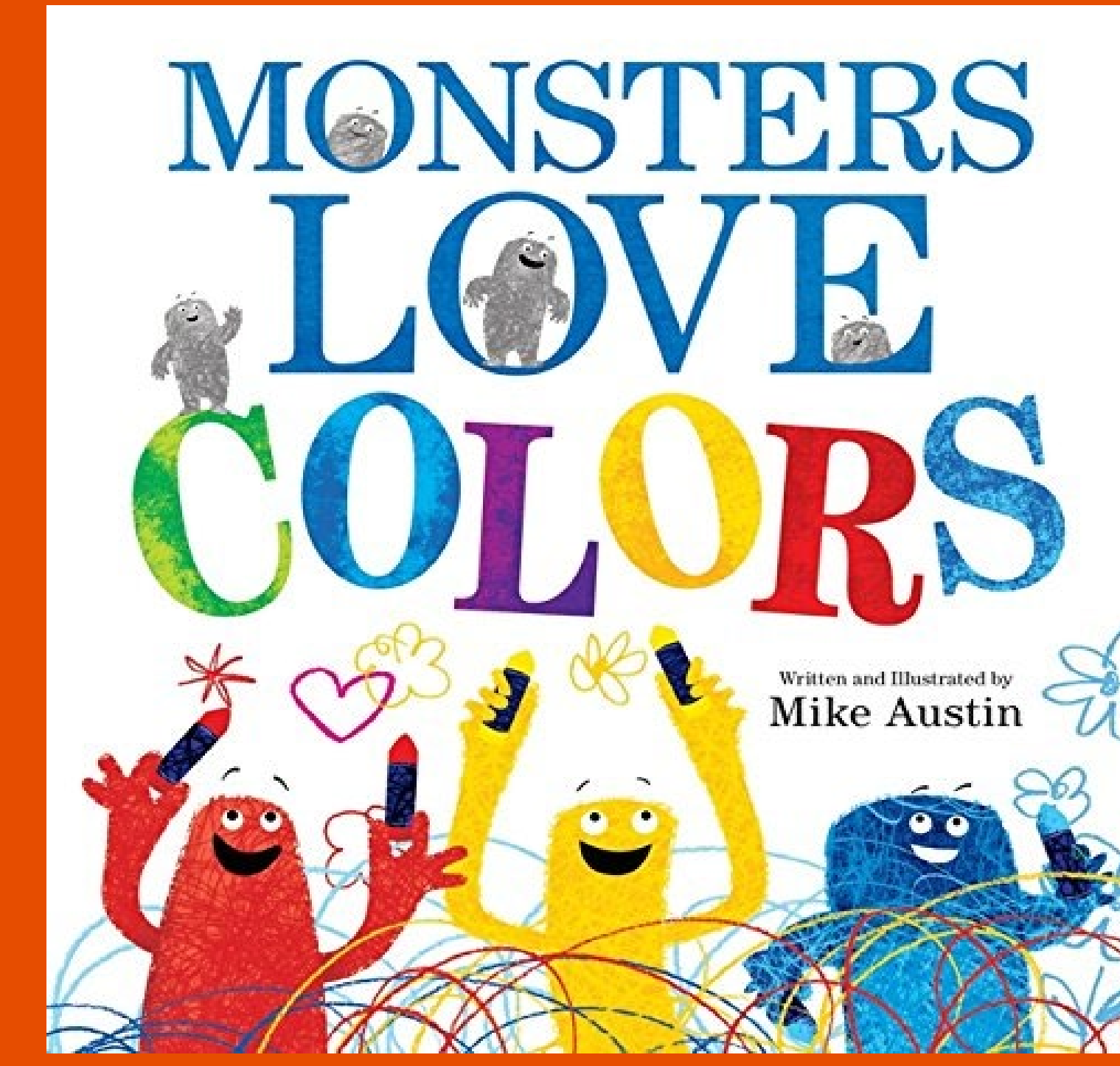
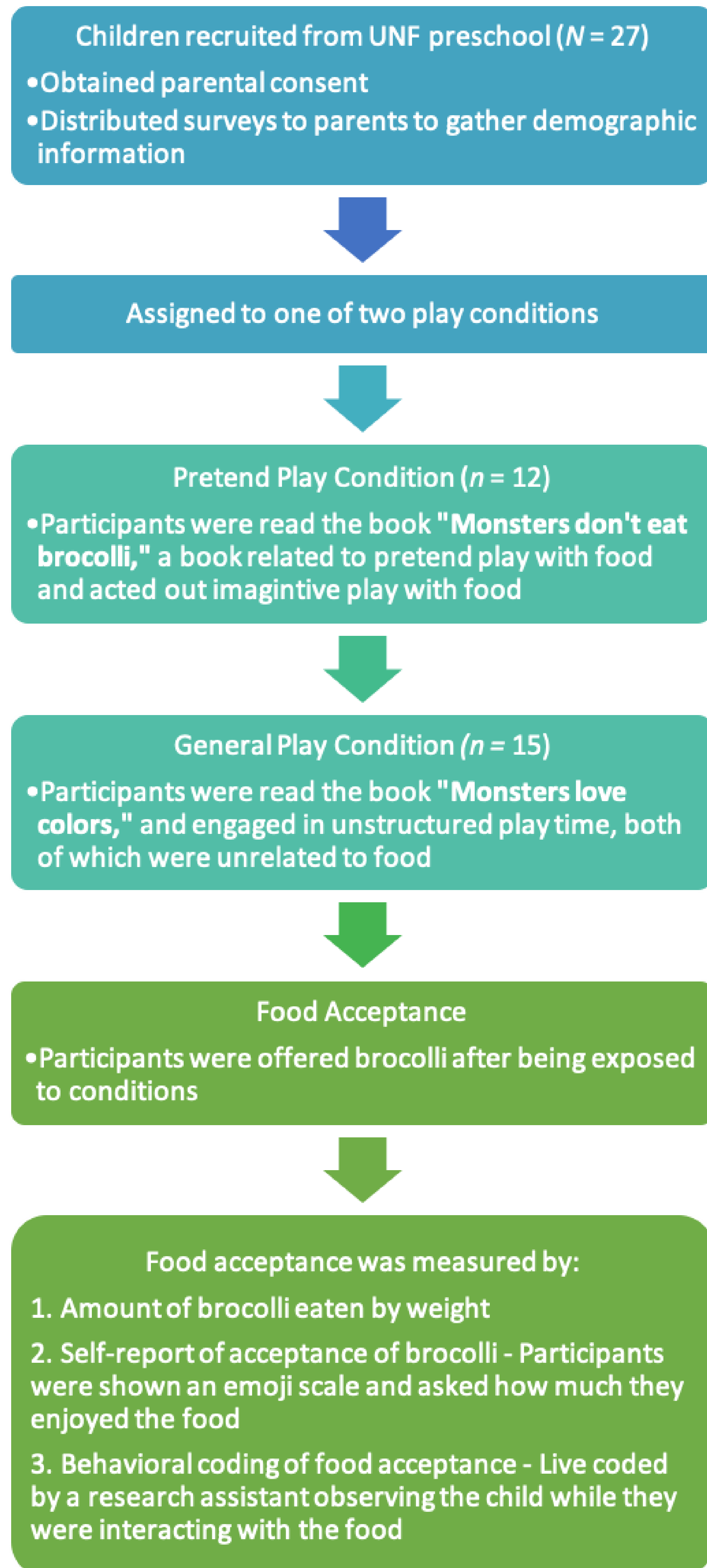
There is no research to our knowledge about using pretend play situations to encourage children to eat new foods

Therefore, **the objectives of this pilot study were to:**

- Assess the feasibility of using pretend play in preschool children to improve food acceptance
- Develop a behavioral coding system to measure food acceptance



METHOD



RESULTS

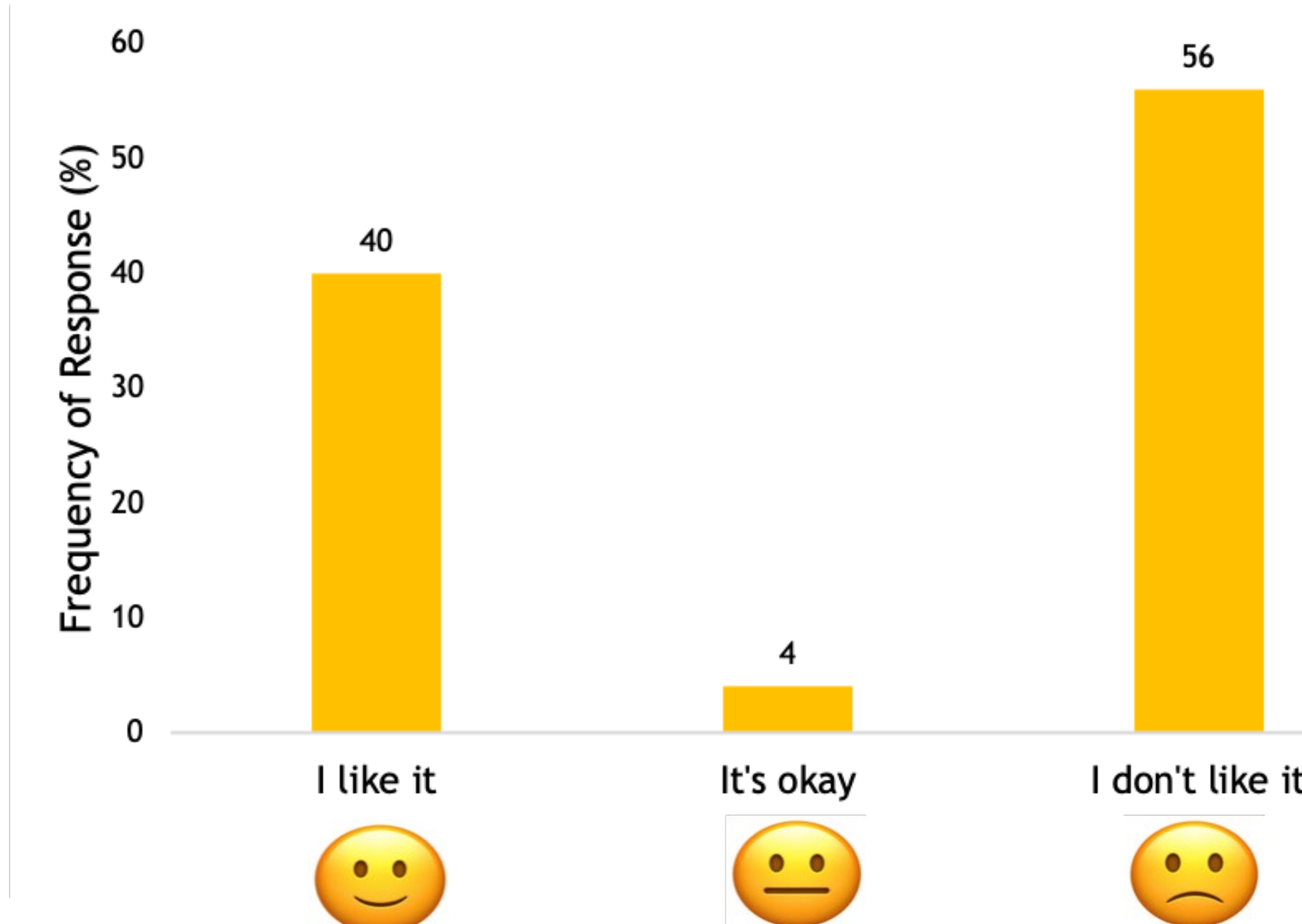
Objective 1

- 12 children were assigned to the Pretend Play condition, 15 to the General Play condition; of those who participated (92.6%) had complete data for all three food acceptance measures
- There was variability in the food acceptance measures, presented below

Amount of Broccoli Consumed (grams)

| Mean | SD | Range |
|-------|-------|----------------|
| 4.91g | 8.77g | 0.00g - 29.83g |

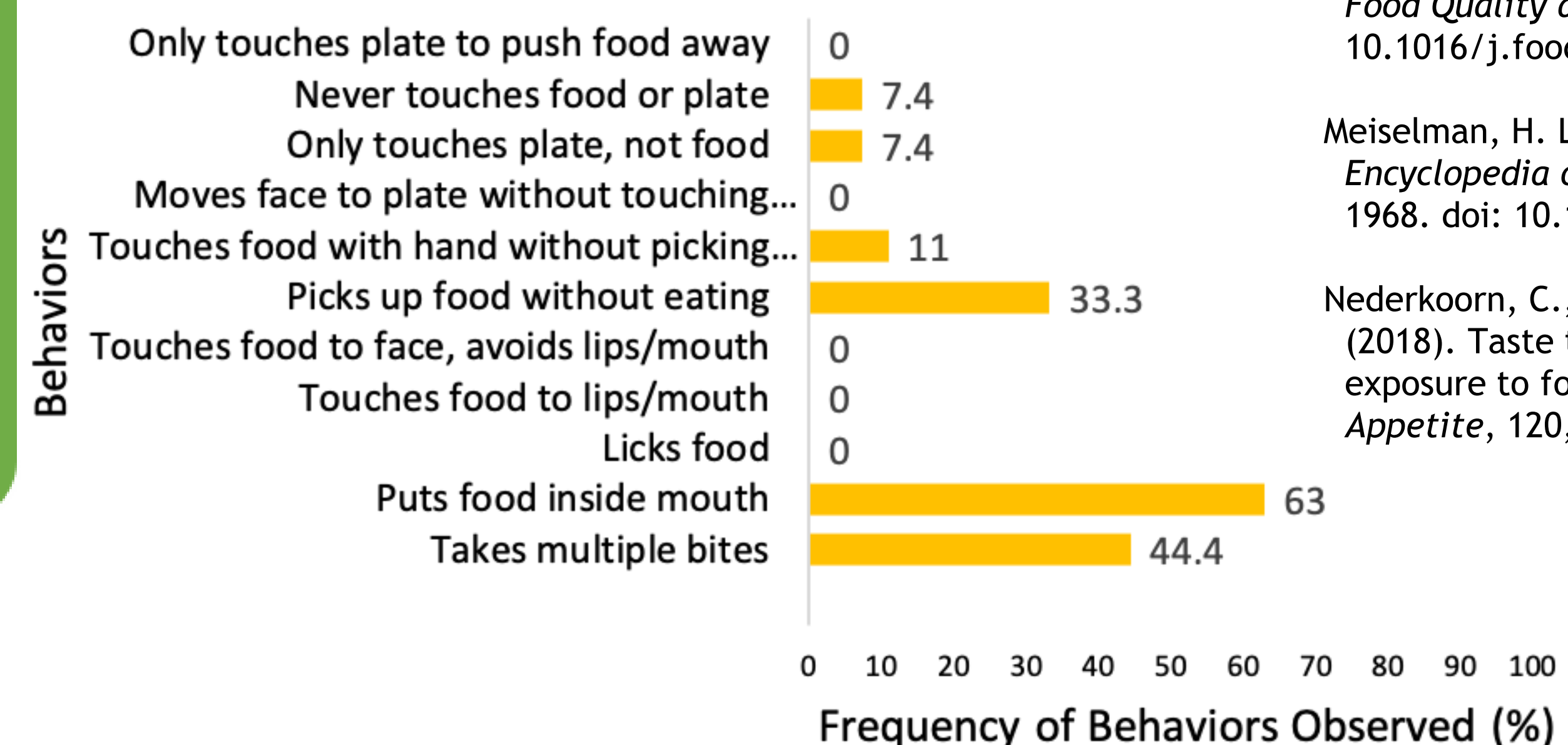
Self-Report of Food Acceptance



Objective 2

- The behavioral coding captured a variety of food acceptance behaviors

Behavioral Coding



DISCUSSION

- Findings from this pilot study indicate that the behavioral coding and food acceptance measures are feasible
 - This supports the aim of the current study and sets the foundation for future research to test the hypothesis that pretend play increases food acceptance
- Future studies should:
 - Include a larger sample of children
 - Work with participants individually rather than in groups to avoid peer-influence
 - Record research sessions and code behaviors from video, rather than conducting a live-coding, in order to minimize reactivity and improve the ecological validity

References

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