



# Eating practices in New Zealand families and whānau

The family environment is an important influence on a wide range of social and health outcomes, including children's nutrition. This Research Bite presents findings on family and whānau eating practices from two major research projects undertaken by the Health Sponsorship Council (HSC) – an in-depth, qualitative study that explores how health issues are viewed and dealt with in the family setting (the *Social Marketing Audience Research* project) and a nationwide survey that benchmarks knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours relating to healthy eating in the family/whānau environment (the *New Zealand Children's Food and Drinks Survey*).

Issues covered include:

1. Responsibilities and decision-making around what families and whānau eat.
2. Rules around what, and how, families and whānau eat.
3. Involvement of children in food preparation.
4. Communication about healthy eating.

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## Research Method

*Social Marketing Audience Research* project – this qualitative study was carried out by TNS New Zealand in 2007 and included 12 focus groups, 18 family and whānau groups, 48 in-depth interviews with parents and caregivers, and 10 children’s interviews.

*New Zealand Children’s Food and Drinks Survey* – this nationwide, in-home survey was carried out by NRB in 2007 and included 1,133 interviews with parents and caregivers of five to 16-year-olds and 547 interviews with five to 16-year-olds.

Samples for both studies comprised a mix of Māori, New Zealand European, Pacific and Asian participants, with a sample bias in favour of Māori and Pacific peoples.

View the full research methodologies at:  
[www.feedingourfutures.org.nz/research](http://www.feedingourfutures.org.nz/research)

## Responsibilities and decision-making

The qualitative study revealed that decisions about what families and whānau eat take place at two key points – when the grocery shopping is done and when a meal is being prepared. A lack of time and energy often results in less healthy meals, as parents and caregivers opt for more convenient options.

“I’ve got to make sure I’ve got something planned and I remember to take something out of the freezer. It might end up being quarter past five and I think, ‘there’s no way I’ve got time to cook anything’.”

**New Zealand European Female – Gisborne**

### MOTHERS

In most households, mothers decide what the family/whānau eats. Even when mothers are in full-time employment they tend to take responsibility for grocery shopping and food preparation, often believing that they can ‘do better’ than their male partner. Consequently, mothers’ beliefs, practices and behaviours have a major influence over family/whānau eating behaviours and practices.

### CAREGIVERS

Adults who care for children during the day have a critical influence on what children eat, and caregivers who are not parents are sometimes charged with applying the parents’ rules around food. However non-parental caregivers may choose to follow their own preferences and feed children sweet foods or treats without the parents’ knowledge or against their wishes. This creates an awkward dilemma for parents, where the need to dictate or enforce household rules is clouded by gratitude towards the caregiver, as well as some parental guilt at their own absence.

### CHILDREN

Children frequently influence food purchasing decisions, with younger children asking for certain products, such as cereals and snack foods they see advertised or in other children’s lunchboxes. Older children tend to request convenience foods such as ‘heat and eat’ meals. Parents often take these requests into account when shopping, although decisions are ultimately influenced by price and perceived healthiness of the product.

“She knows what she needs or what she wants to have in her lunches – she’ll count how many [packs of] chippies are left. She likes to get snacky things for her lunchbox.”

**Māori Female – Gisborne**

“... they want those particular breakfast things like ‘Fruit Loop’ or whatever they are called. They want those and they’re all sugar-coated, and that’s what we’re fighting – the TV adverts.”

**Pacific Male – Wellington**

The *Children’s Food and Drinks Survey* found that most children are involved, to some extent, in meal planning and choosing what they eat:

- 57% of parents and caregivers said that their five to 16-year-old ‘sometimes’ helps plan meals, such as suggesting what to eat or how to prepare, cook or serve the meal.
- 41% of parents and caregivers said that their five to 16-year-old chooses the snacks he or she eats,



and 35% said that the parent/caregiver and child choose together.

- 19% of parents and caregivers reported that their five to 16-year-old chooses what kinds of food and drinks to take from home to school, 36% reported that the parent/caregiver and child choose together, and 41% said that they (the parent/caregiver) chooses.

Older children and children living in more deprived areas were more likely to make their own decisions about what they eat than younger children and children living in less deprived areas. Children in Māori whānau were more likely to make independent decisions about what they eat than children in Asian and New Zealand European families.

## Rules

The qualitative study found that most households have some eating rules but these are far from universal and are often inconsistently enforced. Mothers are the people most likely to take responsibility for enforcing eating-related rules.

Many families and whānau have rules that children must eat breakfast and that packaged snack foods may not be eaten for breakfast. However, breakfast is rushed in many families and older children's breakfasts are often not supervised.

Rules around snacking tend to relate to limiting snacking around meal times and limiting unhealthy snacks. Many parents and caregivers admit using snacks to 'buy peace.'

"I don't give them as much snacks as [my wife] does. Because [she] is there 24/7 and she needs a bit more of a break, so she's more tolerant to give snacks so they will go away and just be quiet and leave her alone."

**Pacific Male – Wellington**

Many families and whānau also have rules about lunch taken from home. These often revolve around waste, with children being asked to bring home any food they do not eat and told to eat their lunch box food at home before they are allowed an afternoon snack.

Rules about eating at school are hard for parents and caregivers to enforce. Many parents and caregivers



welcome and support school rules requiring children to take uneaten food home and discouraging unhealthy food and drinks from being taken to school.

Dinner-time rules tend to focus on eating certain foods, such as vegetables, finishing the meal, and trying new foods. These rules are more likely to be enforced than other rules as there is usually at least one parent or caregiver supervising the meal. For many families dinner is an important time for parents to talk about, and role-model, good eating practices. Equally, enforcing dinner-time rules can be complicated by the parents' own eating habits, especially when a parent is seen not eating foods that the children are supposed to eat.

## Involvement of children in food preparation

The *Children's Food and Drinks Survey* found that most children are infrequently involved in food preparation, with only 15% of parents and caregivers saying their five to 16-year-old helps prepare or cook food 'nearly every week'.

The qualitative study found that that children aged over five years are involved in baking, preparing simple, child-orientated foods and simple tasks such as peeling vegetables. However, while children in this age group may be keen to help, many parents limit their involvement because of safety concerns and because it is easier to do the work themselves.

[Mum] "We haven't got a very big kitchen ..."

[Dad] "... they'd drive you nuts ..."

[Mum] "And they get messy ... nanny lets [the four year old] bake ... she'll get out the flour and [there's] flour everywhere."

**New Zealand European Family – Gisborne**



From around the age of eight years, children help with other tasks, such as setting the table and washing dishes. The focus is on sharing routine household tasks and reducing the workload for parents. While parents may be keen to foster their children's interest in cooking, it can be hard to integrate into a busy week night routine.

"[The eight-year-old's] getting there slowly. But it depends – if I'm trying to cook a meal for the family, I really don't want any distractions and [to] try to teach her at that time of day isn't great. So sometimes, on the weekends, if it's good timing she can help make pancakes or will butter a sandwich ... she's starting to take more of an interest but it's pressure for time."

**New Zealand European Female – Gisborne**

By the teenage years, children are often involved in preparing simple meals and snacks for themselves and other family/whānau members.

"If the kids cook for themselves it's spaghetti and baked beans. Sometimes I leave them to sort themselves out if older ones [teenagers] are here."

**New Zealand European Male – Wairarapa**

## Communication about healthy eating

The qualitative study found that parents and caregivers routinely encourage children to eat certain foods, such as fruit and vegetables, by telling them that these foods are good for them. Children are also told that some foods and drinks are unhealthy because of their fat and sugar content.

Parents and caregivers also transmit non-verbal, and often mixed, messages about healthy eating through their own behaviour. Some parents, for example, emphasise the importance of eating vegetables while eating relatively few themselves. Many parents and caregivers downplay, or are unaware of, the impact their eating behaviour has on their children.

Findings from the *Children's Food and Drinks Survey* reveal that the majority of parents and caregivers monitor their children's eating and communicate both verbal and non-verbal messages that support healthy eating:

- 76% of parents and caregivers reported that they 'often' or 'sometimes' ask their children about what they eat and drink when away from home.
- 84% of parents and caregivers reported that they 'often' or 'sometimes' keep a check on what their children eat and drink between meals at home.
- 92% of parents and caregivers reported that they 'often' or 'sometimes' talk to their children about healthy and unhealthy foods.
- 91% of parents and caregivers reported that they try to set a good example at home by what they eat and drink 'fairly often' or 'all of the time'.

Māori parents and caregivers, parents and caregivers from more deprived areas, and parents and caregivers of older children were less likely than other parents and caregivers to report that they talked about, monitored, and sought to role-model healthy eating.

The research highlights the importance of parental involvement and influence on children's eating behaviour.

View the full report at:

[www.feedingourfutures.org.nz/research](http://www.feedingourfutures.org.nz/research)

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