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Par

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Le développement des connaissances conceptuelles sur les aliments et leurs liens avec les  
tendances au rejet des aliments chez les jeunes enfants (3-7 ans)

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Composition du Jury :

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**Title:** Spilling the beans: The development of conceptual knowledge about food and its links with food rejection in young children (3-7-years-old)

**Keywords:** cognitive development, food neophobia, food pickiness, food rejection, young children, conceptual knowledge

Insufficient dietary variety in children leads to significant nutrient deficiencies and health issues, both in childhood and later life (DeCosta et al., 2017). Cognitive mechanisms, such as categorization and conceptual knowledge, play an important role in understanding and appropriately accepting or rejecting foods (Mura Paroche et al., 2017). The food domain lends itself to many concepts and categories, such as taxonomic (i.e. lamb is meat), thematic (i.e. lamb goes on a plate), or script (i.e. lamb is eaten at dinner). Such knowledge aids accurate recognition, understanding, and appropriate interaction when confronted with foods situated in context. If conceptual knowledge is underdeveloped, the possibility to understand food and eating situations is mired. When faced with such uncertainty in the food domain, children with increased food rejection tendencies are likely to reject a substance, regardless of whether it is edible or not. It thus stands to reason that impoverished conceptual knowledge in the food domain will lead to increased displays of food rejection in children.

Previous evidence demonstrated that food rejections (food neophobia and picky/fussy eating) are associated with impoverished knowledge of taxonomic categories in the food domain (such as the food groups: fruits or vegetables). However, young children have access to other forms of conceptual knowledge to help interpret situations and objects, such as script categories (i.e. breakfast foods) or thematic associates (i.e. soup and spoon). The overarching aim of my research, beginning in October 2018, was to expand upon these previous findings by determining whether food rejection is related to deficits in specific knowledge structures (script and thematic categories), or a global deficit in knowledge of food. The first step of the research required determining at what age children acquire certain types of knowledge and categories in the food domain. The second step was to determine how food rejection influences such knowledge acquisition. Four empirical studies were conducted over the past three years with children between 3 and 7 years old.

My findings show that young children first master functional and co-occurring food relations (i.e. soup and spoon), and later master food scripts (i.e. food to expect at breakfast). This indicates that children as young as 3 and 4 years old may already rely on common co-occurrence to guide their food acceptance in eating situations, while older children may depend on script norms. As with taxonomic knowledge, children with poorer conceptual knowledge of both script and co-occurring relations in the food domain exhibit increased levels of food rejection. The research findings provide compelling evidence that educating children about conceptual knowledge and food norms could be an effective strategy for increasing familiarity and subsequently promoting greater food acceptance. The research concludes by suggesting opportunities for developmental psychologists and public health professionals develop educational initiatives to improve children's knowledge of food and foster increased dietary variety.