



# **Covid-19 and Children's Food:** Parents' Priorities for Building Back Better

The Children's Food Campaign and Food Active

September 2020



# Context: Covid-19 lockdown

- On Friday 20 March 2020, schools were closed indefinitely to tackle the spread of the coronavirus - the first national school shutdown in modern history.
- A-level and GCSE exams for the academic year were cancelled.
- Schools only remained open for key workers' children and 'the most vulnerable'. More than 9 in 10 children staying at home, with parents or carers advised to home-school their children.
- 25,000 state and private schools and up to 8 million pupils in England were affected.



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# What did the Covid-19 lockdown mean for children's food?

- Schools required to continue providing free school meals (FSM) to benefit-entitled children – via existing caterers or alternative forms of provision. The Universal Infant Free School Meal (UIFSM) programme was suspended.
- National school meal voucher scheme for England launched on 31 March 2020, highly criticised for its inefficiency (delays, failures, and overall limitations of the system). In Wales and Scotland, free school meal provision devolved to local authorities.
- Public campaigning led to Government U-turns on food provision over Easter, half term and summer holidays, and temporary extension of FSM eligibility to some categories of children with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).
- Sharp rise in children living in food insecurity<sup>1</sup> – with 200,000 children reported to have missed meals in May 2020.
- Polling data suggested an overall increase in snacking of foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt<sup>2</sup>.
- One study also found a significant decrease in fruit and vegetable consumption amongst children in receipt of free school meals<sup>3</sup>.
- During the height of lockdown restrictions, only one outdoor exercise was allowed per day. Families without gardens or space to exercise/play at home will have been further affected in terms of mental and physical health<sup>4</sup>.
- Some households experienced positive impacts such as more home cooked meals and an increase in fruit and vegetable intake<sup>2</sup>. This will vary across the social gradient.



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# Our research with parents

- To add to existing evidence base with qualitative parents' insights on how on how 'lockdown life' affected children's food preferences and eating habits.
- To find out what parents' priorities were for children's food as schools return in September.
- Methodology: an online survey, disseminated via online platforms, social media and the Sustain/Food Active networks and partner organisations.
- The survey was open for responses for four weeks: 22 June – 17 July 2020.
- In total, 767 parents with a total of 1332 children aged from 1-17 years old participated. Strongest representation from families in the North West, where Food Active is located, and 9 in 10 respondents were women.
- Limitation: Responses were collected via snowball sampling and data therefore not demographically representative.



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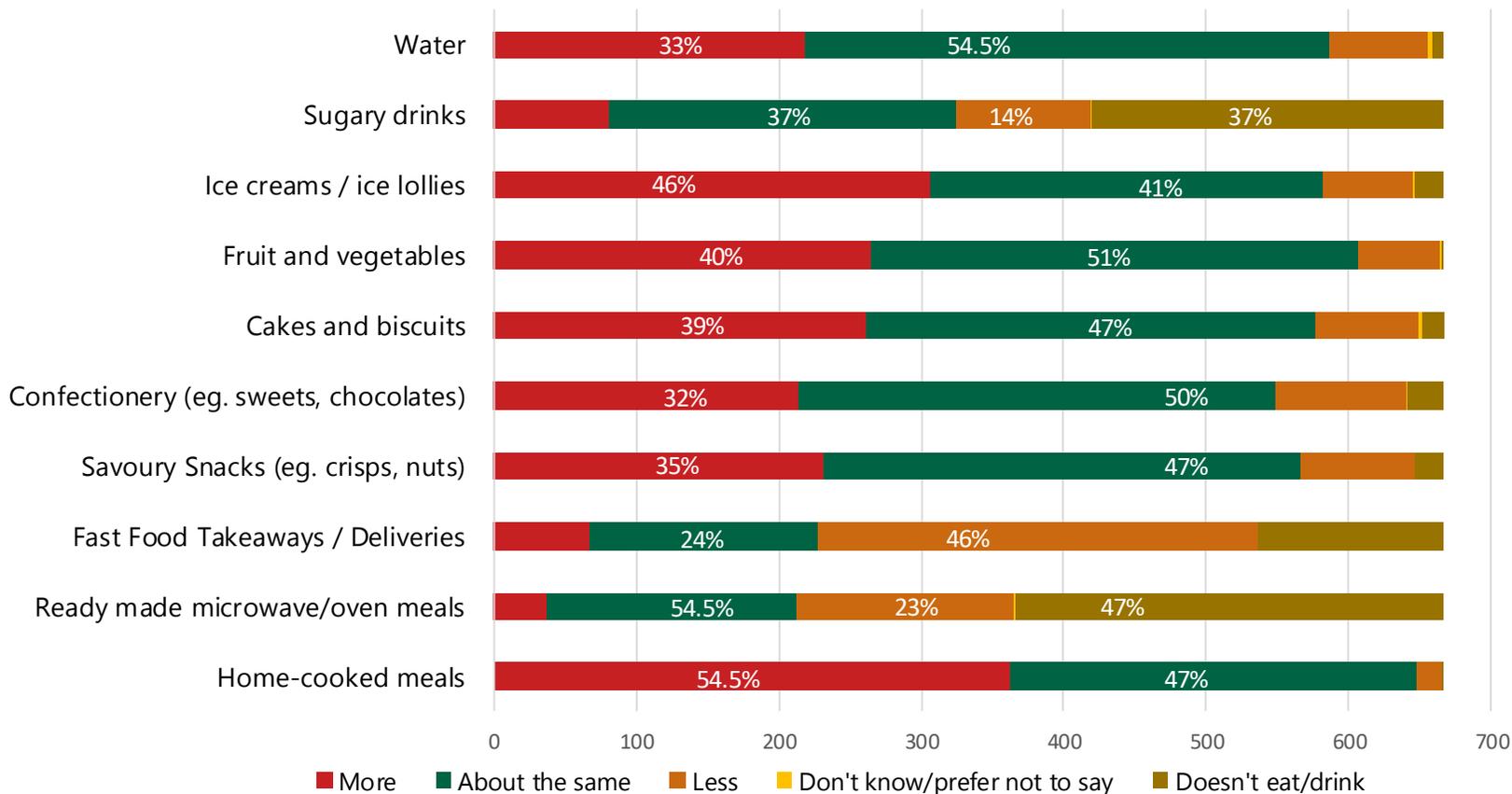
# Part One

Life under lockdown: what changed for children's food?



# Life under lockdown: what changed for children's food?

Q: During the lockdown period, to what extent have your child/children's eating habits shifted in relation to the following types of food?



Parents reported more home cooking and fewer takeaways, as well as sustained or increased water and fruit & veg consumption, largely attributed to their greater control over mealtimes and time availability.

However, increased consumption of snacks, cakes, confectionery were reported by more than 1 in 3 parents, with hot weather fuelling increase in ice creams/lollies.

# What changed for families feeding children?



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*"Constant grazing throughout the day - always a boy in the kitchen looking for food."*

*"Giving treats more often due to feeling guilty as they couldn't play out or have days out or see their friends."*

*"I casually slip a bowl of fruit/carrots next to them when they're on their device/watching TV. They would buy unhealthy fizzy drinks from town after school. This has now stopped."*



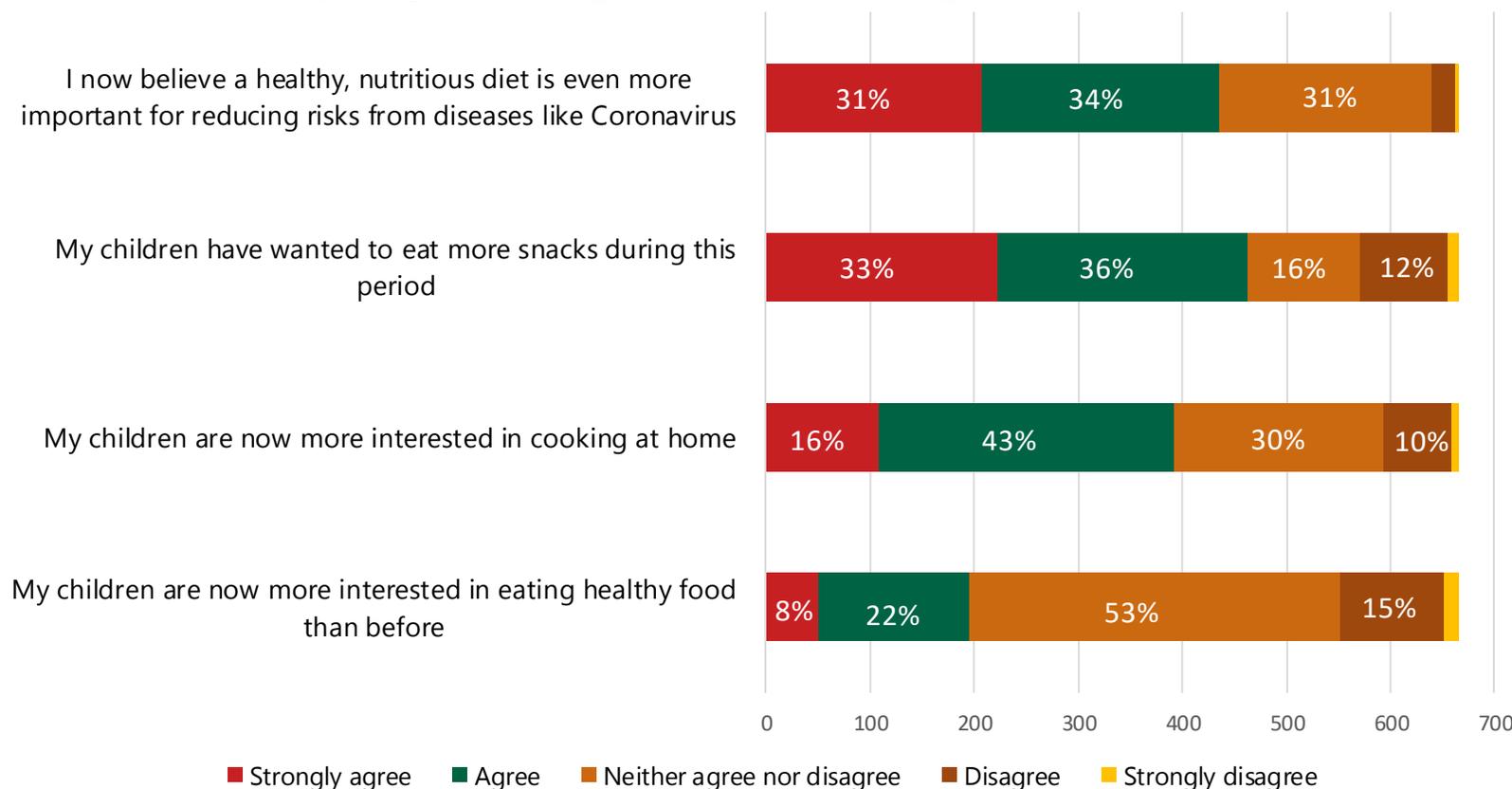
*"Working from home full time whilst trying to look after my daughter is hard. Getting time to cook meals during the day or stick to set meal times is difficult and often ends up with a sandwich and snacks for convenience."*

*"My daughter has become more conscious about healthy food and has made some positive changes to her diet as it makes her feel better."*

*"Because I was at home for 13 weeks, I had more time to cook home cooked meals, rather than convenience meals as life is normally so busy. The children have enjoyed trying new foods, and enjoyed the times and opportunities to sit and eat as a family more."*

# Life under lockdown: what changed for children's food?

Q: Thinking of the overall effect of being in lockdown, please say how far you agree or disagree with the following statements.



7 in 10 (69.5%) parents agreed their children wanted to eat more snacks during lockdown – consistent with other reported data. Boredom, anxiety, lack of routine and providing treats to alleviate pressure were all cited as contributing factors by parents.

Nearly 6 in 10 (59%) of parents reported that their children's increased interest in home cooking, but less than 3 in 10 said their children were more interested in eating healthy food than before.

Two-thirds of parents (65%) agree that a healthy diet is even more important in light of Covid-19.



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# What changed for families feeding children?



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*"Started lockdown eating home cooked meals 3 times a day. As time went on they got fussier and started snacking more."*

*"More sweet foods at home than previously. We used chocolate to encourage the children to leave the house for walks for their mental health!"*

*"No school dinner cakes at lunchtime, and more fruit or salad at lunch for my son, plus fewer snacks on the journey."*



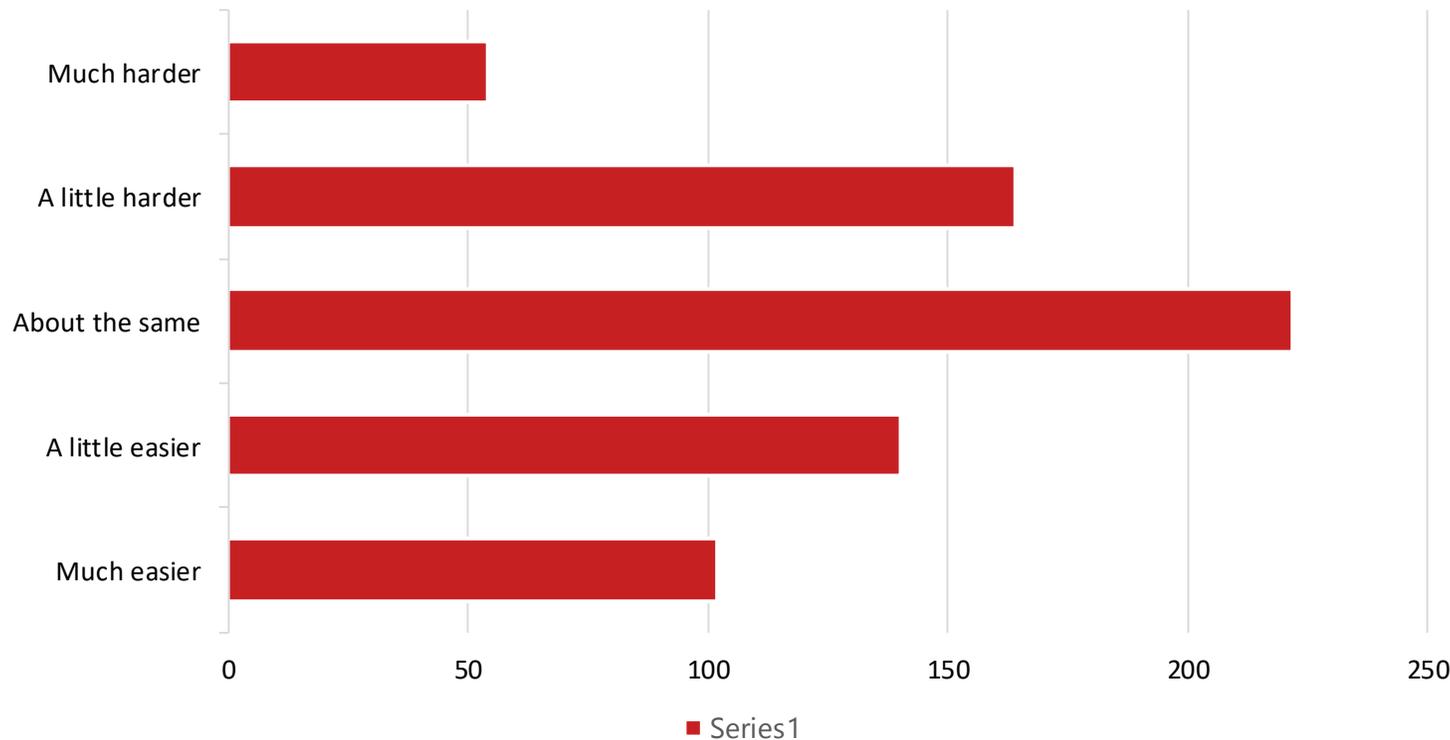
*"Seeing food in the fridge/cupboards is making them ask more, but at the beginning of lockdown this hit hard and I had to rely on a food bank as I had no way to get to supermarkets and no available delivery slots to order online. This is still affected to this day, even after lockdown rules have been eased."*

*"They've been making many more of their own meals! More time to cook and space to be creative."*

*"Of course there has been no junk food bought outside as there have been no extra-curricular activities to attend. Therefore the McDonald's treat on a Friday night was skipped."*

# Life under lockdown: what changed for children's food?

Q: Would you say it has been easier, the same, or harder for your child(ren) to eat a healthy, balanced and nutritious diet during the lockdown period?



Parents' views were split on whether lockdown life had made it easier or harder to feed their child a healthy diet. Over a third suggested it had made it easier, compared to just under a third stating it had been harder.

Factors influencing responses by parents included changes in their available time for shopping and cooking (based on the degree to which they were juggling home-schooling with working from home or working outside the home), as well as access to healthy food due to economic factors, self isolation or shielding/quarantining. The reduction in interactions with wider family members and friends/peers, and lack of journeys to and from school/other activities and quality of school food provision prior to lockdown, also affected parents' responses to this question.



## Part Two

Building back better: parents' priorities for healthy children's food



# Building back better

## Support for children living in food insecure households

- ✓ 90% agree Govt should review eligibility for free school meals (FSM) to ensure ALL children in families struggling with low income or at risk of food security can access them.
- ✓ 89% agree ALL children, regardless of immigration status\*, should have the same eligibility for FSM.
- ✓ 83% agree children eligible for FSM should receive additional support during school holidays
- ✓ 73% support reinstating/maintaining Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM)\*\*. Only 26% agree infant free school meals be restricted to children with the greatest needs.
- ✓ 80% agree that all schools should now have breakfast clubs as well as providing FSM.
- ✓ 68% support extending UIFSM to ALL primary school children.

*\*Immigration status means the terms under which a migrant is allowed to enter the UK. At present FSM eligibility has been extended to certain children from households with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), but this is temporary.*

*\*\* At the time of the survey, UIFSM had been suspended, but has now been reinstated.*



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# Building back better



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## Support for children living in food insecure households

*"Making healthy food more accessible and cheaper so low income families can afford them will make a big difference."*

*"All families should receive help, not just low income. We are both workers but still struggled."*



*"The Covid lens is important to learn what we could do better for our children of the future generation to ensure no child goes hungry."*

*"Free school meals should be extended to all families under 11. It's infuriating not being eligible for things despite only earning slightly over the threshold for financial assistance."*

*"Working families should also get free school meals, they cost a lot of money when you have 3 children to pay for we get no help yet trying to do the right thing and work, some working families struggle more than non working, when will this be taken into account."*

# Building back better

## Improving the school food environment

- ✓ 92% agree that it is now more important than ever to teach children about healthy food & cooking skills.
- ✓ 89% agree that they prefer their child to have a proper sit down healthy hot lunch when schools reopen.
- ✓ 68% agree that schools need to go further to remove unhealthy food from menus.
- ✓ 37% said they are now more concerned than before about the health and safety of school meals.
- ✓ 29% say they are now more likely than before to give their children packed lunches.



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# Building back better



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## Improving the school food environment

*"Cooking should be a standard part of education in primary school."*

*"I'd like to see much healthier school food so that my child isn't given cakes and ice cream at school as well."*

*"In school I am not convinced their dietary choices are always wise (being year 7). In school I have noticed they eat a lot of fried food, pasta and pizza, with little veg and no fruit."*

*"I have not been happy with the amount of sweets my child has brought home from school throughout the year for birthdays. Sometimes it was 2 bags a week in weeks with several birthdays. I think all schools should ban sweets being handed out."*



*"ALL schools should ONLY have healthy food options and water to drink!"*

*"It would be good to see schools put more emphasis on basic cooking skills as it is too often the case that children cannot cater for themselves when they become independent (at university or otherwise leaving home)."*

# Building back better

## What do parents include in their top 5 priorities\* for making food healthier?

1. Extend free school meals to all families struggling with food insecurity (56%)
2. Supermarkets price promotions on healthy not unhealthy food (52%)\*\*
3. Schools should do more food and nutrition education (43%)
4. The Government needs to do even more to tackle child obesity and diet-related disease (32%)
5. Government should ban all TV & online junk food advertising before 9pm (21%)

*\* Respondents were asked to select no more than three priorities from a list of 11 policy options.*

*\*\* Survey was conducted prior to publication of obesity strategy*



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# Building back better



## Action to improve the wider food environment to reduce obesity

*"I would like to see ban of advertisements before 9pm too; and Government initiatives on obesity no sweets at counters/corners, no sweets in non food shops, or 'free sweet' promotions on high streets etc."*

*"There is not enough action from government in relation to rising obesity in children - our future adults."*



*"The government must invest in the obesity crisis because it will cost the NHS a fortune to deal with the consequences of our generations poor diet habits."*

*"Educating our young people and changing the wider environment is vital if we want to build back better and reduce food poverty and obesity."*

*"The power of advertising is very strong, and you often hear of children pestering their parents for the latest Disney or superhero promoted food, often unhealthy, like sweet yogurts or cake mixes! and likewise promotions - it's very easy to eat an unhealthy diet, given the price of junk food and the heavy promotions and appealing packaging. It's impossible to expect people to lead a healthy lifestyle if their surrounding support an unhealthy one."*



## Covid-19 and Children's Food:

### Parents' Priorities for Building Back Better

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Contact us



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