

Children's Food: Market Forces and Industry Responses

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Food for children is a complex market. There are two principal customers when it comes to choosing food for children: the child and the person buying the food, usually the child's parents. Both these groups need to be satisfied with the purchase that has been made. Thus, to understand the forces currently driving the children's food and grocery market it is necessary to take a step back and look at children in the context of their family and society as a whole.

Many social trends in the UK impact upon children and their family, and particularly how children learn about and choose food. For example:

- The 'nuclear family' no longer holds true for many households. Divorce and remarriage mean many children are growing up with the influence of two families on the food they eat, opinions they form and the lives they lead.
- More women are taking less time, if any at all, away from work after childbirth. Childcare from an early age may mean children are learning about life, including food tastes and eating skills from a broader range of people and at a younger age.
- Inward migration and faster more efficient travel mean children's awareness and exposure to new foods is far wider than previous generations.
- Family meals are reported to be declining in importance. Changing working patterns and more leisure activities can make it difficult for the whole family to eat at the same time.

Adding to the complexity of these social changes is the increasing focus on the children's food market from

a variety of sources and with particular emphasis on the issues driving healthy eating, promotions, children's lifestyles and their apparent lack of cooking skills.

Industry Responses

The UK food and grocery industry is actively responding to these changes. New product developments meet the needs of children and their parents, through innovative packaging formats, by offering a source of entertainment or facilitating food preparation by the child. Brand extensions have meant that industry is stretching the bounds of the traditional children's food market to include nonfood items such as children's toiletries and web-based services that offer education, entertainment and that crucial opportunity to bring the brand alive.

A number of initiatives are operated throughout the food supply chain that aim to support children when learning about food. Such programmes recognise that children are the food shopper of the future and as such aim to build children's knowledge and interest in food and give them the tools to become discerning consumers in the future.

New Consumer Research

In the light of the rapidly evolving social environment in the UK and a continually expanding food and grocery offer IGD, set out to uncover what children think about food, cooking and meal times.

IGD in-house facilitators ran small discussion groups with children. These were conducted between December 2001 and January 2002. The discussions lasted between 30 and 45 min Each group involved 4–6 children, who were already friends and happy in each others company. The children were between 7 and 9 years old.

A web-based quantitative survey followed the qualitative groups. A representative sample of 400 children aged 7–9 years, conducted between the 10th and 14th

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*IGD is the leading research and education organisation for the food and grocery industry. The research included in this article is taken from IGD's latest report into the factors driving the children's food market: 'Children's Food: Market Forces and Industry Responses.' For more information visit www.igd.com or call 01923 857141.

January of 2002. This tested some of the themes emerging from the discussion groups with 400 children. The children participating came from around the UK, and were between 7 and 9 years old.

Favourite Foods

Children chose their favourite foods on the basis of taste and texture, for example many did not like wholemeal bread because it had got ‘bits in’. Most children enjoyed a broad range of foods and some of them believed they had relatively sophisticated tastes for their age and seemed very proud of themselves for this.

‘I like grown up food, like Chinese food, the sort of food kids don’t like.’

7–8 years old, Hertfordshire, January 2002

The children also liked foods that entertained and amused them, and offered something more than just functional attributes.

‘I like celery because you can peel it like cheese straws.’
7–8 years old, Hertfordshire, January 2002

Parents Top for Information

Contrary to popular belief, the children said that their parents hold the power when it came to learning about food. The most popular sources of information about healthy foods were:

Parents: nine in 10 children (89%) said that they would ask their mum or dad

Teachers: 37% would ask their teacher

TV: 31% thought TV programmes (excluding adverts) were a good way to learn about healthy foods.

New Foods

When it came to trying a new healthy food (Fig. 1), 65% of children said that including a free toy or game would have the most effect, with boys more likely than girls to respond to this. This could be something as simple as including free stickers for children in packs of fresh

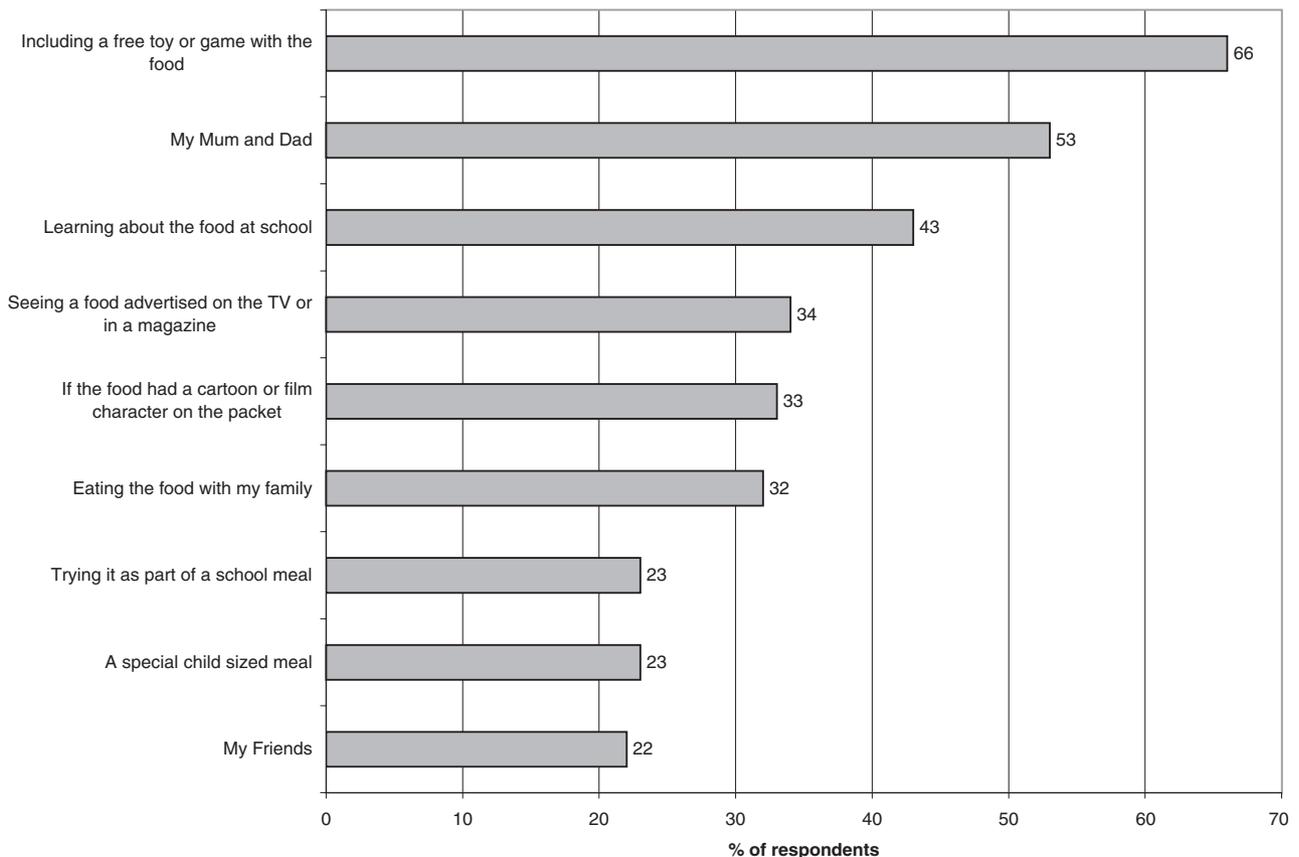


Figure 1 What Encourages Children to Try New Healthy Foods?
Source: Children’s Food: Market Forces and Industry Responses, IGD 2002.

fruit. While parents were the top source for information, their influence waned when it came to encouraging children to *eat* a healthy, new food. The findings suggest that if the incentives offered with a product have the support of the parent then this could be a powerful influence in encouraging a child to eat a healthy food.

Understanding of Healthy

All the children had a general sense of what *healthy* meant, what *healthy foods* were and that *healthy* related to more than a person's weight. They generally felt that a balanced diet was very important and that a food only became bad for a person if they ate too much of it. Whilst most seemed to eat at least one portion of fruit and vegetables a day, they seemed unsure of how much they should eat. Like many adults, they tended to view eating fruit and vegetables as a trade-off for foods they did not perceive to be healthy.

Family Meals

Most children frequently ate a family meal (Fig. 2):

74% of children said their family mostly or always ate at the *same time*, and

71% of children said their family mostly or always ate the *same food*.

These findings suggest that in the child's eyes at least, family meals have a major role in family life. The majority of the young children participating said their family regularly had meals together, and indicated that that this was particularly important at weekends when the whole family made a special effort to eat together. If the same questions had been asked of older children different results may have been obtained.

The importance of family meals varied throughout the UK. More families ate together in the North (including the North-west and North-east of England,

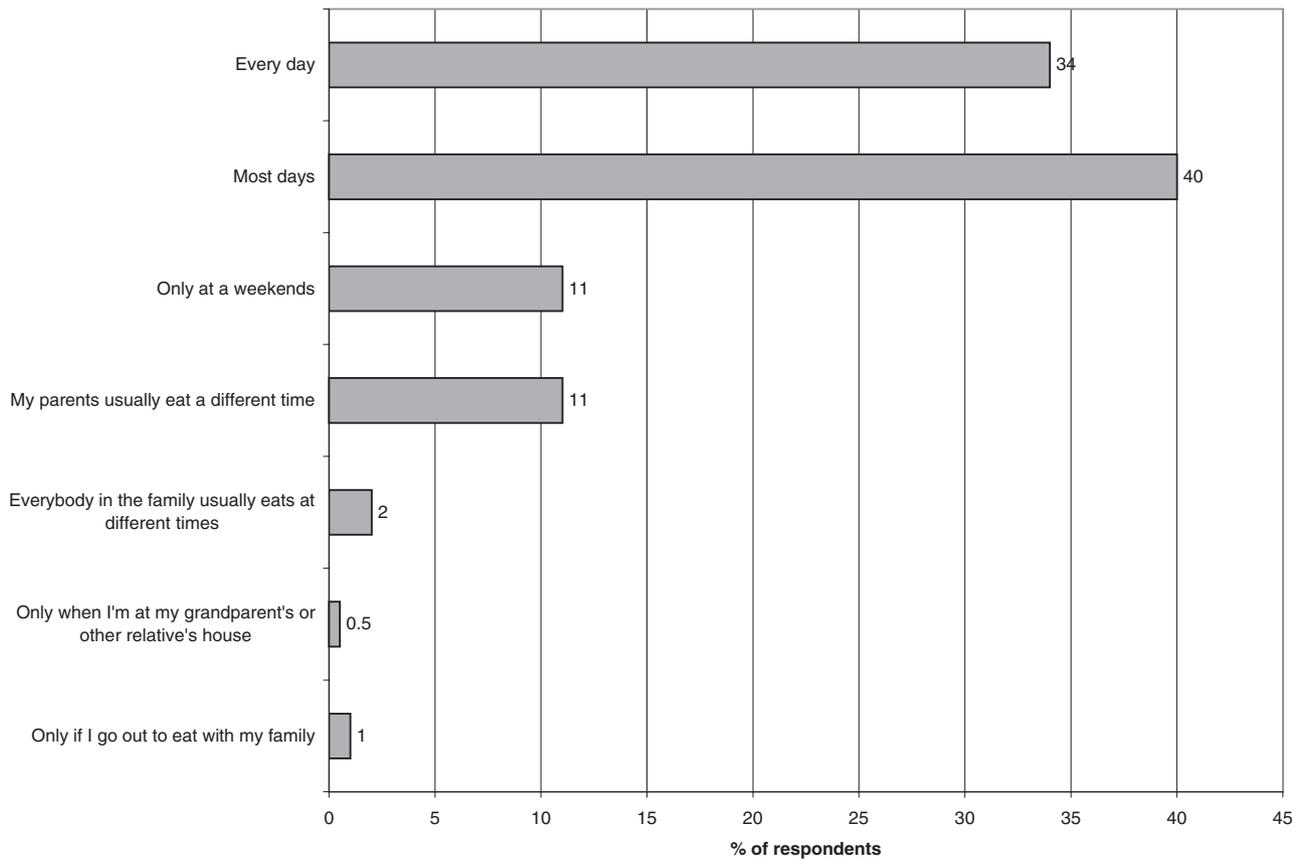


Figure 2 Frequency of Family Meals.

Source: Children's Food: Market Forces and Industry Responses, IGD 2002.

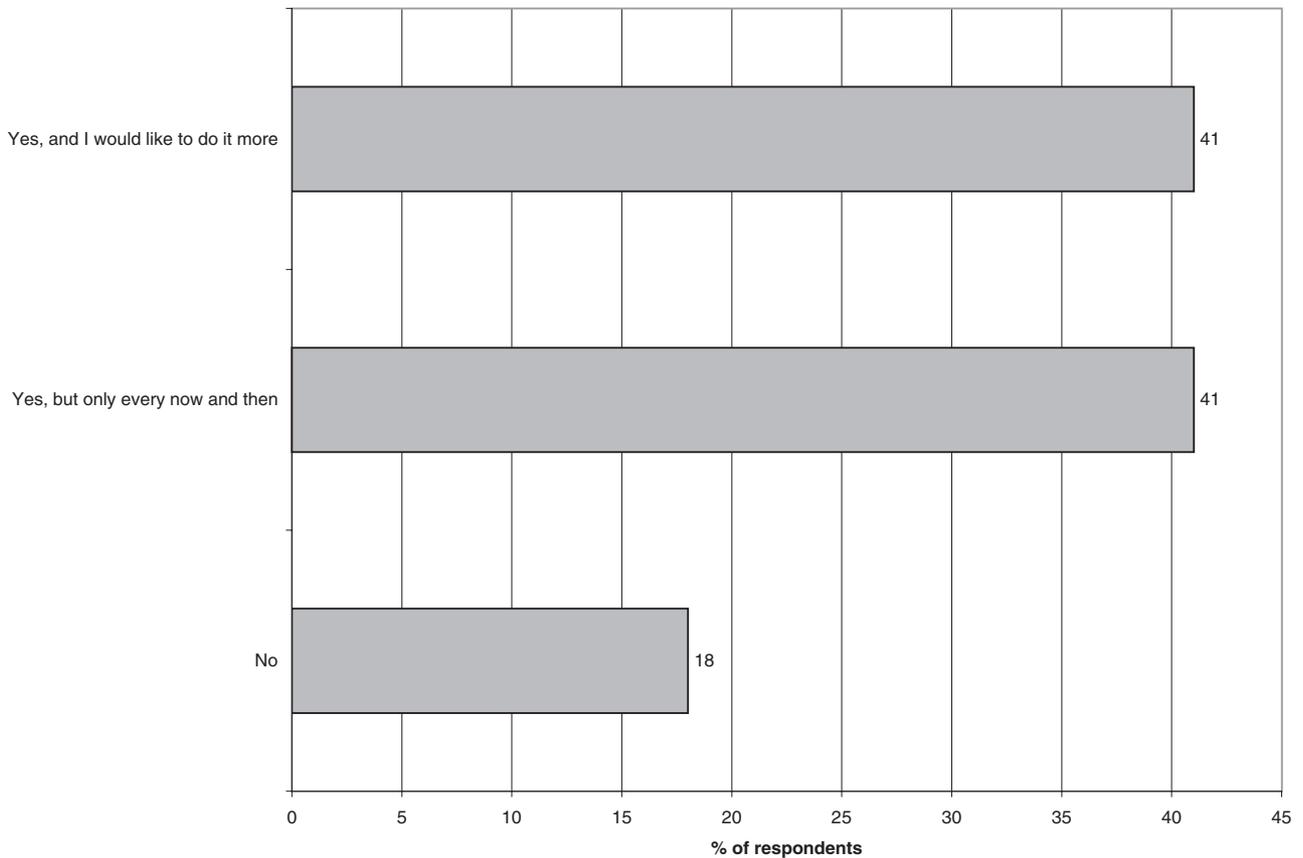


Figure 3 Children's Interest in Cooking at Home.
 Source: Children's Food: Market Forces and Industry Responses, IGD, 2002.

Yorkshire and Scotland) than in the South (East Anglia to the South-west).

82% of families in the North frequently ate together
 74% of families in the Midlands ate together most or everyday
 65% of children in the South said their family ate together most or every day.

Novelty Cooking

The majority of children (82%) enjoyed cooking at home, 41% said that they would like to cook more while 18% were not interested (Fig. 3).

Children particularly liked helping to cook when it was a food that was unusual or a novelty, such as cooking a curry with dad, suggesting that it is important to stimulate their curiosity. They wanted cooking

to be exciting and enjoyable rather than the everyday task of preparing food for a family.

Future Inspiration

IGD's findings suggest that stimulating initial interest and curiosity about food is imperative in creating and sustaining a child's interest in cooking and healthy eating. This could be done through the ingredients used, or in how the final meal turns out. The current trend amongst adults of distinguishing between cooking as an everyday chore and for weekend entertainment seems set to continue as these children grow up. Today's kids may not want to know how to boil an egg but they love cooking a curry with dad. There is a huge opportunity for industry to help parents by creating 'cookery kits' for children, just as they have for adults with meal solutions.