

Britain's Kids Need Food for Thought

Contributed by MINTEL
Thursday, 30 June 2005
Last Updated Thursday, 30 June 2005

Childhood Obesity: Britain's kids need food for thought

Exclusive consumer research from MINTEL's first comprehensive report into childhood obesity names a staggering one in three (33%) Mums and Dads as 'Relaxed Parents', who take little interest in their children's eating habits. This amounts to some 5.3 million parents, making 'Relaxed Parents' the largest group of Mums and Dads in Britain today. But when it comes to children's diet, it is clear that Mum does know best, with just a quarter (27%) of Mums falling into this group, compared to as many as two in five (41%) Dads.

While in general, three-quarters (75%) of parents with children under 16 claim that they try to ensure their kids eat a healthy diet, only just over half (54%) say that they try to actually educate their children about healthy eating. What is more, a similar proportion (just 51%) mention putting into place any specific course of action such as avoiding too much sugar, while just two in five (42%) avoid giving kids high fat foods.

"Over the past few months there has been considerable media coverage about the problems of child obesity. But the time has come to take action and to move away from simply who is to blame. Although messages about the importance of leading a healthy life seem to be getting through, too many parents are still unsure about how to actually put a healthy diet into practice. Clearly parents need practical suggestions, such as how to ensure their child eats five portions of fruit and veg a day, to make leading a healthy life as easy as possible," comments Maria Elustondo, senior market analyst at MINTEL.

Parents also need to realise that weight gain is not just down to the child's diet. Indeed, weight gain amongst Britain's children is often related to their increasingly sedentary lifestyle, with many children spending a large amount of time slumped in front of the television or playing computers and game consoles.

"Clearly children need to be encouraged to become more active as well as to have a healthier diet. But the health education process is not an area open solely to the public sector. Indeed, there are plenty of further opportunities for the private sector to get involved and provide help in this area. Companies could look into introducing easy to follow books, videos and counselling, while private health clubs could benefit from focusing on developing family based exercise programmes," comments Maria Elustondo.

The remainder of parents are 'Indulging Parents' (17%), who give their children what they want when it comes to food, whether it is healthy or not, 'Worrying Parents' (21%), who are concerned about their children's weight as well as their sugar and fat intake and 'Controlling Parents' (29%), who try and ensure their children eat a healthy diet.

Kids - concentrate on curbing those carbs

The vast majority (72%) of 11 - 16 year olds know that it is important to eat a balanced diet, but many do not seem to be putting this knowledge into practice. Despite significant drops since 2001 almost seven in ten (67%) still often eat between meals, and over half (53%) claim to eat whatever they like.

There is obviously a strong carbohydrate element to children's diet these days, with bread (85%), fruit (82%), biscuits (80%), cereals (78%) and tomato ketchup (78%) named as the top five foods for Britain's seven - 16 year old children. And while it is encouraging to see that as many as eight in ten (82%) do eat fruit, it is of some concern that far fewer, at just seven in ten (69%), eat vegetables.

When it comes to eating between meals, the situation is equally as worrying, with just one out of the top five snacks of choice proving to be a healthier option. The top choice is potato crisps (41%), followed by chocolate (39%), then comes fruit (35%), sweets (29%) and sweet biscuits (22%).

"Children need to be educated on the benefits of a healthy diet for themselves, in order to understand how it affects their lifestyles. This could be done by marketing certain foods as "beauty foods", which are good for healthy skin, hair and nails, or "sports fuel". The main point being that they understand how eating a healthy diet and taking regular exercise, can have a positive impact on their life and what they enjoy doing," explains Maria

Sugar and spice and all things nice?

Girls are much more interested than boys in healthy eating, with three-quarters (76%) of girls understanding the importance of eating a balanced diet, compared to fewer than seven in ten (68%) boys. Girls are also more likely to mention the practical statements such as not eating "too many sweets" (51% of girls vs 43% of boys) and "trying not to eat too much" (54% of girls vs 43% of boys).

But at the other end of the spectrum there are growing concerns about children becoming obsessed with their weight at a young age. Worryingly, as many as one in three (33%) children say that they often try to lose weight - whether they need to or not - and a similar proportion (32%) eat when they are sad. Three in ten (30%) also say that they sometimes feel guilty about eating.

Girls (44%) are almost twice as likely as boys (23%) to be trying to lose weight, and are also more likely to feel guilty about eating (41% of girls vs 20% of boys) and to comfort eat (41% of girls vs 23% of boys).?

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This Press Release relates to the following Mintel Report:

Childhood Obesity - UK - June 2005

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