



# Covid-19 and Children's Food:

## Parents' Priorities for Building Back Better

Children's Food Campaign and Food Active  
September 2020

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 767 parents across the UK have shared experiences of how life under Covid-19 lockdown has affected their children's food intake and preferences.
- Amidst more home cooking and some increases in fruit and veg consumption, parents also reported their struggles with children wanting constant snacks, treats and comfort foods.
- 9 in 10 parents want to see eligibility for free school meals dramatically expanded so all children from low-income or food insecure households benefit, regardless of immigration status.
- Other top priorities for parents included: Shifting price promotions away from unhealthy and towards healthy foods; more food and nutrition education in schools; further Government action to tackle obesity and diet-related diseases; and a ban on unhealthy food and drink TV/online advertising before 9pm.



Children's Food  
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# Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had unprecedented impact on countries and communities worldwide, including the UK.

To prevent the spread of the virus, the UK enforced a nationwide lockdown, with restrictions only slowly lifting in late June/early July. With schools closed from Friday 20 March for almost all children, plus major disruption in food availability and wider income losses, families with children have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic.

At the beginning of lockdown, the economic impact of Covid-19 led to a large rise in food insecurity across the UK, as seen by a rise in demand from food banks. Compared to the same period last year, the Trussell Trust reported a 107% increase in the number of children needing support from a food bank in April 2020<sup>1</sup>. Though the government introduced replacement support for those entitled to free school meals, early reports estimated 500,000 children eligible for free school meals were at risk of missing out<sup>2</sup>. In England, failures in the national school meal voucher scheme saw delays for many eligible families receiving free school meal vouchers, while Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland introduced alternative schemes<sup>3</sup>. For families on low income, lockdown coupled with income losses exacerbated existing financial pressures, whilst forcing many more into poverty. Previous research found that many families experienced profound changes to

their diets during lockdown. A study conducted by Northumbria University found almost half of the children (45%) who received free school meal vouchers hadn't eaten any fruit across the 3-day reporting period during lockdown, whilst 55% said they had not eaten any fresh vegetables<sup>4</sup>. Not only has children's access to food been of concern, but the quality of food being consumed and the mental and physical impact of lockdown on their food preferences and eating patterns.

Children's Food Campaign and Food Active set out to investigate parents' experiences with their children's food habits during lockdown. A nationwide survey was launched from 22 June-17 July 2020, targeting parents and carers of children under the age of 18 years. The research aimed to gather parents' views on what lockdown life, and ask their views on the future of children's food as schools reopen, what the Government should prioritise in relation to childhood obesity and building a healthier food environment as part of Covid-19 recovery plans. In total, 767 parents and carers took part in the research, which was open to any parent on a voluntary basis who wished to take part. Responses were collected via snowball sampling on social media and via the Sustain and Food Active network.

1. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/06/APRIL-Data-briefing-external.pdf>

2. <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Hunger-release-FINAL.pdf>

3. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/09/uk-poorest-families-suffering-as-free-school-meal-vouchers-delayed>

4. <https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/rew-sitecore-gallery/news/documents/pdf/covid-19-free-school-meal-vouchers-final.pdf?modified=20200605160553>



# Part One: Life under lockdown – what changed in children’s food habits?

## Positive Changes

With restaurants closed and government advice to stay at home, lockdown presented families with more opportunities to cook for themselves. 55% of parents responded that their children were eating more home-cooked meals, whilst 43% were having the same as usual.

Children were also having fewer ready-made meals, takeaway meals, fast food takeaways and deliveries. However, home cooking everyday was not always easy for some parents. The demands of home-schooling and working from home made time for cooking more challenging for some.

*My child has been much more adventurous with food, willing to try lots of different things. Usually he would be very difficult all week, often refusing healthy meals knowing he would get takeaways and junk food with his dad at the weekend. He has been at home with me full time during lockdown, so is eating a much healthier and more varied diet as he knows there’s no chips coming!*

*Although their consumption of sweet treats may have slightly increased, I believe their overall diet has improved. 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. Both children appear healthier as a result of lockdown.*

Being at home with their children meant parents could have more influence on what their children were eating. The ability to spend more time eating as a family was also a significant positive change. 59% of parents agreed that their children had also become more interested in cooking.

40% of children were eating more fruit and vegetables, whilst parents also saw a change in children’s willingness to try new foods, which was said to have helped improve the variety of their diet.



## Negative Changes

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70% of parents, however, saw a rise in their children snacking habits. Children ate more crisps (35%), ice creams and lollies (46%), cakes and biscuits (40%), sweets and chocolate (30%).

Lack of routine, boredom, constant access to food in the house and provision of treats to alleviate pressure were significant factors influencing children's snacking habits.

*My children both had hot school dinners at school but at home it's been much harder to home-school two, work full time on my own for most of the week and provide hot meals at lunch. They have tended to have more snack meals, leftovers etc. My youngest snacks a lot more but equally I have been able to make her snacks healthier because for the majority of the time there was only what I got from the supermarket in the house.*

*Although I have more time to prepare fresher healthier meals whilst working from home, I found that the children wanted to snack a lot more throughout the day, probably due to boredom.*

*Started lock down eating varied home cooked meals and eating 3 meals per day. As time went on, they got fussier and started snacking more.*

*They eat a lot more sweets and fizzy drinks, sugar free, than they previously did as we used to normally save this till the weekend.*

*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.*



# Part Two: Building back better: what do parents see as priorities for their children?

## Food Insecurity and Healthy Free School Meals

As lockdown restrictions ease and children return to school, parents' views on school meal provision have been unified. During lockdown, thousands of children under 7 missed out on Universal Infant Free School Meals as the government suspended the scheme due to schools being closed.

Those eligible for benefit-entitled free school meals continued to receive support in the form of food parcels (either collected or delivered), supermarket vouchers or cash transfers. Parents were clear that access to free school meals for all children is more important than ever now.

- 91% of parents wish to see the government review current eligibility rules to ensure all children from low income families or those facing food insecurity are more able to access free school meals.
- 89% of parents agreed eligibility should also apply regardless of immigration status.
- 83% of parents agree that children eligible for free school meals should receive additional support during school holidays.
- 80% of parents would like all schools to have breakfast clubs as well as providing school meals.
- Overall, 73% of parents' agreed that the government should reinstate Universal Infant Free School Meals, with 68% supporting expansion of universal free school meals to include all primary school children.

*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?*



## Food Insecurity and Healthy Free School Meals (cont.)

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The quality and health of children's school food is also a key priority for parents.

- 91% of parents agree they want their children to be able to have a proper, healthy hot or cold lunch every day at school.
- 69% believe schools should go further in removing unhealthy items from menus.
- 92% of parents believe that teaching children about nutrition and how to cook healthy food is now more important than ever.

*I'd like to see healthier school food so my child isn't given cakes and ice creams to eat at school as well.*

*All schools should have ONLY healthy food options, and just water to drink.*

*I have not been happy with the amount of sweets my child has brought home from school throughout the year for birthdays... I think schools should ban sweets being handed out.*

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



## Improving the food environment for children

Brands, fast food chains and delivery companies found new ways of promoting their products to families during the height of the lockdown period. Although our Parents' Jury was out over whether their children's exposure to junk food marketing increased or decreased during this period, the most prevalent food advertising they had noticed and repeatedly reported in the survey included McDonalds, KFC, Domino's, Deliveroo and Just Eat.

Parents also expressed continued concerns about the challenges taking their children shopping, and continued in-store promotions for snacks, confectionery and less healthy items, alongside the perceived higher costs of healthy foods, and want to see the tables turned on this.

*It needs to be much easier to eat healthily. Focus should be on restricting availability/attractiveness/price of unhealthy food, and 'levelling up' by providing free school meals/breakfasts etc.*

*I think you need to be realistic. Making healthy foods more accessible and cheaper so more low income families can afford them will make a big difference.*

*Unhealthy snacks and fast food is too cheap and available everywhere they go.*

# Parents' top 5 priorities for building back better on children's food

As the UK moves to learn lessons from the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, parents would like to see an improvement in children's food environment and greater focus on measures to reduce childhood obesity and food insecurity. We asked parents to select their top five priorities for action to build back better on children's food, from a list of eleven policy

options. Over half of all parents (56%) included extending free school meals to more children as their top priority. However they also strongly want to see action to address the wider food environment, and see this as vital in building back better, with measures that make it easier and more appealing for families to eat healthier food wherever they are.

## Parents' priorities:



1. Extension of free school meals to all children from families struggling with food insecurity (56%)

2. Supermarkets focusing on price promotions on healthy food, not unhealthy food (52%)



3. More food and nutrition education in schools (43%)

4. More action from the government to tackle child obesity and diet-related diseases (32%)



5. A ban on all television & online junk food advertising before 9pm (21%)



## Conclusions

During lockdown, parents encountered pressures from home-schooling, managing children's behaviour and keeping them entertained, whilst managing other responsibilities such as work. Though lockdown brought benefits in increased home cooking and fruit and vegetable consumption, parents also experienced a rise in children's snacking habits, predominantly for unhealthy foods. They also became more aware of and affected by growing levels of food insecurity. The survey provided useful insights and showed strong support from parents on extending the eligibility for Free School Meals to ensure all vulnerable families receive the support they need. Parents would also like to see a shift in children's food environment which enables healthier choices.

The UK government's new obesity strategy includes a proposed ban on television and online advertising for high fat, salt and sugary (HFSS) foods before 9pm, along with a ban on multi-buy price and location promotions for less healthy foods in stores and online. Whilst these actions are welcome and supported by the Children's Food Campaign and Food Active, Covid-19 has highlighted the inequalities widely existent across the country, with children from low-income households most affected by nutritional problems associated with food insecurity, including obesity. Therefore tackling underlying poverty, whilst simultaneously improving children's food environment – in school, in stores and on the street – are key challenges for the Government in building back better on children's food.

## Survey Methodology

The survey on children's food during the Covid-19 lockdown was launched on Survey Monkey in June 2020, closing for responses in late July 2020. Any parent or carer in the UK with children up to the age of 18 years could participate in the survey, and therefore findings are not demographically representative. Most of our participants were women (9 in 10), with strong representation from the North West of England, where the

effects of Covid-19 are currently still being strongly experienced. The lockdown period used in the survey was defined as the period between 23 March and start of June 2020. The Children's Food Campaign disseminated the survey across its members, online platforms and social media networks. Food Active also distributed the survey via its local authority network and social media networks.

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### Acknowledgements

The Parents' Jury survey on Covid-19 and children's food intake and this briefing were developed and written by Nicole Musuwo, with input and advice from Barbara Crowther (Children's Food Campaign) and Beth Bradshaw (Food Active). The Children's Food Campaign and Food Active would like to thank all the local food and public health networks and our member organisations for assisting with disseminating the survey to parents, as well as all the hundreds of parents, carers and guardians who shared their experiences and views.

### Further information

A full presentation of findings from this study is available for download at [www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Children'sFood\\_Covid19\\_Full\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Children'sFood_Covid19_Full_FINAL.pdf). The contents of this briefing or the presentation may freely be distributed or disseminated but must be clearly referenced to Children's Food Campaign/Food Active, September 2020.

### About the Children's Food Campaign

Children's Food Campaign champions children's rights, parent power and government action in order to create a healthier food environment for children to grow up in. It is a project of charity Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming, and is supported by over 100 UK-wide and national organisations, including children's and health charities and professional bodies, trade unions, school food experts and environmental organisations. Contact:

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### About Food Active

Food Active is a healthy weight programme of work originally based in the North West of England, delivered by the public health charity the Health Equalities Group. The programme aims to address the environmental, social, economic and legislative factors that influence people's lifestyle choices and behaviours. Contact:

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