The Parents’ Views on Food Study aimed to explore parents’ understanding and approaches to giving ‘extra’ foods to their 3-5 year old children. This study represents a sample of parents’ views and comments.

Your preschool/long day care centre was one of 13 early centre-based child care services that took part in the study. This involved parents participating in focus groups during October 2009.

This report presents a summary of the major results from across all centres and groups. It focuses on the common views and themes across the groups rather than differences between them.

Also presented is practical information and referral to resources to help answer common questions and concerns raised in the study.

What are ‘Extra’ Foods?

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating’ describes ‘extra’ foods as:

• ‘foods that do not fit into the five main food groups’; and
• (foods that) ‘should be chosen sometimes or in small amounts’

Examples of ‘extra’ foods include chips, ice cream, soft drink, chocolate etc.

The study was conducted by the Royal North Shore Hospital Dietetics Department and Northern Sydney Central Coast Health Promotion in collaboration with The Physical Activity Nutrition and Obesity Research Group (PANORQ) at the University of Sydney.

Who did the study?

The study specifically investigated external and personal factors influencing parents to provide ‘extra’ foods.

Why we did the study

Energy-dense and nutrient-poor ‘extra’ foods make up 41% of the daily energy intake in 2-18-year-old Australian children’s diets. This is more than double the amount recommended in the Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents. The Parents’ Views on Food Study aimed to identify strategies, that are acceptable to parents, to address the issue.

Who participated

• Thirteen focus groups were conducted, 6 on the Central Coast and 7 on the Lower North Shore.
• There was a mix of preschool (6) and long day care centres (7).
• Overall, there were 88 participants, 44 from the Central Coast and 44 from the Lower North Shore areas.

“Your child can influence how you feed them definitely depending on their likes and dislikes…”

The Results

What influences the types of food parents provide?

Parents described nine influences that shape their decisions on the types of food they give their children.

1. Children’s influence

Children are central to the food choices parents make. A child’s taste preferences, pestering for particular foods and fussiness or faddishness, are all major influences on the foods parents provide.

2. Food-related parenting practices

Parents described themselves as the main influence on what food was provided to their children and often spoke about food-related parenting practices. The most common practices described were the use of ‘extra’ food as bribes, treats and rewards and not having certain foods in the house.

3. Health

Health related concerns such as additives, sugar and behavioural issues also influence parents. For some, the issue of sugar intake and the negative influence on their children’s behaviour was perceived as the same as the possible effect of additives on ‘sensitive’ childrens’ behaviour.

Secret Sugar Names

It’s not always easy to know which foods contain added sugars. Have you seen any of the following ‘other’ names for sugar on the ingredient panel on the items you buy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glucose</th>
<th>Maltose</th>
<th>Golden syrup</th>
<th>Sucrose</th>
<th>Fructose</th>
<th>Treacle</th>
<th>Dextrose</th>
<th>Honey</th>
<th>Malt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Note: When natural sugars such as fructose (fruit sugar) and lactose (milk sugar) are processed and no longer in their natural state they become refined/added sugars.
Know Your Additives

The issue of food additives is a complex topic as new evidence is always emerging. In general, some additives have been shown to trigger food intolerance in a small number of susceptible children, and others can cause allergic reactions in children with food allergies.

Although most food additives are harmless to the majority of children, if you are concerned about additives you can read some of the reliable sources of information provided below to help you make informed decisions on additives you may choose to avoid for your family’s health.

The easiest way to avoid food additives is to eat fresh and lightly processed foods e.g. frozen vegetables and canned tomatoes.

Additives are substances that are added to foods to help their processing, prolong shelf life, enhance the food’s appearance, texture and flavour, or improve its nutritional value. The major classes of additives include: colours, preservatives, flavour enhancers and sweeteners.

A list of food additives approved for use in Australia can be found by searching for ‘additives’ on the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand website: www.foodadditives.gov.au


What are food-related parenting practices?

Food-related parenting practices are the ways parents, ‘parent’ their children when it comes to food. Many parents in the study understood the value of establishing these practices early.

Top 7 food-related parenting practice tips:

1. Create a healthy food environment
   Take control of what food is available in the home, how it is prepared and where the family eat out. Over time, children learn to prefer the types of food they know the most.

2. Be a role model
   Be a role model for your children. Being surrounded by family and others who eat healthy foods and do regular physical activity can help children adopt the same healthy behaviours.

3. Establish healthy eating patterns
   Instil an appreciation of cooking by sharing a meal together or enjoying a restaurant meal together. Eating patterns have changed as we eat out more often, cook less and eat more fast food. Parents and grandparents who take a few extra minutes can help create a healthy eating pattern.

4. Strengthen family bonds
   Help create a stronger sense of family for children. Making the time to share meals is very important for a sense of family, learning to socialise and growing stronger family bonds. It can also help teach etiquette.

5. Keep the traditions going
   Pass on your family food cultures and traditions to children. It may help provide a love of real food and choosing of more wholesome options more often, rather than fast or heavily processed foods.

6. Keep food positive
   Use a positive parenting style when dealing with food issues as it helps create a positive attitude to food. This includes being authoritative and responsive with clear divisions of responsibility. Avoid negative styles like over-emphasising rewards, treats or special foods; being overly controlling and not responsive to child cues and using language that creates negative psychological perspective on food, e.g. “good” and “bad” foods.

7. Be informed
   Learn about healthy nutritious foods and cooking styles. Using food-related parenting practices with nutrition knowledge helps foster healthy lifestyle habits in our children.
4. Cost
Parents stated that the cost of food is an issue for food choices. Parents were sensitive to price fluctuations of fresh food young children like, giving bananas, blueberries and strawberries as examples.

5. Convenience
Packaged foods were considered convenient. Although parents said they want to provide fresh healthy foods for their children, they also need to use packaged foods from time to time to feed children while on the run. As a result, parents wanted to understand how to choose better convenient snack options for children. However, parents were also concerned about additives in packaged food.

Some suggestions for convenient nutritious snacks are provided below.

6. Centre based child care influence
Parents saw Preschool and Long Day Care policies as extremely helpful in establishing positive foundations for children's healthy food and drink intake. However, these can sometimes limit the variety of foods that can be provided. Parents said they would therefore appreciate food suggestions.

7. Parents’ perception of what influences their children
- Parents believe media and advertising influence children's food preferences, in particular, TV/cartoon characters and packaging used on products. Parents acknowledged this was a tricky issue since food industry exists to make profit, but were clearly aware of and annoyed with food marketing techniques that target their young children directly.
- Parents were also concerned their children would be exposed to more unhealthy foods at school.

8. Social/family influences and occasions
Parents know they are the most important role models and influence on their child’s eating habits. However, family and social occasions such as parties, play dates and sporting activities play a role in the type of food children eat. Parents say these events can tip the balance to less than ideal healthy eating.

Healthy snack suggestions for the ‘on-the-go’ moments:
- Wholemeal crackers, rice cakes or corn cakes with vegemite, reduced-fat cheese or peanut butter
- Plain, fruit or savoury scones
- Air-popped popcorn
- High-fibre breakfast cereals, for example, bite-sized pieces of wheat with or without fruit at the centre
- Small tin of baked beans
- Reduced-fat cheese cut into sticks, cubes or triangles
- Tub of yoghurt or low-fat custard
- Fruit salad in a tub
- Frozen grapes or pineapple rings (in natural juice) in a bag
- Dried fruit, such as sultanas, apricots, prunes and dates, mixed with nuts and seeds
- Corn cobbettes on sticks

More great healthy snack ideas can be found on the following websites (just search for ‘healthy snacks’):
Healthy Kids
Munch & Move – Choosing healthy snacks for young children:
www.healthykids.nsw.gov.au
Children’s Hospital Westmead
www.chw.edu.au

Parents’ Party Tips
- Feed your children a healthy meal that fills them up before they go to a party so that they are not starving at the party.
- Don’t serve soft drinks. A great alternative in the warmer months is a jug of water with ice and lemon or lime in it.

Packing a lunchbox
Lunch plays an important part in supplying your child with their daily nutritional needs for healthy growth and development. A nutritious lunch needs to include a variety of foods from the five core food groups (as well as plenty of water).

Visit the following websites for healthy lunchbox ideas:
Get Up & Grow
www.health.gov.au
Search for ‘healthy lunchbox’ to get a copy of the ‘Packing lunchboxes for early childhood settings’ information.
Munch and Move (Northern Sydney Central Coast)
www.healthpromotion.com.au
Look for the lunchbox ideas for preschoolers under the Munch and Move section.
9. Commercial and community environments

Supermarket checkouts and food advertising were common examples given by parents of perceived influences on food choices that are outside the home. Parents also felt strongly about unhealthy food being provided in after school sport venues and children’s menus in restaurants.

How do parents understand and describe ‘sometimes’ food?

“A treat... Yeah... Sometimes food... Yeah... Junk”

- The most common term parents used for ‘extra’ foods was ‘treats’. They also used the term ‘sometimes’ foods, a term identified as something taught by the preschool or long day care centres that their child attended.
- Parents had a good understanding of foods that should be eaten every day i.e. the basic food groups.
- Parents were able to correctly identify foods or categories of food that they could not classify as ‘everyday’ or ‘sometimes’ because of variation in the amount of sugar and salt within that food category e.g. breakfast cereals, muesli bars, rice crackers, some flavoured dairy snacks, cheese sticks, some biscuits and fruit juices.

However, parents’ descriptions did not include fat or energy as a reason for not being able to categorise a food as an ‘everyday’ food.

- Foods with additives and preservatives also made it difficult for parents to know whether a food should be eaten sometimes or every day.
- Soft drinks were consistently perceived as ‘sometimes’ drinks, that should be limited or not provided. Some parents reported that they limited sugar-dense drink ‘treats’ to special occasions; and some mentioned that they did not have sugar-dense drinks in the house or that their children were not allowed to have them.
- ‘Everyday’ drinks were consistently identified as water and milk, or as water, milk and juice. In a smaller number of cases, parents described juice or cordial as ‘everyday’ drinks.

The Best Drinks for Kids

Water is the best drink for kids. It quenches their thirst and doesn’t have the sugar found in soft drinks, fruit juices, sports drinks and flavoured mineral waters. Tap water has fluoride which helps prevent dental problems and is better for the environment than bottled water.

Milk is another great drink for kids. It’s a great source of calcium, which helps growth and development of healthy bones and teeth. Reduced-fat milk can be given to children over the age of two. Calcium-fortified soy milk can be used as an alternative to cow’s milk.

Fruit juice is not the best drink for kids to be drinking all the time. One small glass (125mL) of most juices in a day is enough for a child to meet their daily requirement for vitamin C. Try watering down juices so children don’t grow up with a preference for strongly sweetened drinks. A piece of fruit is better than juice as it will also provide your child with good dietary fibre.

For more information:

Munch and Move
www.healthykids.nsw.gov.au
Search for the healthy drinks for young children fact sheet, ‘Choosing drinks for young children’.

Go For Your Life
www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au
Search for ‘sweet drinks’ for information on ‘Why no sweet drinks for children’.

The 10 top foods most frequently referred to by parents as examples of ‘extra’ or ‘sometimes’ foods included:
- Chips
- Ice cream
- Lollies
- Chocolate
- Cakes/donuts
- Sweet biscuits
- Take away
- Soft drink
- Savoury biscuits
- Spreads

Bust the Junk!
Many parents report finding it difficult to convince their children to eat healthy foods when ‘extra’ foods are marketed so attractively to them. The Cancer Council NSW Junk Busters program gives parents the chance to voice their concerns about inappropriate junk food marketing. Visit them at www.junkbusters.com.au
Take away and pre-prepared meals

- Parents believe food prepared outside the home is less nutritious than home prepared food. As a result, many parents said that they rarely eat these kinds of foods/meals. However, most discussed the routines that they had that included take away and pre-prepared meals. This choice was related to convenience, cost and children’s preferences.

“take away night on Saturday night that is a treat”

- Parents distinguished “fast food” from healthier take away e.g. a barbeque chicken with skin removed, salad and a wholemeal bread roll.

Extra’ foods are not essential for your child’s growth and development. They are low in nutritional value; high in saturated fat, sugar or salt; and can lead to tooth decay and your child consuming too much energy.

The best way to help your child meet all their daily nutritional requirements is to provide a wide variety of foods from the five core food groups, and offer ‘extra’ foods only occasionally.

Tips on limiting ‘extra’ foods:

- Make healthier snacks appealing, convenient and readily available at home. For example, one parent described having a fruit bowl where children helped themselves. Another parent continually stocks the pantry/fridge with healthy convenient snacks.

- Don’t buy ‘extra’ foods on a regular basis but choose healthier alternatives when shopping, such as wholegrain-based snacks that are high in fibre.

- Moderate your child’s intake of unhealthy snacks without being too restrictive, by not having some of them readily available in the house and providing healthier but appealing options e.g. frozen fruit smoothie popsicles as an alternative to ice blocks in warmer months.

Parents’ decision making processes - ‘extra’ foods

- Parents put a lot of time, energy and effort into preparing and providing food for their children.

“...deciding what I am going to do for my dinner is like what I have to do almost before I get out of bed in the morning and that guides my whole day...”

- They expressed a desire to provide a balance which includes ‘treats’ as long as children are eating mostly healthy foods. Restricting ‘treats’ was viewed as negative.

“something little as a treat isn’t a problem, ... as long as I know that my children are getting good nutritious meals then in-between those meals I don’t mind them having extra things”.

- Parents are okay with providing ‘treats’ for their children on a regular basis. However, giving ‘treats’ also relates to situations as well as rules or fixed ideas about certain foods (e.g. not having soft drinks in the house).

“I think they should have sometimes foods every day as long as they are having enough of the good foods, so it is a good mixture...”

How many ‘extra’ foods do kids need?

‘Extra’ foods are not essential for your child’s growth and development. They are low in nutritional value; high in saturated fat, sugar or salt; and can lead to tooth decay and your child consuming too much energy.

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What might make it easier for parents to feed their children healthy options?

- Parents felt they are ultimately responsible for the food they provide their children, but some assistance would be helpful.
- Education strategies should target parents and children, as well as the influence preschool/school settings have on their children.
  “...I think it is important that schools educate children ... they spend so much time there and I think school is a big influence on them...”
- Food supply strategies including food pricing, food product reformulation, labels that are easier to understand (e.g. ticks or traffic lights on front of packages), etc. would make choosing healthy options easier for parents.
- There is a strong sense that parents are aware and unhappy about advertising targeting their young children and that self-regulation by industry is not successful. Government regulation might help make it easier for parents by reducing the volume and type of this advertising.

Get informed about supermarket products
Visit CHOICE Food for Kids for more information.
You can also register for updates on products.
www.choicefoodforkids.com.au
• Parents showed us that a large amount of time, effort and care goes into providing food for children. Food is obviously a very high priority for the parents we spoke with.

• Parents’ descriptions of ‘extra’ foods are consistent with health professional categorisations, which suggests parents’ understanding of them is good.

• Parents want to provide a balanced healthy diet for their children, but there are a range of influences to balance according to the situations, contexts and setting.

• Most of our findings are relevant to policy makers and people who communicate with parents via large campaigns and programs.

• The information we received through the study will be very useful in promoting healthy weight and preventing weight gain in young children.

• The information will also be used to develop resources for distribution to parents locally via their child care centres.

Thank you to all the parents and centres that participated in the study. The information you provided has helped form a comprehensive picture of the challenges facing parents trying to provide a healthy diet for their children.

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References