

Leann Birch, Who Knew How to Get a Child to Eat Peas, Dies at 72

By Neil Genzlinger

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Leann L. Birch, whose research into children's eating habits challenged some long-held notions about finicky young diners and led to new insights on childhood nutrition and obesity, died on May 26 in Durham, N.C. She was 72.

Her daughter, Charlotte K. Newell, said the cause was cancer.

Dr. Birch, a developmental psychologist, and the researchers she worked with studied pea-hating children, coached new mothers in ways to quiet crying babies other than feeding them, and scrutinized time-honored parental practices like demanding that a child finish everything on the dinner plate. Her work found that a child's food preferences and eating habits are formed very early, and that things parents do in the interest of good nutrition often backfire.

"Leann was a pioneer in bringing developmental psychology to the study of nutritional issues facing young children," Jennifer Orlet Fisher, who studied under Dr. Birch at Penn State University and is now associate director of the Center for Obesity Research and Education at Temple University, said by email. "Her research moved the science of nutrition beyond its narrow focus on foods and nutrients to consider *why* children eat and how eating habits are established in early life."

Dr. Birch's research — at the University of Illinois, Penn State and, most recently, the University of Georgia — has frequently been cited in scholarly journals and government reports. She was the chairwoman of several committees on childhood obesity and published more than 200 scholarly articles.

"The public health impact and reach of Leann's work is profound," Dr. Fisher said. "References to her work can be found everywhere: federal dietary guidance, position statements from leading professional organizations, early-childhood education policies, anticipatory guidance given in the pediatrician's office, and popular books on feeding children."

Jeff Brunstrom, a professor at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom who studies nutrition and behavior, is another admirer.

"Leann practically carved out a new academic field in systematically studying infant and child eating behavior," he said by email. "Across the board, very few academics will ever be credited at this level — a truly extraordinary contribution that has impacted the way people think globally, and in so many ways."

Leann Elsie Traub was born on June 25, 1946, in Owosso, Mich. Her father, Paul, was an engineer, and her mother, Dorothy Jean (VandeGuft) Traub, was a homemaker. The family moved a number of times during her childhood because her father was in the Army Corps of Engineers; she graduated from Riverside High

School in California.

She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1971 at California State University, Long Beach. She received a master's degree in psychology at the University of Michigan in 1973 and a Ph.D. in psychology there two years later.

Dr. Birch joined the faculty of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in 1976. She taught both human development and nutritional sciences, an indication of the cross-disciplinary approach that would characterize her research. In 1992 she moved to Penn State, where she would eventually direct the Center for Childhood Obesity Research. In 2014 she joined the University of Georgia faculty.

The findings coming out of her labs made news repeatedly over the years. One was that coercing a child to eat, say, a vegetable by dangling the prospect of dessert was a bad idea.

“The universal parental tactic of offering children a reward if they finish a certain food — you can have some cake if you finish your peas — might work in the short term,” she told *The New York Times* in 1989. “But in the long run, it makes children dislike the food they had to finish.”

Also unsound, she said, was the old finish-everything maxim; a better approach was to encourage children to follow their own hunger signals.

“If you focus on external factors, like how much food is left on the plate, or what time it is, then children get out of touch with their internal cues for when they are hungry and when they are full,” she said.

Those cues, her research showed, were pretty reliable if left on their own; one study found that though a child might eat 100 calories at breakfast one day and 350 the next, the overall calorie intake for the day tended to be consistent.

“If your parents say it's not time to eat yet when you tell them you're hungry, or insist you finish what's on your plate when you're already full, it can lead you to look to externals to decide when and how much to eat, and that creates lifelong weight problems,” Dr. Birch said. “Natural eaters, in contrast, eat when they're hungry and stop when they're full. They rarely have weight problems.”

Among her other findings was that children are more likely to imitate peers than to imitate their parents. When putting a pea-hating child among a group of youngsters who liked peas, she found the anti-pea child was soon converted.

A recent study directed by Dr. Birch and Ian Paul of the Penn State College of Medicine has been tracking infants whose mothers were coached in how to deal with crying.

Although feeding is often the go-to response for a busy mother, Dr. Birch said, “babies cry for many reasons,” among them “being too cold or too hot, tired, bored or gassy.” The research found that when the infants of mothers educated in alternative responses like swaddling reached age 3, they had lower body mass indexes than children in a control group.

The middle initial Dr. Birch used professionally was for Lipps, the last name of her husband from a brief early marriage. Her second marriage, to David Birch, ended in divorce in 1983. Since 1984 she had been married to Karl M. Newell, who survives her, as do her daughter and a son, Spencer H. Newell.

Ms. Newell said that her mother practiced what she preached at home.

“My brother Spencer and I are lucky to have a healthy relationship with food and love to cook,” she said by email. “ ‘Everything in moderation’ was always the household motto. One bite to try things could be followed by rejection, no problem.”

“We were often guinea pigs for her studies, too,” she added, “so we grew up around her research and a bevy of wonderful grad students and colleagues.”

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