

# Kids and food: Challenges families face



## Poll report

Dr Anthea Rhodes, Director

Poll 9, December 2017

### Report highlights

- Over half of parents (57%) say it is hard to know which foods are healthy choices when buying food for their family
- Two-thirds of parents (67%) find it hard to know how much added sugar is in the food products they buy for their children
- More than nine out of 10 school-aged children (95%) don't eat the recommended daily serves of vegetables
- Parents are giving their children too many treat foods, with almost half (41%) of preschoolers receiving treat foods most days of the week
- A third of children (35%) regularly consume sugar-sweetened drinks, with over a quarter of parents (26%) mistakenly believing fruit drinks may be a healthier choice than water
- Most parents (76%) report that their child has a home cooked dinner almost every day, despite finding this hard to achieve due to lack of time and energy
- More than a third (37%) of school-aged children have not been taught how to cook or prepare food, and almost half (44%) of teenagers rarely or never help to cook dinner
- Despite one in four Australian children being overweight or obese, only one in eight children in this poll were considered to be overweight or obese by their parents

In a survey conducted during October 2017, Australian parents were asked a series of questions about their understanding, experiences and opinions in relation to the diet, nutrition and eating habits of their children. A sample of 1,980 parents yielded data on a total of 3,704 of their children aged between one month and 18 years. Of these 3,704 children, 571 (15%) were infants and toddlers (aged zero to less than three years), 708 (19%) were preschoolers (aged three to less than five years), 1479 (40%) were primary school-aged children (aged six to less than 13 years) and 946 (26%) were teenagers (aged 13 to less than 18 years). The median number of children per parent was two with a range from one to nine.

## Parents face challenges when making food choices for their family

Parents are involved in making choices about food for their families every day. While most parents (91%) understand the importance of a healthy diet for the health of their children, the majority of parents (57%) say it can be difficult to know what foods are healthy when choosing food to buy. Two-thirds (67%) of parents reported that it is hard to know how much added sugar is in the food they buy for their children, and over half (53%) say it is hard to understand nutrition information labels.

Parents also indicated cost is a barrier to making healthy food choices, with three quarters (77%) of parents saying

that they believe healthy food is generally more expensive than unhealthy food. Advertising is also a factor, with almost two-thirds (61%) saying that they sometimes buy unhealthy food products that their children request because they have seen them advertised.

## Which foods should kids eat and are they getting enough?

The Australian Dietary Guidelines ([www.eatforhealth.gov.au](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au)) provide up-to-date advice about the amount and kinds of food and drinks children need regularly for good health and well-being. The amount of food a child needs from each of the main food groups depends on their age, gender and activity level. In this poll, we asked parents about their child's average daily intake of fruit and vegetables, as well as treat foods and sugar-sweetened drinks.

### Fruit and vegetables

It is recommended that children have around two serves of fruit per day and around five serves of vegetables per day, depending on their age and gender. This poll found that overall, parents report most children (71%) have adequate daily fruit intake. However, reported fruit intake decreased steadily with age, with 93% of children aged between one and three years meeting the daily requirement, decreasing to 83% of preschoolers, 69% of primary school-aged children and only half (56%) of teenagers (see *figure 1*).

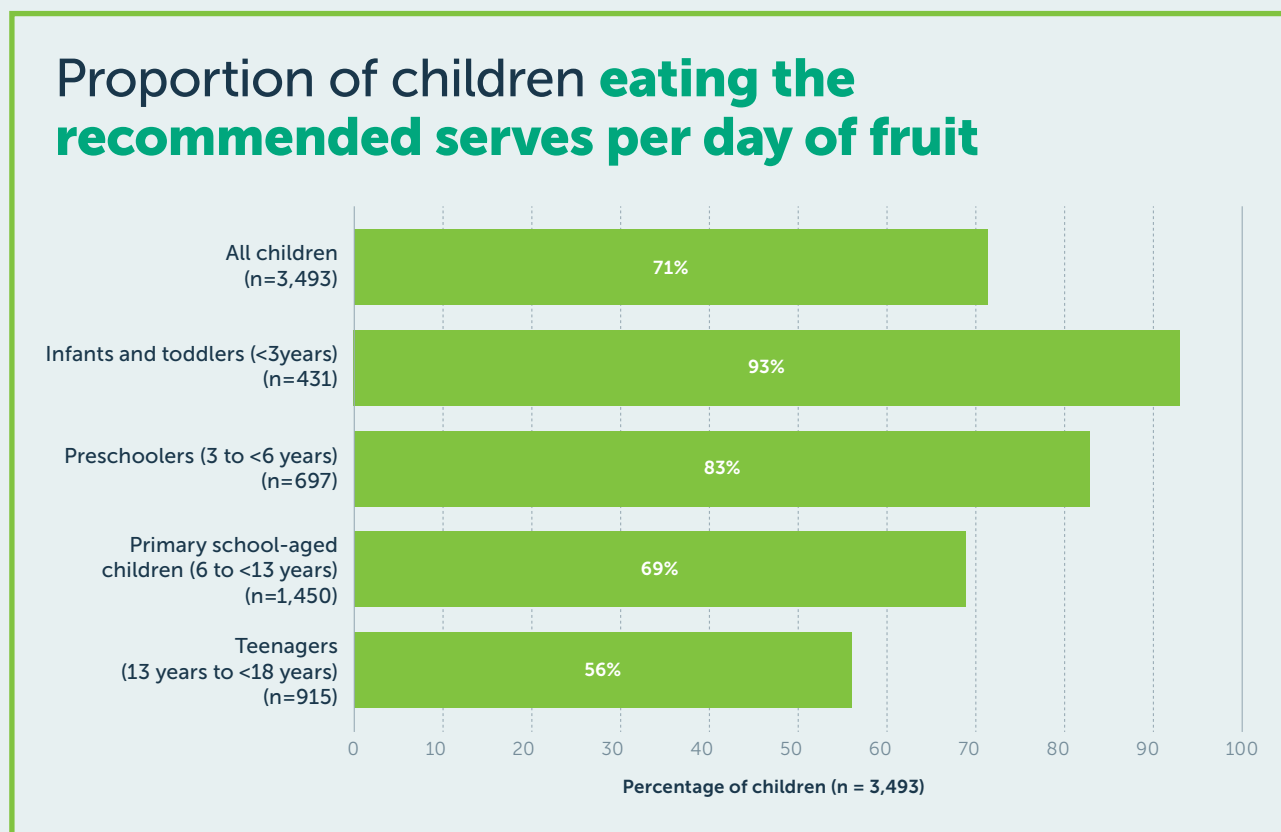


Figure 1.

## Proportion of children eating the recommended serves per day of vegetables

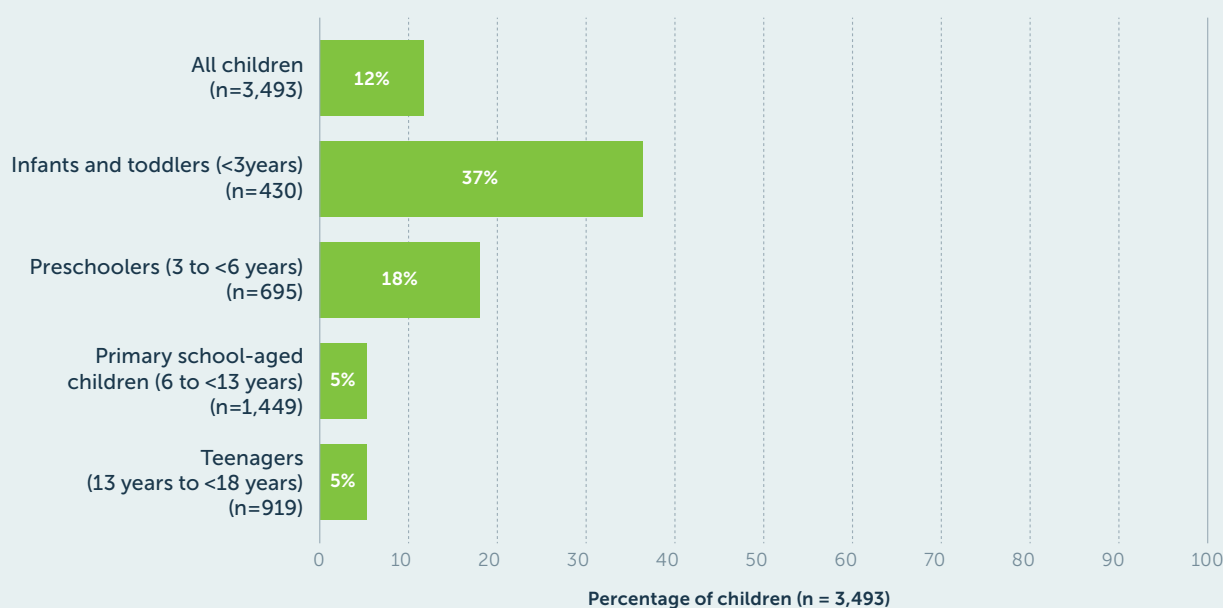


Figure 2.

Parent report of vegetable intake was notably inadequate across all age groups and genders, with only 12% of all children eating the recommended daily number of serves. Similar to fruit intake, the proportion of children reported to have consumed the recommended amount decreased steadily with age, with 37% of children aged one to three years meeting the recommendation, 18% of preschoolers, and just 5% of primary school-aged and teenage children (see figure 2).

The leading reasons given by parents for why it is difficult to get their child to eat fruit and vegetables relate to child preference, with 30% saying their child refuses to eat fruit and vegetables and 27% saying their child prefers to have other food instead. Other barriers related to preparation and cost, with 11% saying they perish too quickly, 7% reporting vegetables and fruit take too long to prepare and 7% saying they are too expensive to buy.

Parents were asked about their knowledge of the Australian dietary guidelines for fruit and vegetable intake for children. The majority of parents (86%) were correct in their knowledge regarding the recommended daily fruit intake for children, as compared with only 25% of parents knowing the correct number of recommended daily serves of vegetables for children. Levels of knowledge of the guidelines for vegetable intake were highest among parents of infants and toddlers, decreasing with increasing age of child. Only 12% of parents of teenagers were knowledgeable of recommended daily vegetable intake, as compared with 20% of parents of primary school-aged children and 41% of parents of toddlers and preschoolers.

## Treat foods and sugar-sweetened drinks

Foods and drinks containing saturated fat, added salt and added sugars have been linked to health problems in children, such as obesity and tooth decay. These foods are also known as discretionary foods or 'treats', and examples include many biscuits, cakes, pastries, pies, processed meats, fried foods, potato chips, lollies, soft drinks, cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, energy and sports drinks. Current recommendations are that intake of treat foods should be limited to only sometimes and in small amounts ([www.eatforhealth.gov.au](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au)). This poll found that almost half (41%) of preschoolers are having treat foods most days of the week (four or more days per week) with the leading reasons for parents giving their children treat foods being 'my child requests these food products' (33%) and 'to control or reward my child's behaviour' (24%). Interestingly, more than half of parents (54%) also incorrectly believe that there is no problem with children having regular treat foods every day, so long as they are balanced by consuming healthy food as well.

Over a third (35%) of children regularly (at least two to three days per week) consume sugar-sweetened drinks (including soft drinks, sports drinks, energy and electrolyte drinks, artificial fruit drinks and cordial), with 16% of preschoolers and 21% of teenagers having sugar-sweetened drinks almost every day. Parents identified home (66%) as the most common place for children to consume sugar-sweetened drinks, followed

## Places where children typically drink soft drinks and other sugar-sweetened drinks

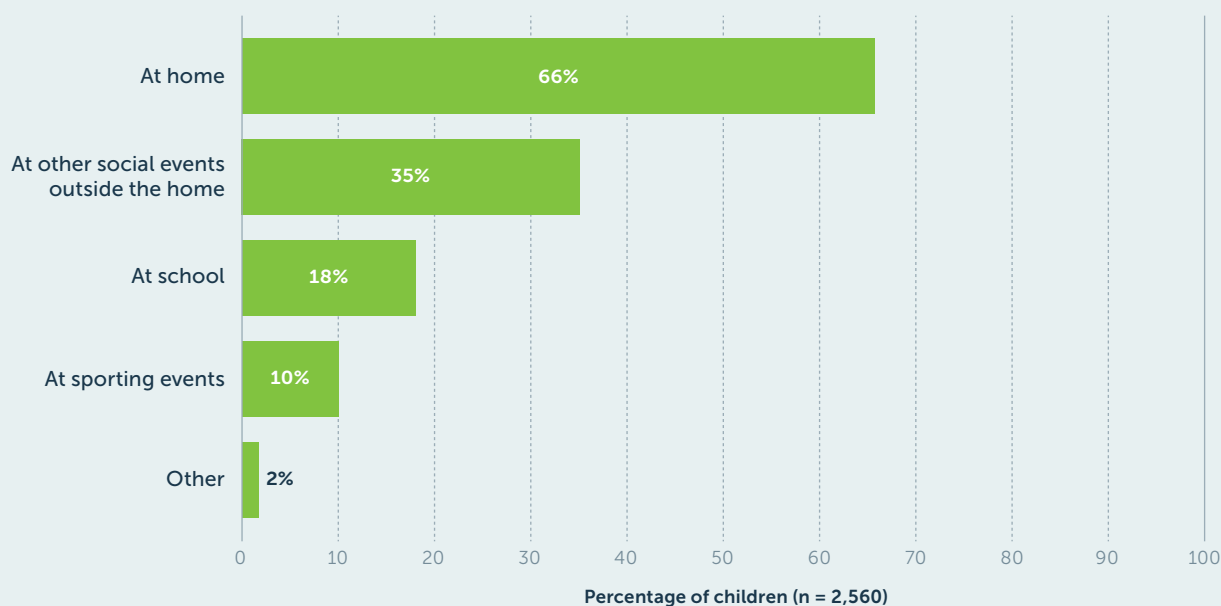


Figure 3.

by at social events (35%), at school (18%) and at sporting events (10%) (see figure 3). Fifteen per cent of parents incorrectly believe a fruit juice product is a healthier option than water for their child, and a further 11% were unsure which was the healthier choice. Almost a third (29%) of parents incorrectly believe children may need sports drinks to recover from regular physical activity.

### Cooking and eating habits at home

As part of modern lifestyles, many families have different habits when it comes to cooking and eating food. Home cooked meals are generally considered to be a healthier option than takeaway or pre-processed food for families. Involving children in cooking and food preparation can help them to learn about food and eat well. Eating together as a family has also been shown to have a positive impact on family functioning and the well-being of children and teenagers.

In this poll, we found that most families (94%) eat dinner that has been cooked by a family member at home most (four or more) nights of the week and the majority (84%) eat dinner together as a family most nights. Three-quarters of families (76%) have takeaway or fast food for dinner once a week or less. Many parents (70%) do find it difficult to cook dinner at home, with 38% saying they are too tired at the end of the day, 36%

saying they lack the time and 13% reporting that it is hard to be organised enough to have the ingredients needed on hand.

Around a third (34%) of school-aged children help to make dinner on a regular basis, but almost half (44%) of teenagers rarely or never help to cook dinner. Almost half (44%) of primary school-aged kids and one in five (19%) teenagers have never been taught how to cook or prepare food at home. Parents provided a number of reasons for why their child hadn't been taught to cook at home, including that their child is too young (38%), their child is not interested (32%), it involves too much mess to clean up (19%) and lack of time (11%).

### Understanding food, nutrition and weight

The type of food and drink children and teenagers consume can affect their health, growth and development. Unhealthy food and drink choices and unhealthy family habits can put children at a higher risk of becoming overweight and obese. Some children are also at greater risk of becoming overweight because of genetic factors that make their bodies gain weight more easily.

This poll found that some parents lack an understanding about food, nutrition and weight in children. One in four Australian children are overweight or obese Australian

Institute of Health and Welfare, A picture of overweight and obesity in Australia, 24 Nov 2017), yet only one in eight children in this poll were considered to be overweight or obese by their parents. For many reasons, parents may not recognise overweight and obesity in their own children, making it difficult for them to acknowledge and tackle the problem. One in five parents (21%) incorrectly believe that a child's weight is mostly due to genetics and cannot be changed by diet or activity, and a further quarter (22%) of parents are unsure about whether weight could be changed by diet or activity. Sixteen per cent of parents think overweight children will naturally lose their excess weight as they get older. Almost one in five parents (17%) don't recognise that eating patterns established in childhood continue into adulthood.

Healthy food choices are important, not only to help children maintain a healthy weight, but also to ensure that they get adequate nutrition. Good nutrition means getting the right amount of nutrients from healthy foods in the right combinations to maintain good physical and mental health. The majority of parents surveyed (91%) recognise that a healthy diet helps to support a child's mental health. Many (84%) also recognise that some fats and oils are healthy and should be included regularly in the diet. Even if children are not underweight, they may still be lacking in essential nutrients, such as certain vitamins and minerals. Some parents (15%) incorrectly believe that only children who are underweight can be malnourished and a further 19% were unsure about the relationship between nutrition and weight.

## Implications

A healthy diet is very important for children's physical and mental well-being. Excessive weight gain in childhood has immediate and long term health consequences. With one in four Australian children being overweight or obese, it is vital that parents and families are well informed and adequately supported to make healthy food choices for their children. This poll found that many parents find it difficult to know which foods are healthy for their children, particularly when it comes to added sugar. These findings suggest that education and clearer food labelling is one way that parents could be assisted in making healthy food choices for their families.

The majority of Australian children are not eating enough vegetables for a healthy diet and many parents did not know that around five serves of vegetables per day is recommended for children. Improved education of families about recommended dietary intake may be helpful to tackle this issue. Other barriers to children's vegetable intake cited by parents were preparation time

and cost. Parents could benefit from further resources to support them in making cost effective, simple and healthy meals for their families. A minority of children and teenagers are being taught how to cook or prepare food. Involvement in food purchasing and preparation has been shown to improve children's nutritional literacy. Parents may benefit from education and encouragement around the value of teaching kids to cook, and other community agencies such as schools and preschools can also play a role in building children's practical skills and knowledge about food.

Sugar-sweetened drinks have been linked to health problems in children, including obesity and tooth decay and yet this poll found that a concerning number of children, including very young children, regularly consume these beverages. The most frequent place for these drinks to be consumed was at home, followed by social events, school and sports events. Further consideration at a community and policy level is urgently required to tackle sugar-sweetened drink consumption in children if we are to reduce the increasing incidence of negative health effects of these drinks.

## Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from October 11 to October 23, 2017, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1,980). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged less than 18 years. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 75%.

Email: [child.healthpoll@rch.org.au](mailto:child.healthpoll@rch.org.au)