
Parent voice: School meals and packed lunches

Key Findings

Parents opt for school meals because they want their child to have a hot meal at lunchtime, to be able to sit with their friends, and because they know the child likes and will eat the food on offer. Parents provide packed lunches because they know their child will eat what is provided, but also because packed lunches are seen to be cheaper and school meals too expensive. What parents say they provide in packed lunches is less healthy than what is typically on offer in school lunches.

- A nationally representative sample of 1000 parents of school children in England answered questions about why they preferred school lunches or packed lunches for their children, and what they typically provide in a packed lunch.
 - The main reasons that parents opt for school meals is because they want their child to have a hot meal at lunchtime, they want their child to be able to sit with their friends, and because they know the child likes and will eat the food on offer. Parents provide packed lunches because they are confident that their child will eat what is provided, and also because packed lunches are seen to be cheaper and school meals too expensive.
 - Parents described what they put into their children's packed lunches. Even taking into account the likely biases in their responses in favour of foods perceived as "healthier", the packed lunches described were less healthy than food typically provided in a school lunch in England.
 - Amongst the parents who thought that school lunches were not good value for money, more were willing to pay £2.00 for a sandwich in the high street than were willing to pay £2.00 for a school lunch.
 - Almost half of parents thought that school meals should be free for all children.
 - 58% of parents providing packed lunches said would be willing for their child to try school meals if they were offered on trial at a reduced price.
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Background and aims

The School Food Trust was keen to understand more fully why parents choose school lunches or packed lunches for their children. In June 2011, NFER conducted a survey of a nationally representative cross-section of 1000 parents of school age children in England. The survey was based on mainly closed questions, with options determined in part by previous work carried out by the Trust in relation to parents' choices and wishes. The aim was to elucidate current reasons given by parents for choosing packed lunches over school lunches, to profile the food and drink provided in packed lunches, and to explore issues around pricing that might help to address some of the barriers that prevent parents from encouraging their children to try school lunches.

Sample and parent profile

The profile of the 1000 respondents matched closely the distribution of EducationAcorn groups nationally. Just over half of respondents were women (57%), and 70% were aged between 30 and 49. Parents had an average of 1.6 children aged 4-18 years at school: Infant (43%), Junior (43%) or secondary schools (52%); a further 18% with children in sixth form were not included in the present analysis. Parents were asked to nominate one child in their family (the choice was up to the parent) and to answer questions in relation to that child. The analyses below relate to children in either primary or secondary schools (n=938). The sample was roughly half boys and half girls.

About 40% of parents said that their child had a school lunch (values were similar in both the primary and secondary sectors). Given the self selection of the child in the family by the parents, these values are of the same order of magnitude as the annual survey of school lunch take up (44.1% and 37.6% in primary and secondary, respectively).¹ Around 56% of primary and 49% of secondary pupils took a packed lunch, and 4% of primary and 10% of secondary pupils obtained lunch away from school premises.

Results

Reasons for taking or not taking school lunch

Figure 1 shows the reasons why parents opted for their child to have a school lunch, by sector. An '**' shown after the reason indicates that the result was statistically significantly different for primary and secondary. Over half of parents with a child in primary school said they opted for a school lunch for their child because they wanted them to have a hot meal at lunchtime. This was still an important factor for secondary parents, but less often (just over 40%). For secondary pupils, 45% of parents said the most important reason was so that their child could eat with their friends who have school meals. About 20% of parents said their child received a free school meal, and around 16% thought school meals were better value for money than packed lunches. 14% of parents of primary pupils and 8% of secondary pupils thought packed lunches took too much time to prepare.

Figure 2 shows the reasons why parents opted for their child to have a packed lunch, by sector. Almost half of parents with a child in primary school said they opted for a packed lunch because they knew that their child would eat the food. Just over 40% said it was because a packed lunch was cheaper, and a further third to 40% said it was because their child did not like what was on the school menu. About one third thought school meals were too expensive. (Indeed, of the parents who thought that school meals were too expensive, only 16% were willing to pay £2.00 or more for a school lunch, and a third were not willing to pay even £1.50. This compared with 44% willing to pay £2.00 or more who did not give this as a reason.) Especially important amongst parents of secondary pupils was their child's desire to eat with their friends having packed lunches. Just under one-third of parents believed that they could provide healthier food in a packed lunch than was provided by the school. Less than one-fifth gave as reasons that school meals were not good value for money, or that packed lunches offered more variety.

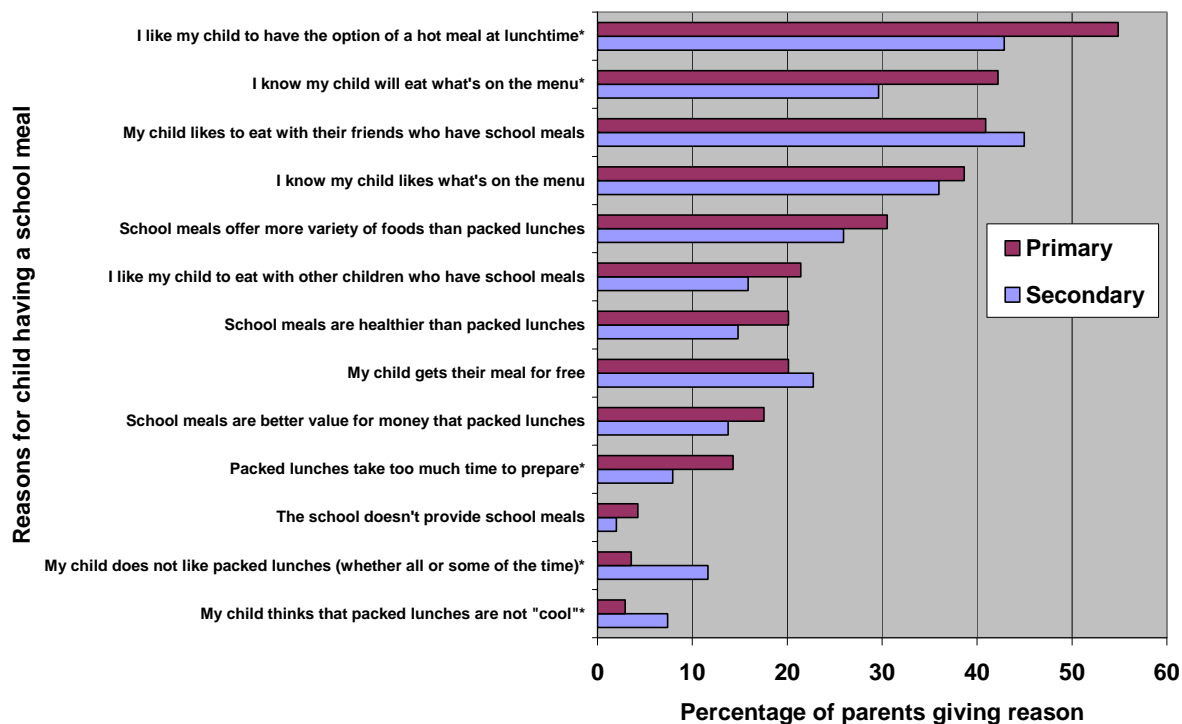


Figure 1. Reasons given by parents for their child having a school lunch, by education sector (primary/secondary).

* An asterisk appearing after the reason indicates statistically significantly differences between responses from parents of primary and secondary school pupils

Base: 499 parents

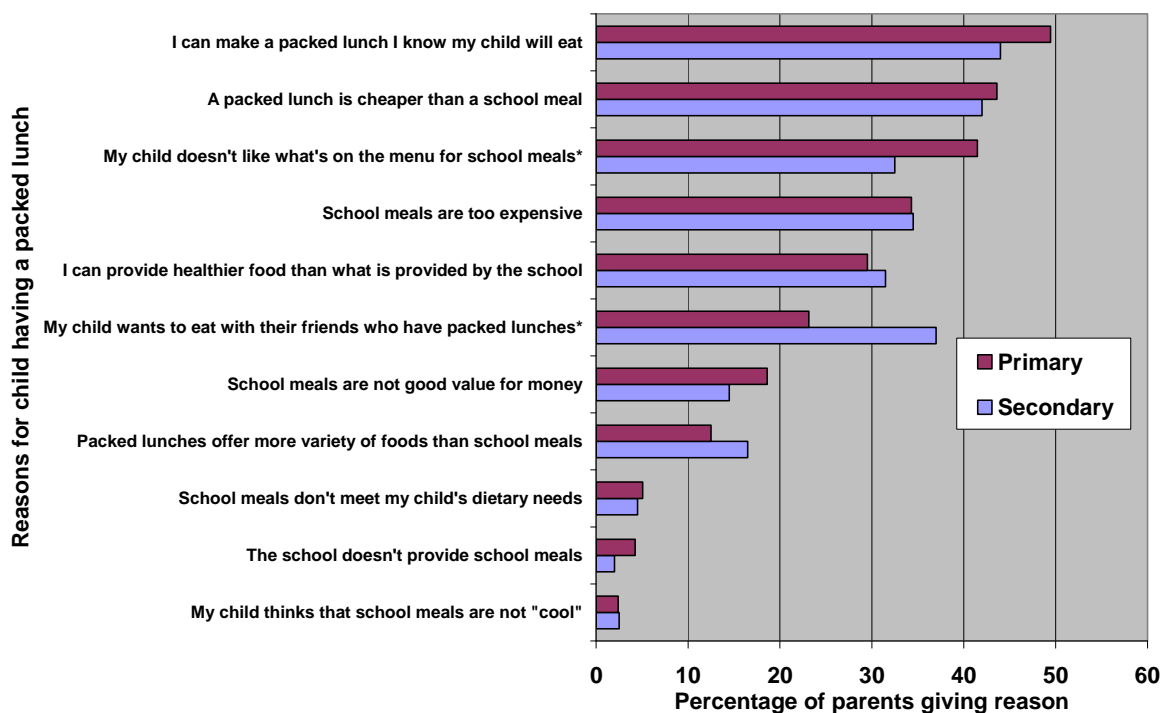


Figure 2. Reasons given by parents for their child having a packed lunch, by education sector (primary/secondary).

* An asterisk appearing after the reason indicates statistically significantly differences between responses from parents of primary and secondary school pupils

Base: 578 parents

Packed lunch provision reported by parents

Parents were asked about the types of food that they provided in their child's packed lunches on at least two days per week. They could tick as many boxes as they liked, and because the question specified "at least two days per week", there is likely to be considerable overlap in terms of the types of food provided and the total number of items being included across a week. Also, children sometimes had a packed lunch and sometimes a school lunch, so the number of days on which a food might have been provided was likely to vary from child to child. Nevertheless, the results give an indication of the types of foods parents provided much of the time.

Over 80% reported that they provided sandwiches (or wraps or panini) with no vegetable filling on at least two days a week, and only one-quarter (one-fifth in secondary) that they provided vegetables or salad (Table 1). Just under one-third said that they provided sandwiches with vegetables. When added together, this suggests that about 44% of parents said they were providing vegetables (either in sandwiches or on their own) at least two days a week.

Over three-quarters of parents said they provided fruit on at least two days a week (more in primary than in secondary); about three-fifths said they provided water or a fruit-based drink; and three-quarters of primary and one-half of secondary provided dairy foods or drinks. On balance, this suggests that at best parents are providing just over one portion of fruit and vegetables in a lunch box. This contrasts with over two portions being provided on average in school lunches.²

About three-quarters said that they included biscuits, cakes, sweets, confectionery, crisps, and other items now restricted or excluded from school lunches. One-third said that they included squash or soft drinks.

Table 1. Percentage of parents saying they provide the following foods at least two days per week

Food group	Primary	Secondary	Total
Sandwich, etc. with no vegetables, pizza, rice, pasta salad, or meat products	83.8	79.4	82.2
Sandwich, etc. with veg	27.5	36.1	30.5
Fresh vegetables and-or salad	28.0	20.6	25.4
Veg or salad from any source	44.3	43.8	44.1
Fruit	80.7	72.2	77.7
Water or juice-based drink	61.9	57.7	60.4
Dairy foods or drinks	76.5	52.6	68.1
Biscuits, cakes, sweets, chocolate, crisps, etc.	68.9	78.9	72.4
Squash or soft drink	35.3	34.5	35.0
<i>Base: All parents providing packed lunches</i>	<i>357</i>	<i>194</i>	<i>551</i>

The 30% of parents who said that they provided a packed lunch because it was healthier than a school lunch did, on average, report providing sandwiches with vegetables, vegetables or salad, fruit, dairy foods or drinks, and water or juice-based drinks more often than those who did not give this as a reason, but they were equally likely to say that they provided biscuits, confectionery or savoury snacks and squash. A similar profile of food and drink provision was reported by parents who said that they preferred a packed lunch because it offered more variety.

In contrast, parents who said that they could provide food that they knew their child would eat were more likely to provide sandwiches without vegetables, fruit, vegetables or salad (although overall no more likely to provide vegetables or salad from any source), dairy foods or drinks, and squash or soft drinks than those who did not give this as a reason for providing a packed lunch, and equally likely to provide biscuits confectionery or savoury snacks.

Parents who said that they provided a packed lunch because their child did not like what was on the school menu were more likely to provide sandwiches without vegetables and biscuits confectionery or savoury snacks, and less likely to provide sandwiches with vegetables. Parents who said that they provided a packed lunch because it was cheaper were more likely to provide sandwiches without vegetables, fruit, and dairy foods or drinks.

Reported versus measured packed lunch provision in primary school

What parents said they provided in packed lunches in the NFER survey was markedly different from the objective measures of lunchtime consumption reported in the primary school food survey.³ Both surveys were based on nationally representative samples. The differences are explained in part by the somewhat rosy view by parents of what they actually provide,^a and in part by what children choose to consume from their lunch boxes.

Figure 3 shows results from the primary school food survey relating to school lunches and packed lunches.³ It shows the percentage of children that actually ate foods from each of ten food and drink categories in the primary school food survey (based on 3422 packed lunches and 6580 school lunches). Whereas 44% of parents in the NFER survey reported providing a source of vegetables or salad (including in sandwiches), the primary school food survey showed that fewer than 10% of pupils were observed to be eating them. Four-fifths of parents claimed to be providing fruit in their child's packed lunch on at least two days per week, but only just over 40% of pupils were observed eating fruit or fruit-based desserts.^b Around one-third of parents reported providing squash or soft drinks, but over half of children were observed to be drinking them. The only area of agreement was in relation to biscuits confectionery or savoury snacks: just over half of parents reported providing them, and a similar proportion of children were seen to be eating them.

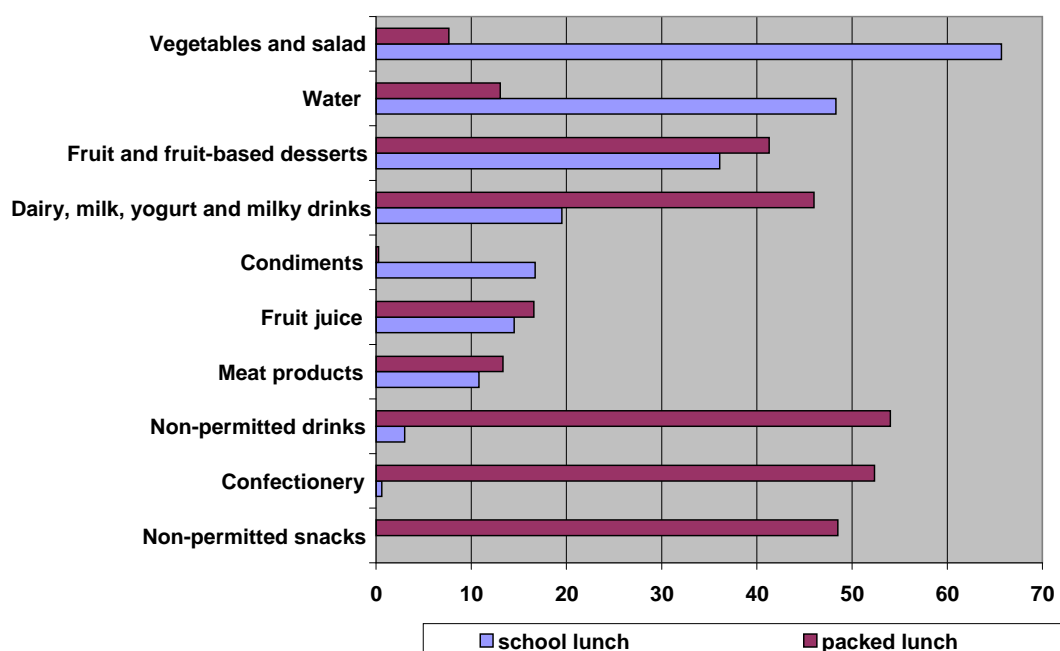


Figure 3. Percentage of pupils that ate a food from each food group, by type of lunch*

*All differences were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

Base: 3422 pupils bringing a packed lunch; 6580 pupils taking a school lunch.

Source: Pearce et al 2011³

^a Results from surveys of this kind are often biased toward what people would ideally like to do, rather than what they actually do.

^b Fruit-based desserts are at least 40% fruit by weight. They are served regularly in schools, but only occasionally in packed lunches.

The cost of meals and willingness to pay

Parents were asked how much a school lunch cost in their child's school, how much they were willing to pay, and how much they would be willing to pay for a sandwich, wrap or panini in the high street.

Around *one-third* of parents who provided their child with a packed lunch because they felt school meals were too expensive or not good value for money were unwilling to pay more than £1.50 for a school meal, and fewer than *one-fifth* were willing to pay over £2.00. In contrast, of the parents who did not give these reasons, only *one-sixth* were unwilling to pay more than £1.50, and between 37% and 44% were willing to pay £2.00 or more. Curiously, more parents who thought that school meals were not good value for money were willing to pay £2.00 or more for a sandwich, wrap or panini in the high street than were willing to pay £2.00 or more for a school lunch (29% versus 19%); whereas parents who did not mention value for money were more willing to pay £2.00 or more for a school lunch than for a sandwich, wrap or panini in the high street (37% versus 27%).

Not surprisingly, the more expensive a school meal was reported to be, the more willing the parent was to spend £2.00 on a school meal or for a sandwich, wrap or panini in the high street.

Around 14% of parents said that their child was entitled to a free school meal (FSM), but a further 6% said they were entitled but gave their child a packed lunch anyway, and another 3% said they were entitled but paid for a school lunch. The survey did not explore the reasons why parents chose not to take up their entitlement.

Just under half of parents (47%) felt that school meals should be free for all children. This was higher (61%) amongst parents already entitled to a free school meal and taking up their entitlement than among those not entitled (43%). It was also higher amongst those unwilling to pay more than £1.50 for a school lunch (60%) compared with those willing to pay £2.00 or more (38%); those who thought school meals were too expensive (or not) (54% versus 42%, respectively); but no differences according to whether or not school meals were regarded as good value for money.

Finally, 58% of parents said they would be willing to sign up to try school meals in September 2011 if meals were offered at a reduced price.^c This was independent of the cost of a school meal in their child's school, or the maximum they said they were willing to pay.

Conclusion

Parents were more likely to have their child opt for a school lunch if they wanted them to have the option of a hot meal at lunchtime, if they knew the child liked and would eat what was on the menu, and if they could eat with their friends. They opted for a packed lunch for not dissimilar reasons: they would be confident the child would eat the food (and their child did not like what was on offer on the school menu); they believed they could provide a packed lunch healthier than what was on offer at school; their child could eat with their friends; and school lunches were seen as more expensive or not good value for money, and packed lunches were seen to be the cheaper option.

In spite of these views on packed lunches, the balance of what parents said they would provide was less healthy than what recent research suggests is likely to be on offer at school.² In consequence, their perception of value for money was not founded on a good understanding of what was healthy, or the contrast between what was being provided at school and what they themselves were providing in packed lunches. Packed lunches were likely to be more repetitive and less varied than school lunches; they were dominated by

^c The survey did not address issues about how the costs of provided reduced-price meals could be met by school caterers. This is an important issue, and would need to be addressed before such reductions were introduced.

sandwiches, wraps or panini lacking in vegetables; over half included sweets, confectionery and savoury snacks; and they contained on average only half the fruit and vegetables being provided by schools. Evidence from the primary school food survey strongly suggests that the fruit and vegetables that parents claim to provide are not being eaten.

Almost half of parents were in favour of free school meals for all children, even those not themselves in receipt of FSM. Curiously, a substantial number of parents entitled to FSM for their child opted to provide a packed lunch or indeed pay for a school lunch, and it is important to understand their motivations.

Finally, almost three-fifths of parents said they would be willing for their child to try school meals if they were offered at reduced prices. While this could be a route to encouraging those children who were reluctant to try school meals to overcome some of their prejudices, it will require some of the preconceptions about school meals on the part of parents to be addressed at the same time.

Acknowledgments

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References

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www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/documents/annualsurvey6

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³ Pearce J, Harper C, Haroun D, Wood L, Nelson M (2011) Key differences between school lunches and packed lunches in primary schools in England in 2009. Submitted, *Public Health Nutrition*.

^d NFER provided basic frequencies for all questions and cross-tabulations by key demographics. All further analysis of the raw data described in this report was undertaken by the School Food Trust.