



Food Promotion and Children's Diets – Views of Young People

Final Report

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Prepared for: Food Standards Agency
and COI Communications

1) Executive Summary

As part of its wider work to improve children's diets, the Food Standards Agency has developed an Action Plan on Food Promotions and Children's Diets. The Action Plan calls upon a variety of stakeholders to work with the Agency to address the way in which foods are currently promoted to children, and in doing so to encourage children to eat a more healthy diet. The Action Plan can be viewed on the Agency's website at www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/promotion/.

Prior to the final agreement of the Action Plan by the Agency's Board, the Agency commissioned research to examine the views of older children on the various options detailed in the Action Plan, and also on the potential likely effectiveness of some of these options in influencing children's diets.

After-school discussion groups were held with secondary school children (aged 11-15) from Birmingham and London. Groups were single gender and included friendship pairs from at least three schools to ensure there was a variety in the school eating experience.

The Action Plan includes elements on which children are unlikely to be able to comment meaningfully. These were excluded, and those that were included were simplified to make them more accessible to children.

- (A) Make sure that school canteens sell lots of different foods, including some healthier ones, and that they try to get pupils to eat the healthier ones more often.
- (B) Design a logo or badge that can be printed on food packets to tell you if it's a healthier choice.
- (C) Get foods to tell you on the front of the pack whether they have a lot of fat, salt or sugar in them.
- (D) Make sure that all restaurants have some healthier foods for you to choose.

Key outcomes

- There are no inherent barriers for older children or young teens to eating healthily, provided it is made easy and some of the decision-making is 'done for them'; and provided the efforts acknowledge valued end results, such as fitness, slimness and attractiveness rather than improved health

- The issue central to the success of any individual government or school initiatives is how children are motivated. This will include the tone that is adopted and the kind of language that is used to express or allude to the 'reasons' for healthy eating
- There is some evidence of 'compassion wearout' and a tendency to see healthy eating as an issue only in terms of obesity, and therefore not relevant to those of healthy weight or slightly over-weight.
- Of the Action Plan recommendations discussed, those relating to School Canteens and the logo or badge had the greatest potential to influence children's diets

School canteen (recommendation A)

- Schemes could consider exploiting the inherent competitiveness of children through competitions or challenges to find the 'fittest' pupil, or by collecting points on smart cards etc.
- Rather than widening the choice of food options available, schools may consider limiting the number 'less healthy' choices available, and highlighting 'healthier options'
- Children, particularly boys, would be more likely to choose the healthier option if promotional activity focussed on value, price and ease, rather than health
- Children said they would welcome a 'complete healthy meal' option, which would reduce the need for them to make individual decisions about the various elements such as drinks, puddings etc. Again, the use of a descriptor that focuses on attractiveness or fitness, rather than health, should be considered.

Logo or Badge (recommendation B)

- Inclusion of a logo or badge would be useful on child-purchased products only, and is likely to be of limited value on 'real foods', which were seen as the parents responsibility

- Could be used to emphasise that a product is 'sorted', 'energy-providing', 'effortless health' (as above) 'good value' (quantity-for-price) 'happiness' (smiles) and 'a good life'
- Key words which appeal to older children and could be used as part of a logo or badge would include:
 - fit, fitness, right, energy, filling, safe, gain (boys)
 - fit, fitness, slim, sexy, win, happy, good, low fat (girls)

On-Pack labelling and promotions (recommendation C)

- Information related to 'healthiness' such as nutrition information or sign-post labelling are generally not of interest to most older children and young teens.
- Promotional activity involving fashion, sports and celebrities appeared to be attractive to children as they reinforced the relationship between looking good and eating 'healthily'.

Restaurants (recommendation D)

- Elements of the action plan relating to restaurants are likely to be the least obviously valuable route as far as older children or young teens are concerned (however it may be suitable area to focus on the adult spender).

(2) Research Objectives

- To explore children’s views on selected elements of the Action Plan – School Canteen Options, Pack Information, ‘Healthy’ Badges and Restaurant Options.
- To gather children’s views on the practical implications of those elements.
- To consider the possible effectiveness of each element in encouraging a healthier diet amongst children.
- To provide direction for the development of each element in order to maximise its effect in motivating healthier eating habits.

3) Sample

Group 1	Girls, Year 7 (11-12ys)	Birmingham
Group 2	Boys, Year 8 (12-13ys)	London
Group 3	Girls, Year 9 (13-14ys)	London
Group 4	Boys, Year 10 (14-15ys)	Birmingham

All: Owned/had access to a mobile phone
C1C2D(E)

Respondents were asked to bring 2-3 examples (packs) from foods/drinks that they had enjoyed in the last week

4) Key Findings

4.1) Food – Context and Climate

- Children and young teenagers are very aware of ‘healthy eating’ messages – via school, parents and, significantly, the media and ‘Government’
- At the moment the emphasis is strongly on obesity ... for the non-obese, there’s some tendency to ‘screen out’ messages. (Slightly overweight children are not inclined to see ‘warning light’ till mid teenage social pressure is felt...and parents are inclined to expect/hope children will ‘outgrow’ the problem)

- Fat and 'fatness' have eclipsed 'health and healthiness' to some degree...Levels of knowledge about healthy eating and healthy foods are high, if somewhat 'predictable' e.g;

healthy food = salads, veg and fruit and 'home cooking'
unhealthy food = sugary and fatty food and 'fast food'...

- Comments about 'healthy eating' reflect both familiarity – and a degree of 'dismissal' ...

"Sometimes I think about healthy eating but sometimes I just can't be bothered"

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

"I think people know what's healthy, you hear enough about it ... God, yes, all the time ...in biology for a start ...but in the end they just buy what they want..."

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

"My biology teacher tells all this stuff about carbohydrates and fats and then you see her getting the biggest chocolate bar ..."

(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

"Like if I was, like, really majorly overweight, then obviously that's something to worry about ... There's been a lot about the problem of obesity recently – it's worse in America, but we're getting as bad..."

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

4.2) Age and Gender

Characteristics of 11 to 13 years.....

Adolescents around this stage are developing autonomy, starting to make serious decisions about their own food choices:-

- In school – peers influence, particularly in relation to 'style' of eating, e.g., canteen vs. snack bar vs. packed lunch etc...

- With own money, on own – fads and favourites can be indulged and for this newly independent age band there's often a phase of experimentation and 'rule-breaking'

"I had basically, like three doughnuts, yesterday – that was all I had – I bought them all"

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

- Input to home/family meal choices can become both more 'serious' and better informed

"I tell my mum I want to eat less fat – yeah, she's fine with that 'cause she's basically the same...we're trying to eat less junk and lose weight..."

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

Enjoyment of new 'food freedom'

Characteristics of 13 to 15 year olds....

- Start to 'own' eating patterns; a more individual style of established patterns and tastes in eating practices, as against the pre-teens
- Eating related to goals (for example 'be quick', 'resist fattening foods', "get a six pack..."...), mood at the moment, and other activities within the day/around mealtimes
- Eating (or lack of..) can be a 'statement'...young teens are known and seen by their peers as having 'signature' characteristics in relation to consumption

"This boy, in our class, like, well he's eating nearly all the time – he's actually fat...he has family problems...yeah, he comfort eats and like I don't blame him..."

(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

"There are girls that make a big thing about eating just nothing, they are noisy and they all eat like one salad leaf and I think they actually want you to be impressed like they're models or something ..."

(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

Body consciousness – both genders, but exerts different pressures

Girls	Boys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size, weight and sexual development... • Covert 'sexual' body health = slimness • 'Faddish' eating (vegetarianism, etc) • Healthy eating is OK/sexy ... • Dieting..... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Fitness' = sporting achievement/athleticism • Overt 'sexual' body health = toned muscles • 'Dustbin' eating ... • Healthy eating is "for wimps"... • Body building.....

Differences in attitude to food between girls and boys...

Girls show their 'goals' and illustrate what motivates them....

"She's really lucky, she can eat anything and she's got an amazing figure..." (talking about friend sitting next to her)

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

"I'm semi-vegetarian at school. I had a completely vegetarian week last week..."

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

"Basically you know you should eat healthily and exercise; you couldn't not know that. It is a bit for your health, yeah, but to be honest, most girls eat quite healthily because of weight – they want to look good..."

(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

Boys espouse disinterest in the detail of food and eating yet comments can often highlight aims and concerns which are more important to them than they

are comfortable to admit at first – something of a paradox exists in their attitudes and approaches to healthy eating ...

“Boys are getting just as bothered about keeping fit – I think I want to be strong ...I think it’s muscle that you want..”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

“I don’t basically want to look like a couch potato with a gut and a flabby stomach and wheezing when you have to run ...like puny... it’s the fit boys that pull girls...”

(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

“...so my mum will say eat that or eat this and that...my dad? He’d say oh give the lad a break... (vegetables and healthy food) is for wimps!”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

4.3) Promotions – Foods, Drinks and other Desirables...

- TV advertising awareness is high – esp. humorous ads for snack-style products; Tango, Fanta, Sensations, Walkers etc. New Media – some awareness of Coco Pops, Pepsi, Lucozade mobile-related links and promotions...computer game-related promotions via email and mobiles also reported

“I’m in the Nintendo club and they are always emailing and I can get a text to say there’s a deal on a new game, say ...”

(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

- Few reports of website visits/interaction via web...related to food/drink. Other – ‘indulgence-oriented’ – experiences of SMS messaging – datelines, fashion shops, follow-ups to ‘competition entries’ from magazines...

“I’ve had that, it’s something like ‘Lust’ and you get ‘someone has contacted our dating service and someone fancies you, ring this number’ but everyone I know has always got it – it’s a rip off”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

There is considerable wariness about ‘hidden costs’ and unscrupulous promotion operators - approaches via mobile have a slightly ‘tarnished’ image for children...

“My dad just says never respond to any of those things, they’re a con, they cost more for the call than the thing you might win...”

(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

4.4) School – the Context: What Really Happens in School

- School ‘mood’ is not oriented to ‘good feeding’ – eating and drinking are social, ‘boredom-beating’ and ‘leisure’ activities within school – and consumption is public
- Some schools have overt ‘healthy eating’ ethos – for reputation of school, due to parental pressure, in response to LEA pressure...and children are aware of school stance...
- Effects are varied; chief developments are fizzy drink, chocolate vending machines and chips removal
- Children are aware of the commercial issues, though...

“They just take out the junk food stuff, then you don’t have the choicethey don’t do cans anymore, just water and Calypsos...”

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

“They gave up because no-one went to the salad bar...they just hide it at the back now...”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

“They want to sell their food – the caterers – no-one would buy salads...”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

Influences on Food/Drink Choice in School

- **Time and money!** Around £2 daily for lunch average...

- Friends – the social milieu; give each other ideas, share fads, eat together. Sometimes the process of eating is a matter of a very low level of attention... compared to what else may be going on...

“I am more just talking really – I can remember what we were discussing this lunchtime (laughs with friend sitting next to her)...but I don’t know what X was eating ... I can’t remember what I was eating!”
(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

- Effort – queuing and ease of eating.... (can favour packed lunches...)
- Too much choice...? Young teenagers are notoriously lazy and inclined to inertia where patterns of behaviour have evolved; more choice doesn’t always, necessarily, seem a good thing...

The lure of ease, familiarity and the ‘evidence’ against choice extension can be heard in young teenagers’ comments...

“I end up just having pizza every day...I can’t be bothered to look at all the specials...”
(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

“I don’t really want to think about it (food) at school...I can’t even think what I want...I can’t remember what I ate today...”
(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

“You know most of it will be like not very nice, even if it looks good...So you go for something safe...”
(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

“Tuna (is a ‘bad packed lunch day’)...I hate tuna but my brother really likes it and basically my mum always gets us mixed up...what, why do I get it? Because I haven’t told her yet – well I haven’t been bothered to say. I chuck them away ... Yeah I’ll tell her... when I can be arsed”
(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

4.5) ACTION PLAN: School Canteens

Overall Response to Idea

- Children and young teens highlight the polarities of choice as a key problem related to healthy foods; availability of ‘unhealthy’ but quick, appetitive favourites creates pressure on *“even my really good intentions...”*
- Some feel coercion is/would be acceptable – because they want to eat healthily (and benefit from the effects...)... And reaction to school policy of ‘banning fizzy drinks and chips’ does support this, to an extent...

“I just like don’t think about having chocolate at school any more ... at first some people missed the coke I think, but you get really used to it...”

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

- By ca. 13-14ys, most ‘expect’ school to be a place where healthy eating is advocated – and ‘rules’ exist around so many other areas ...
- Some feeling that the ‘school version’ of most foods is something of a ‘pale imitation’ so *“it might as well be good for you ...”*
- School could be a relatively ‘painless’ place to eat healthilyif the decision is ‘made for you’...esp. given ‘unthinking’ mood around food selection and consumption in school

ACTION PLAN: School Canteens - Practical Ideas

- **Competition** is integral to school ethos – could build in to healthy eating....though some experiences warn of danger of obverse effects... (One school was reported as having tried a weekly ‘healthy eating’ competition, but teenage boys tended to *“do the opposite – see how much crap we could eat each week!”*...discussion amongst 14-15yr olds).
- Language and inferred ‘goals’ are key...e.g., ‘fittest pupil’ much more motivating than ‘healthiest eater’!
- **Price:** Children/young teens like the idea of ‘bargains’ and deals better than straight price incentivisation, so ‘two for price’, ‘this week’s giveaway

special', and (for boys esp.) 'as much as you can eat' bars, credits towards free lunches, all have appeal

- **Ease and Speed** Activity/promotions which highlight 'easy eating' for example 'all-in-one' lunch etc (N.B. the 'airline meal' idea...) The notion is 'instant health', no need to think about selection...fits 'careless' mood within school

Overall, positive good choice food/drink messages are better/more appealing than negative, 'avoid' messages – 'you should' rather than 'you should not', in context of school canteens...and make it easy/effortless.

4.6) ACTION PLAN: Pack Information – Promotions and Health Messages

Overall Response to Idea – Pack Information

- Price, product shot and brand name are the big triggers where children are buying for themselves...contents are an afterthought or never explored
- Recent recognition of EURO 2004 promotions, esp. coupled with freebies were reported and demonstrated in favoured consumption examples
- The 'little circles'(on pack) are seen as *"health and ingredients"* messages – indicating a 'concerned' buyer audience...but around these ages, youngsters don't see the 'contents' as their concern....esp. on 'real food' like ready meals. Mums are seen as the arbiters of health, food contents and appropriateness in this context...

"If it's in the fridge then I assume It's ok, my mum has bought it for the family..."

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

Comments by respondents while discussing packaging and contents...

"I like this Poweraid ... It's the one I said about. Yeah, if you're tired, like after playing football, it gives me lots of energy... I know? ... Because it says, look, it says it's like really full of stuff, an energy drink and that..."

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

“See this, it’s lasagne, but, like my mum would have that in the freezer and she’d say do you want to do it and tell me how to do the microwave ... if I saw that I’d think it might be alright, quite cheesy but there might be too many vegetables, look ... I don’t know what it’s made of ...”

(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

“I just look at what flavour and if I have enough money. I don’t care if it’s got Beckham or Rooney or whatever on it...”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

“Yeah, but saying that, the EURO 2004 things have usually got some deal on them ... It’s Pepsi, I think, doing 50 per cent extra ...so you might get the football one if they were all the same”

(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

Novelty – and ‘quirkiness’ signalled on pack - can inspire selection by young teens, esp. the 11-13’s, during the ‘honeymoon’ phase of newly independent eating and food choice...

“I just so felt like them – they’re called mini-jaw breakers. They’re really tough but I also got Skittles, crisps and a Pepperami - yeah, bit of a weird combination...”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

“I’ve got a real thing about the Thai Sensations – they are just brill”

(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

“Special K Lite Bites – tried them because I thought they’d be nice and maybe a bit healthy ... They were disgusting. My mum got them and she gave them away”

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

“Pittas with butter and pepper ... I have them for breakfast. They’re, I dunno, they’re just more interesting than ordinary bread”

(Girl, 11-12ys, London)

Overall Response to Idea – ‘Healthy’ Content Messages

- The only ‘health’ messages which impinge or potentially motivate are calories and fat grams - for some older girls, and this is all about weight....
- ‘Energy’, ‘larger’ and ‘value’ messages can attract boys...esp. in drinks; ‘bravado’ consumption..!
- Much suspicion re ‘less’, ‘low fat’ and ‘natural’ messages – viz infamous denounced products, notably ‘Sunny Delight’..

“That Sunny Delight was all supposed to be the best health thing for children. It was full of vitamins and all fruit and then now they’ve found out it gives you cancer or something...you can’t believe any of the stuff they say on packs...”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

“And in America they say ‘low fat’ on cereal that’s never had any fat in it to take people in...”

(Girl, 11-12ys, Birmingham)

In general young teenagers expect ‘others’, notably mothers, to screen for them; they have no/few health concerns in the context of their own purchases

ACTION PLAN: Pack Information - Practical Ideas

- Could signal via role-modelling on pack fronts e.g., ‘the choice of....’ (athletes/footballers etc)....’X’s favourite...’ (n.b. Tara Palmer Tomkinson) based on young teens anecdotal reported interest in celebrity promotion
- Messages about good taste and/or possibly energy outweigh health – so tangential approaches are possible e.g., ‘all day satisfaction’, ‘sets you up’, ‘fitness food’...(rather than, for example, ‘healthy’)
- ‘Low in fat’ (rather than ‘low fat’, which is *“a diet version”* and has taste negatives...) and/or specific ‘looks’ messages e.g., ‘good for your skin/hair/physique’ could appeal to inherent appearance anxiety around this age

Good/tasty in its own right rather than a 'better'/healthier version of something is the way forward for pack messages ... BUT ...

'Badges' may be simpler...

4.8) ACTION PLAN: Badges

What Kinds of Messages could Motivate?

- Emphasis on positive thoughts, as before....
- Good in own right, not 'better' versions
- For fitness (all meanings....)
- What it has not what it lacks (dieting is 'adult' and/or you're admitting failure...)
- Energy (sporting esp.), physical well-being, good looks and 'happiness' as goals (N.B. smiley images...)
- Again, 'all-in-oneness' and 'all-you-need' messages – health made easy and quick... (some liking/recognition for the '5' campaign, because of idea of 'daily doses' simplicity...)

ACTION PLAN: Badges - Practical Ideas, based on respondents' own badge designs

Prominent Themes...

- 'Right \leftrightarrow Wrong' ideas ...almost all based on physical good looks
- 'Fit vs. Fat' images were often described in terms of a 'good vs. bad' life...healthy eating translated as a source of success and happiness (and attractiveness to the opposite sex)
- 'Challenge' - often relates to 'bargain-hunting', thus some ideas incorporated low price for extra content
- Symbols, typically 'stickmen' or 'smile' or apples; simple and recognisably positive encapsulations of the idea of 'good' (healthy) food

The context for badges which might be noticed and could be motivating is in self-purchasing areas - snack, 'gap-filling' and CTN purchased foods are appropriate to badge, for example. 'Home' food such as ready meals comes under the *"mum sorts all that out..."* category

Respondents' comments on badges – focussing on the positive...

“It would be good if it was a special range or something. It would save time looking if you just saw that sticker so you could grab it”

(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

“But I would try it first – when it’s food that’s not supposed to be healthy then I think the healthy version is rubbish – like Weight Watchers ice cream ... it’s disgusting...it needs to say how fantastic something tastes because if it’s just what it hasn’t got in it then I don’t think you’d bother..”

(Boy, 14-15ys, Birmingham)

“A badge should say you’ll be slim and good looking if you eat this – that’s basically all it should say”

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

“For boys? Look like this footballer...”

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

“Fit food! ...with money off tokens!”

(Boy, 12-13ys, London)

4.9) ACTION PLAN: Restaurant Choices

The Context

- Eating out, even relatively informally, is all about indulgence...

“If I am at school, or having tea at home I do try to think a bit about food and if I’m being a bit healthy...in a restaurant I just let go, that’s the point when you have a meal out, you just let yourself go...”

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

- Seen as a ‘punishing’ context in which to present ‘healthy’ foods...

“At school and that the food is really crap anyway...in the Harvester I went to at the weekend the puddings were amazing...”

(Girl, 13-14ys, London)

- Recent ‘healthy’ moves by McDonald’s were generally disparaged

ACTION PLAN: Restaurant Choices - Practical Ideas

- Children had few practical ideas for signalling – in an enticing way – healthy options in restaurants!
- Ideas generally centred on *“keeping the healthiness a secret...”!* (Like ‘vegetarian options’ which several meat-eaters claimed they invariably dismissed...)
- Only viable ‘promotional’ activities likely to motivate, relate to quantity offers (price per. se. is a non-issue eating out, as a parent is usually paying..) and/or novelty, e.g., ‘cook-your-own’ (stir fry..), come-again buffet style etc
- If developed, the ‘healthy’ badge could be used in restaurant context