



Key Features

Examining Key Influences on Children's Consumption of Seafood

Summary

- **To promote seafood successfully to children, it is crucial to take into account all the direct and indirect influences that impact on children's consumption of seafood:**
 - Direct influences include a child's age, gender, parents, friends and family, special eating occasions and school dinners;
 - Indirect influences include food advertising and marketing, the media, food packaging and education.
- **Seafood must be made relevant to children of different ages and genders, focusing on the specific short-term benefits.**
- **Children rely heavily on sensory analysis of food (appearance, smell, taste) when making consumption decisions.**
- **Children can be categorised in terms of their food orientation, ranging from 'foodies' to 'non-foodies' and this is significantly influenced by the attitudes and behaviours of their parents.**
- **Careful targeting of key messages to parents, teachers and children will maximise impact and effectiveness of education initiatives.**

Background

Seafish is responsible for a number of initiatives designed to encourage engagement and promote awareness of seafood amongst children of all ages. This study sought to identify the factors which influence children in their food consumption decisions.

Many manufacturers have identified the commercial potential in developing food brands and products targeted specifically at children, through the use of cartoon characters, celebrity endorsements, harnessing 'pester power', attractive packaging and advertising.

**SHE THINKS
EVERYTHING IS
CHICKEN NUGGETS
- EVEN IF IT IS
FISH FINGERS!
->MUM<-**

Children's seafood consumption

Results from the study indicate that awareness and consumption of seafood are directly related; in other words, children who are aware of a greater variety of seafood are likely to eat more seafood more often.

On the whole however, the types of seafood consumed by children tend to be restricted to coated and shaped products (fish fingers, fish cakes, etc.) which do not boost awareness of seafood generally as they are indistinguishable from other coated products (eg chicken nuggets). As children become accustomed to regularly eating such products, it is more difficult to try and encourage them to eat different types of food.

Often the greatest hurdle in encouraging children to eat seafood is the fact that it is quite distinct in terms of its appearance, smell and texture. The study found that children often 'eat with their eyes'.

What influences children's food decisions?

1. Children's food orientation

Children's food orientation can be expressed in terms of where they sit on a spectrum which ranges from 'foodies' to 'non-foodies'. 'Foodies' typically enjoy cooking, eat a wider selection of foods and associate food with pleasure, while 'non-foodies' see food as a low priority, view eating mainly as a functional means of alleviating hunger, stick to a narrow food repertoire and are often fussy about what they will eat. A close link exists between parents' food orientation and that of their children.

2. Direct influences

Age

As they grow older (six to eight years), children begin to consume slightly heavier, more complex food than during younger years, increasing their consumption repertoire. Food with simple tastes which is fun and easy such as pizza and burgers is still favoured however.

The most significant broadening of food repertoire occurs between the ages of eight and eleven years, where children show arguably the broadest and most balanced diet before adulthood. Evidence of aspiration for more 'grown-up' foods is evident amongst children in this age group as they try spicier, stronger and more complex foods. Importantly, children also develop an awareness and concern for nutritional issues at this age.

At secondary school, children become more concerned about what their peers are eating and what they are seen to be eating. Such peer pressure often counteracts any trends towards healthy eating as the desire to conform inhibits children's willingness to experiment with new foods.

Gender

Boys and girls as young as nine start to show differing motivations in terms of eating; girls start to focus on the impact of food on dieting, physical appearance and weight control, while boys view food as a provider of energy and stamina necessary to perform well at sport, for instance. Such clear gender differences provide opportunities for a more targeted approach to seafood education and communications.

Figure 1: Direct influences on children's food consumption

Biggest direct influences

Age
Mum



Other direct influences

School
Friends
Special occasions
Grandparents

Figure 2: Key Parent Types

Controllers	Balancers	Permissives
Conscious & active about nutritional balance	Approach nutrition in a more general way	Food is functional
Typically cook from scratch	Mix of convenience meals and cooking from scratch	Cooking is seen as a chore
Rarely use convenience meals	Limited cooking skills, knowledge and interest	Rely mostly on convenience meals
Whole family eats same meal	Will cook individual meals if necessary	Healthy eating not a priority
Resilient to pester power	Can give in to pester power	Children are often fussy
Limited snacking	Flexible about chocolate and crisps	Less inclined to risk trying new foods

Parents

Of all the direct influences, it is clear that parents (usually Mum) play the greatest role in what children eat as they are the 'gatekeepers' to food. Understanding their attitudes and behaviours is therefore essential in order to gain a better understanding of how children's food choices are made. Three key parent typologies emerged from the study, namely Controllers, Balancers and Permissives (see Figure 2).

Despite these differences, most parents share similar issues and considerations in terms of providing for their family, ranging from emotional to functional motivations. The most common of these is the desire to be a good parent and to nurture their children into healthy adulthood, as well as providing an enjoyable yet varied meal, convenience, affordability, availability and nutrition.

Friends and family

Often children will eat food with other family or friends which they will not eat at home. Grandparents, in particular, often care for children and may feed them food which they don't eat regularly at home. Children also tend to be more compliant with grandparents and therefore food becomes less of a contentious issue. Significantly, grandparents can be more open to trying seafood and so they are also more likely to serve it as a meal to grandchildren.

Despite the potentially negative influence which peer pressure can have, friends can play a positive role in influencing children, particularly when they visit each other after school or at weekends. At these times children are often exposed to new foods and tend to be more open and receptive to trial (sometimes purely out of politeness).

"WHEN I GO ROUND TO MY NAN AND GRANDAD'S THEY COOK COD IN THE OVEN AND GO TO THE CHIP SHOP TO GET SOME CHIPS" ->CHILD-<

Special occasions

Experiences with food out of the home – such as at a barbeque, a birthday party, on holiday or at a restaurant – are often cited as influencing children's eating habits. In these settings children are more likely to try new foods and tastes as the occasion creates a happy, positive environment where there is a sense of fun that revolves around being 'out of the norm'.

"WE WENT TO MY UNCLE IN LEICESTER AND HE DID PAELLA WITH PRAWNS AND SQUID IN IT...AND I LIKED THEM" ->CHILD-<

School

The study found that, on the whole, eating food at school (in the dinner hall, at lunchtimes) had an overall negative effect on children's eating habits. School dinners tend to provide a relatively limited choice of food (due to budget constraints) and children generally feel that the quality of school meals is sub-standard. Moreover, for children who visit the dinner hall towards the end of lunch time an even more restricted choice is available. However, a limited number of positive direct influences exist, such as the opportunity to be exposed to new foods (especially for younger children) through themed dinners and free fruit initiatives for example.

3. Indirect influences

Education

Many food schemes and initiatives work with primary schools as children of this age are seen as more receptive to messages, as well as the fact that healthy eating is often a priority for parents of these children. The fun and interactive nature of food education lends itself to a better learning environment, with many children observing and tasting some types of food for the first time. Furthermore, the primary school curriculum tends to be more flexible than secondary school and so visits (eg by dentists) and health initiatives are welcomed by teachers.

In secondary school food education constitutes a more formal aspect of children's education, featuring in such subjects as food technology, biology (food as energy), Physical, Health and Social Education (healthy diet) and Religious Studies (cultures and religions). At this age most children are aware of what constitutes a balanced diet and have already taken on board the essentials of healthy eating. Despite this, however, the study found that teachers saw little evidence of children altering their eating patterns. The reasons for this include that:

- there are more important issues for children of this age, such as sport, friends, appearance, etc;
- food is seen only in terms of its practical value (ie a source of fuel);
- the instructive way in which food education is delivered has a reverse effect, and;
- children of this age focus on the short term and have a sense of immortality.

For these reasons, children are more likely to take on board food education messages if they are made directly relevant to their lives and interests.

Advertising

Confirming the findings of other recent research studies, it was found that children are strongly influenced by advertising, especially on television but also via magazines, the internet and radio. Indeed, advertising on television is a source of entertainment for many children, and often is the subject of conversations with their friends. The study found that successful advertising to children held shared characteristics, namely that:

- they employ comedy/humour;
- they utilise 'cool' music, characters or scenarios;
- celebrities feature in the advert; and
- there is a catchy slogan.

Examples of a campaign which children cited include Cadbury's Crème Egg (catchy slogan – "How do you eat yours?") and Walker's Crisps (celebrity – Gary Lineker). These campaigns have achieved success through employing tactics which children identify with; in other words, the messages are communicated at children's level and are therefore taken on board.

Food packaging and marketing

Children openly admit the importance of food packaging and marketing to them, and are more inclined to purchase (or pester their parents to purchase) products which feature characters (eg The Simpsons), advertise competitions, contain freebies or gimmicks etc. Bright, innovative packaging and food designs which contain an element of fun are popular with children, as found in dedicated children's ranges.

The media

A relatively limited role is played by the media (excluding advertising) in influencing children's decisions about food, according to the study. Cookery programmes on television and teen magazines have some influence on food decision-making, girls in particular often read diet hints and tips. The impact of leaflets, newspapers and other similar media on children's food decisions was found to be relatively limited.

Key learnings

- Initiatives focused in primary schools are likely to be more effective than secondary school
- It is critical to engage parents to increase seafood consumption amongst children
- Children are most receptive to messages, media and activities which are relevant to their lives
- Specific targeting of messages to each age group and gender which focus on short-term benefits will be most effective.
- Creating a positive visual appearance and appeal is key in getting children to try seafood



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