

# **Children, food consumption and culture in the Nordic countries**

**Anne Trine Kjørholt, Vebjørn Tingstad and  
Helene Brembeck**

## **Introduction**

This is a project description written by a Nordic research group, which has received funding<sup>1</sup> to develop an interdisciplinary comparative research network about children, food consumption and culture in the Nordic countries. The funding will be used to arrange a workshop to constitute a group of researchers representing both consumer science and child research in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and Norway and initiate joint Nordic research applications.

The main aim of the activities is to generate knowledge about the relations between cultural practices of food consumption in public spaces and childhood as a social phenomenon in modern welfare societies. Food is particularly interesting in this respect since it is part of the global market and since eating is a way to incorporate culture and literally make in part of one's body (Bell and Valentine 1997). Though being so far an almost unexplored research field, this cross-disciplinary topic represents a potential for gaining new insights into both the conditions of children as consumers in rapidly changing and global societies, as well as about cultural practices, values and norms in the Nordic countries. The project seeks to develop a common theoretical and methodological framework for empirical studies of children's food consumption seen as cultural practices in public spaces.

---

<sup>1</sup> The funding is 50000 DK given by Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS).

The workshop will bring together Nordic and international researchers within the fields of cultural perspectives on food consumption and the new social studies of childhood. The focus of the workshop will be key ideas and perspectives for a future research agenda. A Nordic research network will be constituted. A mailing list will be set up and a chat room will be opened at the homepage of Center for Consumer Science or Norwegian Center for Child Research. Researchers from the different Nordic countries will be invited to develop a research plan. Associate Professor Helene Brembeck, Center for Consumer Science and Associate Professor Anne Trine Kjørholt, Norwegian Centre for Child Research (NOSEB) will be responsible for co-ordinating this work and develop applications on the topic of children, food consumption and culture.

## **Background**

The activities applied for aim at exploring children's food consumption as a public, cultural practice in the Nordic countries today. This perspective will extend earlier research on food consumption, by introducing childhood studies into the field of cultural food research. Cultural aspects on food consumption have been developed within sub fields such as sociology of food (Warde 1997, Beardsworth and Keil 1997, Warde and Martens 2000) and food studies (Counihan and van Esterik 1997, Scholliers 2001, Belasco and Scranton 2002). However, in this field children have almost exclusively been studied as part of the family and the private sphere. The few exceptions focusing on childhood, such as van Esterik (1997), Lyngø (2001) and Bentley (2002) deal with historical discourses on baby food and nutrition, not children's activities as food consumers today. At the same time it is obvious that a growing part of children's food consumption takes place outside the family, in public institution such as day care centres and schools and to an increasing degree in places like snack bars, quick food restaurants and candy stores. Children visit these places alone or together with friends at an early age (Brembeck and Johansson 1996). A lot of public concern is raised about children's exposure to media, advertisements and various market related activities and the possible relations to eating disorders, obesity and distorted body images. We have little knowledge about children's activities as food consumers in public spaces, and hardly anything involving children's own perspectives. A child-centred perspective will contribute greatly to consumption studies generally and will also

be useful for politicians and others dealing with public policy issues in this field. Studies of food consumption, childhood and culture may benefit from cross-disciplinary approach by integrating theoretical and methodological perspectives in childhood studies with research related to food consumption.

## **Earlier research**

Recent studies (Currie et al. 2000, Kjærnes 2001) show significant differences in people's food habits in the Nordic countries. Kjærnes (2001) finds that for the majority of all countries eating is concentrated in relatively few events. The total number of eating events is somewhat lower in Norway than in the other countries. In all countries, however living together with others seems to be the factor that more than anything else increases the probability of following socially shared eating patterns. In Norway, there is a tendency to focus on "proper meals", *orn'tlig mat*, which refers to a meal containing a staple or/and bread, and vegetables, with trimmings as an additional option. Sweden has the most "modern" food habits in terms of more variation and more complex meals. The Swedish breakfast, for instance, contains bread, yoghurt, fruits, juice and coffee. Finland is most "traditional". The meals are of short duration, they take place by the eating table and there are small differences between weekdays and weekends. In Denmark people tend to eat with their families and at prescribed times and eating is, more than in the other Nordic countries, a social activity. Danish people use more time to eat, they eat less "proper meals", more meat and the common meal is not just an activity for weekends (Kjærnes 2001). An international study with 29 participating countries (Currie et al. 2000) also states that food consumption habits vary widely. In addition to personal and social factors, food availability and culture definitely play an important role, the report concludes. The report does not however, discuss or define the meaning of the concept of culture in this connection. There are also significant gender differences. In general, girls seem to eat more fruit and vegetables daily, while boys more often both drink milk and consume the less nutritious items, high in fat and/or sugar. The Nordic countries have low ratings on the consumption of products like chips, sweets, chocolate and soft drinks. Finland and Norway are at the bottom when it comes to eating fruit every day.

A common perspective in these studies is the focus on food content and eating as a private activity within the family. It is necessary to extend this research with a cultural analytical perspective on children's food consumption in the public space. Individuals are increasingly linked to global markets that standardize commodities and tastes (Bailey 2002). In this respect globalisation is a characteristic feature in contemporary food culture. McDonald's offers children and families a standardized food menu, which is part of a broader concept of entertainment connected to notions of "happy childhoods". Thus food becomes an item that represents particular images of what children think is good and enjoyable. The potential contrast between this food culture and the meals in day care centres and primary school may imply a fruitful focus in further studies.

## **The Nordic meal in day care centres and primary school**

Cultural practices in organising children's meals in day care centres and primary school also show variations. Particularly related to the question of whether to offer hot meals and common meals, the practices vary. Icelandic day care centres have long historical traditions in offering hot meals, while primary schools have started this practice recently and parallel to the invention of "whole day school" (*heldagsskole*). In Norway, the hot meal in day care centres was removed in the 1990s. In Finland and Sweden, food is part of the curriculum in the primary education (7-15 year olds). Young people (15-) are served lunches (included in the semester fee) also in the secondary education and still at the universities students get a cheap lunch. In this respect the school meal is an institution in Finland; a part of the modern welfare society, which is taken more or less for granted.

## **Cultural perspectives on childhood and food**

Comparative studies of meals as cultural practices represent important research challenges. This project emphasises cultural perspectives on food and childhood.

Within the expanding field of social studies of childhood, childhood is seen as socially constructed and children are regarded as active partici-

pants, not just passive receivers of adult upbringing and teaching, culture and society (Alanen 1992, Qvortrup et al. 1994, James, Jenks and Prout 1998). On the other hand, their agencies are restricted by and constructed within particular discourses. Food and meal habits manifest different kinds of social, cultural and symbolic features, which express something about ourselves and where we are situated in the world (Bugge and Døving 2000). Meals can be seen as structuring and organising elements of social relations and everyday life (Douglas 1986). Food can be understood as a total social phenomenon with a significant meaning in a variety of different aspects of human life (Døving 2002). A recent ethnographic study carried out with children (3-16 years old) in Denmark argues that more attention has to be given to understanding children's diet and food in the context of children's own daily routines and the social settings of their everyday eating: at home, in the nursery and at school (Christensen 2002, 2003). Most importantly, the study demonstrated that the changing meaning of food and eating to children can be seen as closely related to the changing life course goals and values of children during their growing up. In pedagogical traditions connected to day care institutions in Norway and also in other Nordic countries, common meals are seen as very important both in terms of the nutritional value of children's diet for their health and development and in the meal as a key cultural practice. A homelike, cosy atmosphere is emphasised in the construction of the meal as a cultural practice (Korsvold 1998). Common meals for children in public institutions can be characterised both as a central site for social interaction, friendship, care and humour, and as an affirmation of belonging to this community of children. Participation in common meals has a significant symbolic value as an assertion of belonging to a particular culture (Douglas 2002). The meal seen as a highly structured and ritualised action obviously represents discipline and socialisation into certain norms and values in the surrounding culture. Ethnographic studies in two Norwegian day care centres illustrates that the staff often try to keep an atmosphere of "peace and quiet" during the meal (Nilsen 2000). The meal can be characterised as a ritual activity, happening at the same time every day, affirming a particular cultural fellowship and making visible each and everybody's belonging to this specific community of children – *barnefellesskap*. In this community, specific cultural values are both reproduced and produced. Meals in day care centres have also been described as moral ceremonies (Ehn 1983). Studies which did not from the very beginning focus on meal or food, have realised through empirical data

how food is intertwined in other activities and is a matter of regulations and negotiations (Strandell 1994, Tingstad 1996).

## **Increasing individualisation and privatisation of children's lives?**

However, in some of the Nordic countries (as for instance Denmark and Norway) common meals for everybody in many day care centres and after school arrangements have been abolished during the last ten years. Instead cultural practices favouring children's rights to choose when they are going to eat have been introduced. The new practices that are implemented can thus be interpreted as part of individualisation processes, emphasising children's rights to make their own decisions (Kjørholt 2005). Children's everyday lives in modern societies are to an increasing degree characterised by standardisation and individualisation (Qvortrup et al. 1994). The changes in the cultural practices that are implemented by the staff within some day care institutions are often connected to universal discourses on children's rights in general, and their rights to participate in particular. Within this discursive context common meals are understood as a way of exercising adult power and controlling the children. As such, the practice is seen as inconsistent with the child's right to choose for her/himself. Discourses on children as social participants have been strongly emphasised in many Nordic countries in recent years, and they are closely related to the conceptualisation of children as autonomous and competent social actors (Kjørholt 2001).

The child's right to choose activities and with whom she/he wants to play, is accented within day care centres as well as within after school programs, *skolefritidsordninger*, both in Norway and Denmark. Contemporary discussions connected to day care centres in Denmark are characterised by "[...] moral assumptions and evaluations on individual autonomy, social coherence and perceptions of the welfare society and citizenship" (Gulløv 2001:2). Notions of freedom and self-realisation within institutional contexts are here seen as connected to the absence of adult control and intervention. These particular cultural notions of "being oneself" also correspond to the anthropologist Marianne Gullestad's analyses of changes in relations between different generations in Norway during the last five to six decades. Whereas children in the 1950s were brought up to "be useful",

children in contemporary Norway are brought up to "be themselves" (Gullestad 1995). The connection between individualisation and self-determination in children's lives on the one hand, and changes in the cultural practices of eating a common meal together on the other, is one of many interesting focuses for further empirical investigations of meals in public spaces. We do not know the extension of such changes, neither on a national nor on a Nordic level. An important aim is therefore to obtain knowledge about the extent of changes in cultural practices concerning common meals in the Nordic countries. Another research focus is related to the food children are served within public institutions.

The following questions represent some possible focuses for discussions of a common research platform connected to meals within institutional contexts: What kind of food are children served in day care centres and primary schools? Hot lunch or packed lunch (*matpakke*) made at home? Are children's nutrition and meals seen as a *public* and/or a *private* responsibility in Nordic welfare societies? What do parents, staff or children decide? How are public meals for children organised in the five Nordic countries and how do these cultural practices reflect images of individualisation, community, inclusion and self-determination?

## **McDonald's as a cultural space for children**

Apart from meals in schools and day care centres, young people and children in the Nordic countries to an increasing extent have their meals in commercial spaces like cafeterias or snack bars. McDonald's restaurants are promising fields for further cross-national studies (Watson 1997). For younger children McDonald's plays an important role, being in fact one of the few places where children are welcome as customers in their own right. Sweden is today the European country with the highest rate of McDonald's establishments per person, Denmark and Norway following close behind. Each Swede visits one of the company's restaurants 1-2 times a month on average, most of the customers being children with friends or parents and teenagers (Brembeck 2003a). In architecture, ideology, activities and offerings for sale McDonald's is directed at children and families with children. The concept includes distinct ideas of children and childhood, articulated by the restaurants in the design of the buildings and the interior as well as in the offerings (Brembeck 2003b, 2004). The national McDonald's companies in the Nordic countries also collaborate to a great extent, e.g. co-

producing TV-adverts and sharing information about various campaigns directed at children. Studies show, however, that Nordic parents generally display a dislike for perceived consumerism and consider the ideal childhood a zone free from the forces of the market (e.g. Brembeck and Johansson 1996, Eckert 2001). Taking the children to McDonald's because they want to, in order to make them happy, which in fact is an integral part of life of most Nordic children, might cause substantial moral dilemmas for some parents. Creating McDonald's as a moral space is therefore of chief concern for the management, exhibited in for example Ronald McDonald House, where parents and siblings to sick children might stay during hospital visits.

Interesting aspects for further studies include the McDonald's birthday party as a distinctive phenomena where the formerly private festivity of the home, celebrating family unity and belonging and love between parents and children is moved into a public space, where the parents (the mother) is reduced to an observer and a customer, paying for the event. The scene is set by McDonald's, the McDonald's hostess and the McDonald's food, play things and rituals. The birthday child is celebrated as a "special child" in a group of friends. The main relations exhibited are between the child, her/his birthday friends and the company and its staff and artefacts. In a world where consumption is central to identity formation, the "community of consumers" might supersede other aspects of identification, also the one between parent and child (Bell and Valentine 1997). Concerning food, the McDonald's menu is of special interest, since burgers and fries are supposed to be eaten with your fingers, giving also small children the possibility to eat on much the same conditions as adults. The texture of the food, the sensuality of eating a hamburger, the dribble and dropping, the dipping in small ketchup pots, the way you are allowed to drop things on the floor, give this form of eating a special significance. Eating junk food has been shown to be a way for young people to articulate their independence from their parents (Chapman and Maclean 1993). Maybe a birthday party at McDonald's has this significance also for younger children, besides other aspects as belonging to the community of children, showing off and getting public affirmation of being the "right" kind of child. From a health perspective the Happy Meal is also of interest. In Sweden and Norway it is now possible to have chicken nuggets instead of the beef burger, to change the French fries to carrots and the Coca Cola to milk. The carrots are of particular interest since they symbolically refer to a healthier and more pedagogic meal. What kind of childhoods and of relations between chil-



dren and children and parents, of ways of being a child, are articulated at the McDonald's birthday party? And what is the special significance of food and eating in this process? Another interesting field of study is children's relation to sweets, their activities in the sweet shop and the new "hybrid" confectionery, for example lollipops with sunglasses (that the child can use her- or himself) or encapsulated in cars or other toys that the child can play with after finishing the sweet. What story is there to tell about childhood and raised expectations in the new experience economy?

## **The workshop and institutions involved**

These are among the research questions that will be further discussed and developed at the workshop arranged by Center for Consumer Science (CFK) at Göteborg University in collaboration with Norwegian Centre for Child Research. Five research programs are currently active within CFK: Consumer decision making, Consumer culture, Sustainable consumption, Information and Communication Technology and Product development and design. A broad research program on food consumption including children, *Det goda livet. Mat, hälsa och välbefinnande ur ett livslopps-perspektiv*, involving all of the five research programs, has been initiated. Associate Professor Helene Brembeck is the coordinator. This application involves the Consumer culture program but will also contribute from this broader interdisciplinary food research. In the Consumer culture program research on children, youth and consumption is of main interest, with several reported and ongoing research projects, e.g. *Alternative modeller for forbrugerbeskyttelse af børn* (Olesen 2003), *Commercial cultures* (including subprojects on McDonald's and on children as consumers), *Unga konsumenter* (with several smaller subprojects on e.g. consumer rights and advertising) and *Young consumers' credit based lifestyles and payment problems*, which is a Nordic cooperative project including SIFO, Norway and NCRC, Finland, funded by Nordiska Ministerrådet.

In addition to researchers from the host institutions CFK and NOSEB, researchers from the following institutions will take part in the work-shop:

Statens Institut For Folkesundhed, Copenhagen  
Sociologiska institutionen, Helsinki University  
Statens Institutt for forbruksforskning (SIFO), Oslo  
National Consumer Research Centre (NCRC), Helsinki

Center for Marketing Communication, Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen  
Tema Barn and Tema Mat, Linköping University, Linköping

## References

- BARN 2-3, 2003. Tema: Barn og mat. Smakebiter fra aktuell forskning. Trondheim: Norskesenter for barneforskning.
- Bailey, J. 2002. *Globalization and Governance: The Institutional Convergence of Civil Society, the State, the Market and the Family*. NTNU: A proposal for a 2-year Network Building Programme.
- Beardsworth, A. and Keil, T. 1997. *Sociology on the Menu. An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Belasco, W. and Scranton, P. 2002. *Food Nations. Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*. London: Routledge.
- Bell, D. and Valentine, G. 1997. *Consuming Geographies. We Are Where We Eat*. London: Routledge.
- Bently, A. 2002. Inventing baby food: gerber and the discourse of infancy in the United States. In: Belasco, W. and Scranton, P. (eds.) *Food Nations. Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*. London: Routledge.
- Brembeck, H. and Johansson, B. 1996. *Postmodern barndom*. Göteborg: Etnologiska föreningen i Västsverige.
- Brembeck, H. 2003a. I skuggan av "M". Berättelser om McDonald's. *Kulturella Perspektiv 1*.
- Brembeck, H. 2003b. Happiness in a box. The magic of packaging at McDonald's. *Ethnologia Scandinavica*.
- Brembeck H. 2004. Pinocchio meets Jafar. The wonders of Happy Meal toys. In: Brembeck, H., Johansson, B. and Kampmann, J. (eds.). *Beyond the Competent Child. Exploring Contemporary Childhoods in the Nordic Welfare Societies*. Copenhagen: Samfunnslitteratur.
- Bugge, A. and Døving, R. 2000. *Det norske måltidsmønsteret – ideal og praksis*. Rapport nr. 2. Statens Institutt for forbruksforskning.
- Chapman, G. and Maclean, H. 1993: "Junk food" and "health" food: meanings of food in adolescent women's culture, *Journal of Nutritional Education* 25.
- Christensen, P. 2002. The meaning of food to children and young people from a life-course perspective. Paper given at the Children, Families and Food Conference, Edinburgh University UK.
- Christensen, P. 2003. Børn, mad og daglige rutiner. *Barn 2-3*:119-137.
- Counihan, C. and Van Esterik, P. (eds.) 1997. *Food and Culture. A Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Currie, C., Hurrelmann, W.S., Smith, R. and Todd, J. (eds) 2000. Health and behaviour among young people. Health behaviour in school-aged children: A WHO Cross-National Study (HBSC). *World Health Organization, Series 1*.

- Douglas, M. 1986. *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Douglas, M. 2002. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Døving, R. 2002. *Mat som totalt sosialt fenomen. Noen eksempler med utgangspunkt i Torsvik*. University of Bergen. Dissertation.
- Eckert, G. 2001. *Wasting Time or having Fun? Cultural Meanings of Children and Childhood*. Linköping University.
- Ehn, B. 1983. *Ska vi leka tiger? Daghemsliv ur kulturell synsvinkel*. Lund: Liber förlag.
- Gullestad, M. 1996. From obedience to negotiation: dilemmas in the transmission of values between the generations in Norway. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropologic Institute* 2(1):25-42.
- Gulløv, E. 2001. Placing children. Paper presented at the research seminar: Children, generation and place: Cross-cultural approaches to an anthropology of children. 19-21 May. University of Copenhagen.
- Jönsson, H. 2002. "Matupplevelser". In: O'Dell, T. (ed.) *Upplevelsens materialitet*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Kjærnes, U. 2001. (ed) *Eating Patterns: A Day in the Lives of Nordic Peoples*. Rapport nr. 7. Statens institutt for forbruksforskning.
- Kjørholt, A. T. 2001. Small is powerful. Discourses on "children and participation" in Norway. *Childhood* 9(1):63-82.
- Kjørholt, A. T. 2005. The competent child and the right "to be oneself": Discourses on children as fellow citizens in a day care centre. In: Clark, A., Moss, P. and Kjørholt, A.T. (eds) *Beyond Listening*. Bristol: University Press.
- Korsvold, T. 1998. *For alle barn! Barnehagens framvekst i velferdsstaten*. Oslo: Abstrakt forlag, Utdanningsvitenskapelig serie.
- Lyngø, I. J. 2001. The national nutrition exhibition: A new nutritional narrative in Norway in the 1930s. In: Scholliers, P. (ed.) *Food, Drink and Identity. Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Berg.
- Nilsen, R. D. 2000. *Livet i barnehagen. En etnografisk studie av sosialiseringprosessen*. NTNU: Fakultet for samfunnsvitenskap og teknologiledelse. Dissertation.
- Olesen, J. 2003. Alternative modeller for forbrugerbeskyttelse af børn. *CFK-rapport 2003:1*. Göteborg: Centrum för konsumentvetenskap.
- Qvortrup, J. 1994. Childhood matters: An introduction. In: Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G. and Wintersberger, H. (eds) *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Scholliers, P. (ed.) 2001. *Food, Drink and Identity. Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Berg.
- Strandell, H. 1994. *Sociala mötesplatser för barn. Aktivitetsprofiler och förhandlingskulturer på daghem*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Tingstad, V. 1996. *Skolefritidsordninger for 6-åringer og barn i 1.-3.klasse. Resultater fra en undersøkelse i 28 skolefritidsordninger våren 1996*. BFD/KUF, F-4028.
- Van Esterik, P. 1997. The politics of breastfeeding. An advocacy perspective. In: Counihan, C. and Van Esterik, P. *Food and Culture. A Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Warde, A. 1997. *Consumption, Food and Taste. Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture*. London: Sage.
- Warde, A. and Martens, L. 2000. *Eating Out. Social Differentiation, Consumption and Pleasure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Watson, J. L. (ed.) 1997. *Golden Arches East. McDonald's in East Asia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Øverby, N. C. and Andersen, L. F. 2000. *Ungkost-2000. Landsomfattende kostholdsundersøkelse blant elever i 4. - og 8. klasse i Norge*. Universitetet i Oslo: Institutt for ernæringsforskning.

Anne Trine Kjørholt  
Norsk senter for barneforskning, NTNU  
NO-7491 Trondheim, Norge  
e-post: anne.trine.kjorholt@svt.ntnu.no

Vebjørng Tingstad  
Norsk senter for barneforskning, NTNU  
NO-7491 Trondheim, Norge  
e-post: vebjorg.tingstad@svt.ntnu.no

Helene Brembeck  
Centrum för konsumentvetenskap  
Box 600  
SE-405 30 Göteborg, Sverige  
e-post: helene.brembeck@cfk.gu.se