



Economic
and Social
Research Council



Understanding longitudinal interactions between parenting and approaches to complementary feeding for shaping child socioemotional development

ESRC DTP Strategic Joint Studentship

Aston University and Loughborough University

The Midlands Graduate School is an accredited Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP). One of 15 such partnerships in the UK, the Midlands Graduate School is a collaboration between the Universities of Warwick, Birmingham, Nottingham, Aston Leicester, Loughborough, De Montfort and Nottingham Trent.

We are now inviting applications for an ESRC Strategic Joint Studentship between Aston University and Loughborough University to commence in October 2025.

Project detail

The complementary feeding period (6 months to 2 years) is a critical developmental stage where infants transition to foods and liquids beyond milk. This phase not only shapes lifelong dietary habits but also provides essential opportunities to refine parent-child interaction quality—a key predictor of children’s socioemotional development. Despite its importance, research on complementary feeding practices and their influence on socioemotional outcomes remains limited.

Emerging evidence suggests that infant-led feeding approaches are associated with enhanced parent-infant interactions, such as greater maternal sensitivity and responsiveness to fullness cues, and increased use of gestures during mealtimes. However, these findings are primarily correlational and fail to account for factors such as parental demographics, mental health, social support, and child temperament.

Research Aims

This PhD project will address critical gaps by using data from a longitudinal birth cohort study (Alberta Pregnancy Outcomes and Nutrition: APrON) to explore:

1. Whether parent-child interaction quality predicts the use of infant-led complementary feeding practices.
2. How complementary feeding influences children’s subsequent socioemotional development.
3. Whether complementary feeding mediates the relationship between parent-child interaction quality and socioemotional outcomes.

4. The extent to which demographic, psychological, and social factors influence these associations.
5. Whether child temperament moderates the relationships between parenting, complementary feeding, and socioemotional development.

The student will be supervised by an interdisciplinary team with expertise in Psychology, Nutrition, Nursing and Epidemiology. Supervisors will include Prof Claire Farrow & Dr Megan Jarman (Aston University), Dr Emily Petherick (Loughborough University) & Prof Nicole Letourneau (University of Calgary). The successful candidate will utilise data from a large longitudinal birth cohort study to address the study aims. There will be opportunities for other aspects of research and original data collection in this area, depending on the interests of the successful candidate.

Candidate Requirements

Applicants should have a strong background in Psychology, Epidemiology, Statistics, Biology, Health or a related field. Experience with statistical analyses is essential. Experience with developmental, nutrition or parenting research, or with using advanced statistics is desirable.

Application Process

To be considered for this PhD, please complete the strategic Joint Studentship application form [available online here](#). Please upload an anonymised CV and cover letter as part of the online application process. Shortlisted applicants will also be required to provide transcripts and two references.

Application deadline: Sunday 23rd February

Midlands Graduate School ESRC DTP

Our ESRC studentships cover fees at the home rate, a maintenance stipend, and extensive support for research training, as well as research activity support grants. Support is available to both home and international applicants. For further details, visit: www.mgsdtp.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/.

Informal enquiries about the research or the College of Health & Life Sciences at Aston University prior to application can be directed to Professor Claire Farrow: c.farrow@aston.ac.uk.