

Our Children, Our Future

A parents' manifesto for healthy children's food



Foreword

Baroness Rosie Boycott

Patron of Sustain

I've been many things in my life, but primarily I'm a Mum. And when it comes to feeding children, there are no more important people than parents. Understanding the concerns of parents and the barriers to healthy eating for their children ought to be of primary importance to the government and to every policy maker. What is so clear from this extensive study of over 2000 parents is that they want to be able to give their children good food, but it's not always available or affordable enough. They want food labels to be trustworthy, but too often they are masking unhealthy, heavily processed products high in sugars and additives. They want their kids to learn about and experience healthy food at school, but it's not always on the menu for everyone who needs it.

There's been lots of debate about the nanny state. Personally, I like the idea of a parent state. A parent state is one that lovingly invests in children's health and development. A parent state is one that fights to the death to protect its children from anything that might harm them. A parent state is one that takes responsibility for the health and wellbeing of its children, instead of outsourcing that role to Big Food and all its advertising and marketing forces. This manifesto is clear on what parents and carers want government to do that will make it easier for them to ensure all our children eat more healthily, and I heartily welcome this report.

Jaynaide Powis

Parent Ambassador of Children's Food Campaign

As parents, we all do our best to ensure that the food our children eat is nourishing, healthy and enjoyable. Our children, our future, have a right to food that sustains them so that they can live, play and learn to the best of their abilities. Yet, our abilities and intentions as parents are too often restricted by means beyond our control. Providing healthy food must always be the affordable, accessible, and easy decision. For this we need support in place for the most vulnerable among us and the support must be sufficient given the ever-increasing food prices. We cannot afford, morally or financially, to leave any children behind. We also need to be able to trust that the food we buy is healthy. This way, as parents we can feed our children knowing that their health and wellbeing is a priority, and we can ensure that nutritious food is always the default.

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Background

The children of today shape tomorrow's world. With the right support, we can ensure that every child is able to access healthy and nutritious food, fostering their growth and development. As champions of children's health, parents' voices are crucial in helping us to shape a healthier future. By integrating parental insights and opinions into policy formulation, we can establish an environment where children and their families are empowered to reach their fullest potential.

However, parents are reporting growing challenges in ensuring that their children are eating healthily. Children are growing up in a landscape awash with highly processed foods containing excessive amounts of salt, sugar and fat, from our high streets and supermarket shelves to our school canteens. To make matters worse, parents and children are bombarded with unhealthy food advertisements wherever they turn, whether on their phones, on TV or on the streets. While school food has improved dramatically in some places, it's not universal. Parents overwhelmingly want children to be able to experience the joys of learning about and eating tasty, nutritious school meals, fuelling their learning success.

The current cost of living crisis is exacerbating the extent of food insecurity in the UK. As food prices have skyrocketed, millions of parents and their children are struggling to access healthy and nutritious food, while big multinational food businesses continue to reap enormous profits. To meet government recommendations for a healthy diet (as outlined in the Eatwell Plate) the lowest income families need to spend nearly half of their disposable income on food¹. For children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, the risks of future food-related ill health are twice as great.

It is no wonder that so many parents want to see change.

Parents from across the UK want our government to act now and prioritise healthy food for all children. Working together with 13 children's food parent ambassadors and drawing on the views of over 2000 UK parents, this manifesto outlines five key areas for government action that parents believe will make a real difference in children's health. After all, Our Children are Our Future.

Methods

This parents' manifesto was developed by the Children's Food Campaign by incorporating the views and perspectives of parents through two different approaches.

1. A nationwide poll of parents
2. Children's Food Ambassador workshops

Nationwide poll of parents

In January 2024 the Children's Food Campaign commissioned Savanta* to conduct nationwide polling research to determine the biggest challenges faced by parents in the current food system and their top priorities for change. We asked parents their opinions around a series of topics including school food, marketing and advertising of unhealthy products, labelling and nutritional information and accessibility and affordability of healthy food and drinks.

2,039 parents of children aged 0-18 completed the survey online between 2nd and 11th January 2024. Data were weighted by gender and socio-economic groups to be representative of the UK population. Key findings are presented throughout the manifesto to highlight the views of parents from across the UK. Full results of the poll can be found [here](#).

*Savanta is a data, market research and advisory company. Savanta is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Children's Food Ambassadors

In 2023, we established the Children's Food Ambassador Programme to ensure our activities at the Children's Food Campaign are informed and inspired by the realities and lived experience of people with children. We recruited a fantastic panel of 13 parents and carers from different backgrounds, with rich and varied experiences – representing 24 children from 22 months to 15 years old.



Agnieszka Stanczka



Dr. Rounaq Nayak



Mary Needham



Jaynaide Powis



Zoe Wright



Aneita Lewis



Clare Frewin



Amie Watson



Mandy Mazliah



Ben Jones



Gemma McFarlane



Alice Holding



Mezreet Rasul

Children's Food Ambassador Workshops

During February and March 2024, we held a series of workshops and conversations with our ambassadors to share insights from our nationwide poll and to define and prioritise parents' top policy concerns for the manifesto.

Prior to the workshops we asked our Children's Food Ambassadors the following question. "If the next government were to make a real difference in children's dietary health what top 3 – 5 actions would you like to see from them?"

Our ambassadors came up with over forty fantastic ideas for government action. During the workshops they were then tasked with deciding on the top policy ideas to be included in the

manifesto, incorporating the voices of parents from the poll with their own brilliant policy ideas.

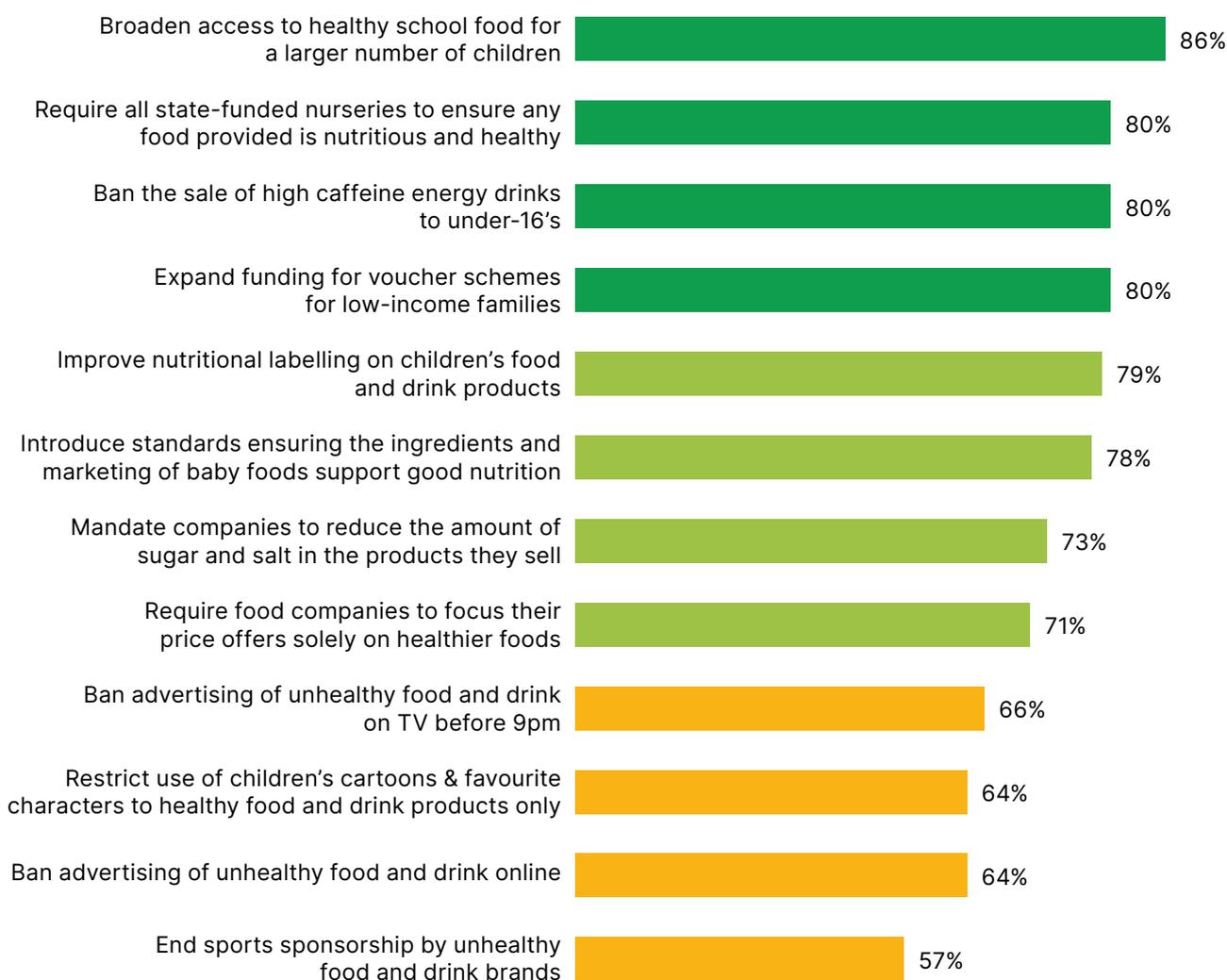
Based on the results of these workshops, we worked with our ambassadors to co-create Our Children, Our Future: a parents' manifesto for healthy children's food. To ensure the manifesto accurately represented parents' views the Children's Food Ambassadors provided their input and feedback throughout the drafting process.

Summary

Our large survey revealed that parents' primary worry is the cost of living, with highest concern about food prices, more than other costs, including energy bills, mortgage/rent costs and job insecurity. Moreover, there's a high level of concern among parents regarding their children's dietary habits, with **seven out of ten expressing worry** about what their children are eating. Alarming, **eight out of ten parents** think that it is getting increasingly difficult, not easier, to promote healthy eating habits among their children.

We asked parents to indicate their level of support for a range of possible future government policies that would help to improve children's food. As can be seen in the figure below we found strong levels of support among parents for government policies across all these areas of our children's food system. Expanding access to healthy school food received the highest level of overall support.

Parental NET support for policies (%)

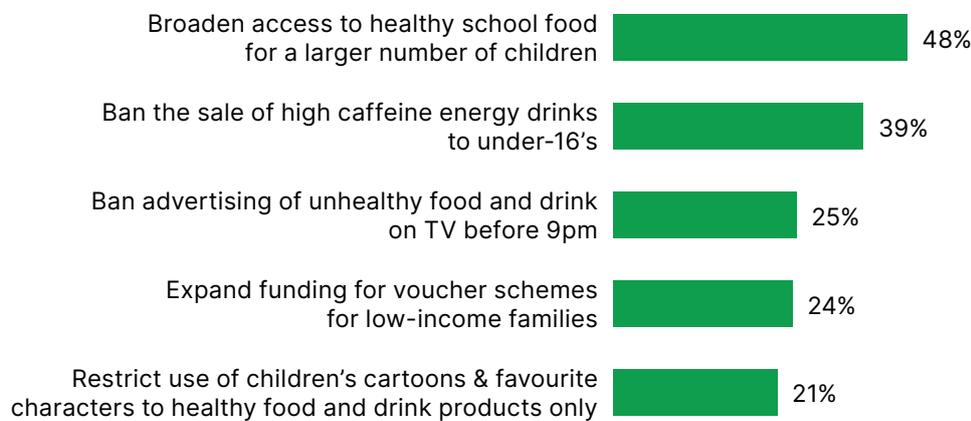


Q23.6 There will be a General Election in 2024 and a new government. To what extent would you support or oppose the following policy ideas being included in any new government children's health strategy?

We also asked parents to select just three government policies from this long list, to indicate what they would prioritise most. Again, access to healthy school meals was the most popular choice, with almost half of all parents including it in their top three priorities. Banning the sale of high caffeine energy drinks, introducing restrictions on advertising and the use of children's cartoons, and expanding funding for voucher schemes for low-income families were the other most frequently chosen policies.

Based on the survey findings and the voices of our children's food ambassadors, this manifesto reflects the key areas of the food system that parents believe have the greatest impact on their children's health and where they see potential for the biggest change.

Top government policies – NET support (%)



Q24. And which THREE policies would you most like to see, that you believe would best support parents to encourage their children to eat healthy food?

The manifesto is structured into five key pillars for government action.



We are calling on the government to make free, healthy and sustainable school food a priority for all our children from nursery to sixth form/college



The government must protect our children from the flood of unhealthy food advertising and marketing



We need honest and trustworthy information on food and drink packaging



We need the government to make nutritious food affordable and accessible for all families



We want the government to put a stop to the sale of high energy caffeine drinks to our children

Healthy school food for all our children



Context

Our children spend 190 days at school every year, which makes a healthy nutritious meal a vital part of their school day and their whole childhood. There are many benefits to school food for children beyond just preventing children from going hungry. Therefore, many organisations have been campaigning for universal free school meals. The benefits of universal school meals are far-reaching. It supports concentration and better learning in class for everyone.² It encourages children to try new foods and eat more fruit and vegetables.³ It ends the stigma created by means-testing children and families.⁴ It alleviates pressures and worries for parents, especially during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.⁵ Despite the economic and social benefits of free school meals, the landscape of school meals across the UK is diverse, with variations in provision and eligibility criteria.

Quality of school meals is equally important to expanding school meals. School food standards aim to ensure schools in England give children balanced meals, which allows them to develop healthy eating habits⁶. However, the standards are not always being met and there is insufficient data to identify success stories or cause for concern⁷. There is also very little evidence on the overall quality of food in early years settings. Although food and drink guidelines are available for early years settings, they are voluntary, and are not always utilised⁸. The expansion of free early years childcare means that young children will be eating a greater proportion of their food in early years settings. Considering the importance of good nutrition in early life⁹, early years settings provide a fantastic opportunity to provide all children with the foundations for a healthy life.

Expanding access to healthy school food is parents' number one priority.

“Knowing my child has eaten well and enjoyed a nutritious meal at school is just as important to me as their academic learning.”

Clare, parent of 9, 12 and 14 year olds

“Children spend a lot of time in education and have the opportunity to have at least one meal at school. Let's make this meal count, so it increases their opportunity to get a nutritious balanced meal and create opportunities for families to build upon this in their homes.”

Zoe, parent of 8 and 11 year olds

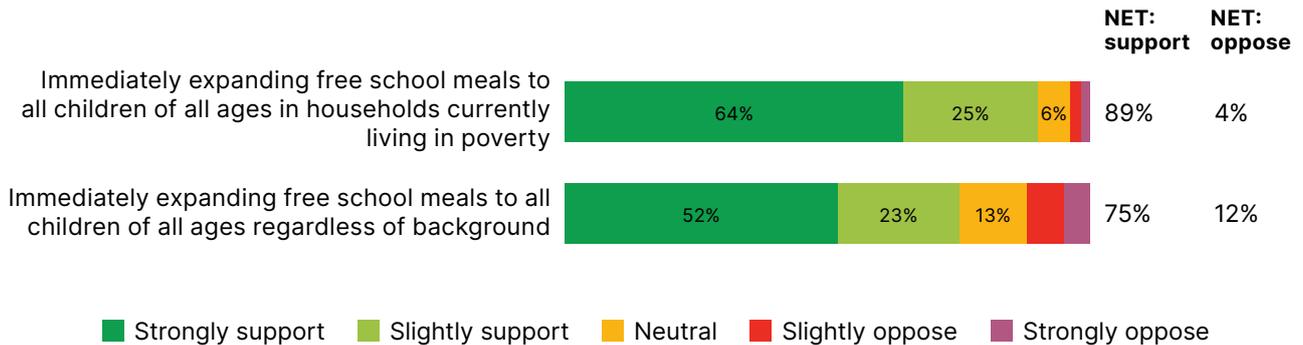
There was overwhelming support among parents for the expansion of free school meals. **9 in 10 parents (89%)** support the immediate expansion of free school meals to children of all ages living in poverty. Over **7 in 10 parents (75%)** support the expansion to all children of all ages, from nursery to sixth form, regardless of background.



School Food For All

Join our **Say Yes** campaign for school food for all

Parental support for policy (%)



Q12. To what extent would you support or oppose the following changes to eligibility for free school meals across the whole of the UK?

“It’s important the school curriculum takes into account food, nutrition and children’s own health. There needs to be consistent language demonstrating to children the links across PSHE, Science, Food Technology and PE.”

Clare, parent of 9, 12 and 14 year olds

“Healthy school meals are key to a successful education. Food and education do not run alongside each other but are intertwined. When schools prioritise healthy school meals, parents gain peace of mind, knowing that their child’s well-being, academic performance and lifelong health are being taken care of.”

Alice, parent of 5 year old

“As a parent who has children on free school meals, it was a relief to have one less thing to worry about. It reduces financial stress. But in my experience children can also feel nervous about having free school meals, and unsure about admitting it to people. Having free school meals for all would help reduce stigma attached to free school meals and create an equal environment.”

Amie, parent of 9 and 12 year olds

“We work tirelessly to ensure our children eat more healthy food at home but it all feels like this is in vain if our children then go to school and are almost encouraged to eat unhealthy foods. If children develop healthy tastes at school, this can influence healthy choices at home too.”

Mary, parent of 4 year old

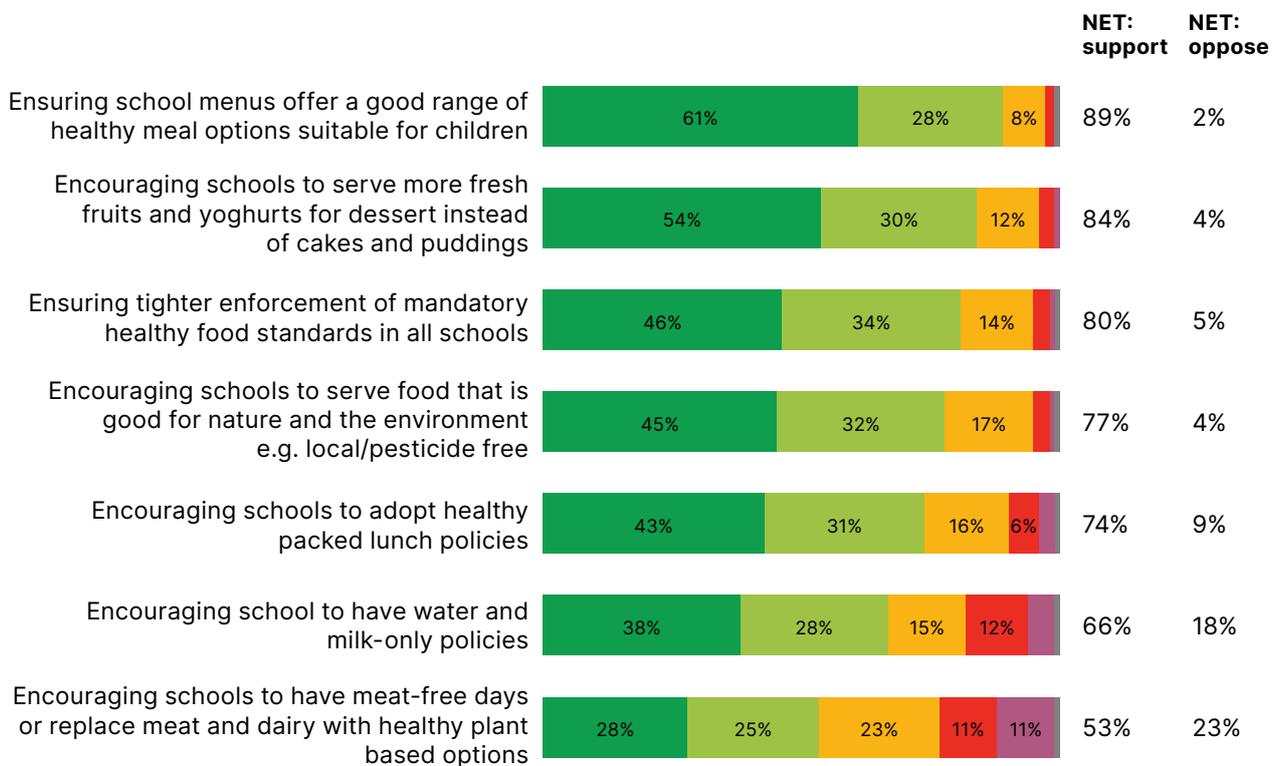
Just **over half (55%) of parents** believe their children’s school meals are nutritious, with parents of secondary school children expressing less confidence compared to parents of primary school children. Parents want school food quality monitored and improved, including more healthy options on school menus, more fruits and yoghurts instead of sugary puddings. A majority also backed adapting school menus to serve up more planet-friendly food.



My child only gets 30 mins to order and eat lunch. As there’s not enough space for everyone to sit in the lunch hall they all grab something that is quick to eat. So everyone’s opting for the snack menu, which does not include healthy and nutritious foods and drinks.”

Gemma, parent of 15 and 12 year olds

The top policies parents want to make school food better and healthier (%)



■ Strongly support
 ■ Slightly support
 ■ Neutral
 ■ Slightly oppose
 ■ Strongly oppose
 ■ Don't know

Q10. To what extent do you support or oppose the following ideas to make school food better and healthier for children?

MANIFESTO CALL TO ACTION



We are calling on the government to make free, healthy and sustainable school food a priority for all our children from nursery to sixth form/college

- The government must commit to a progressive approach to expanding school food for all to ensure that all our children have access to a hot and nutritious lunch.
- When entrusting our children to nursery and school care the government should guarantee that their lunches and snacks meet current, regulated, and monitored school food standards.
- Our school leaders, caterers and administrative staff should feel empowered and supported to provide healthy, sustainable food to all our children, minimising salt, sugar and fat in meals and snacks.
- We need an updated curriculum that actively encourages our children to engage in learning about food, from farm to fork, and ensures that the whole school environment puts these principles into action.

Protect our children from unhealthy food advertising and marketing



Context

Each day, our children are inundated with advertisements for unhealthy food, whether it's on television, their phones, or in their play spaces. Major fast-food giants and food delivery companies are investing unprecedented amounts in marketing efforts¹⁰, with junk food advertising reaching nearly 30 times the government's expenditure on promoting healthy eating¹¹. In recent years, digital marketing aimed at children has surged, with an estimated exposure of over 15 billion advertisements for high-fat, salt, and/or sugar products online each year.¹²

In July 2020, the government announced plans to introduce the following restrictions on advertisement:

1. Implementation of a 9pm watershed for advertisement of less healthy foods, including on-demand content
2. A total online ban on paid-for advertising of less healthy foods online
3. Restrictions on in-store displays of less healthy foods in prominent locations in supermarkets
4. A ban on multi-buy deals on less healthy food

However, while legislation was passed and the location restrictions came into force in October 2022, the other restrictions have been delayed until October 2025 putting more of our children at risk of food-related ill health.

9 in 10 parents think their children are influenced by unhealthy food advertising.



I didn't realise that when children download the McDonalds app, it will alert them at 11 o'clock what the deal of the day is. That in my mind is beyond acceptable, it's another level of advertising. To have your phone telling you to go get a burger at lunch time... it just blows my mind the influences and pressures that children are under."

Clare, parent of 9, 12 and 14 year olds

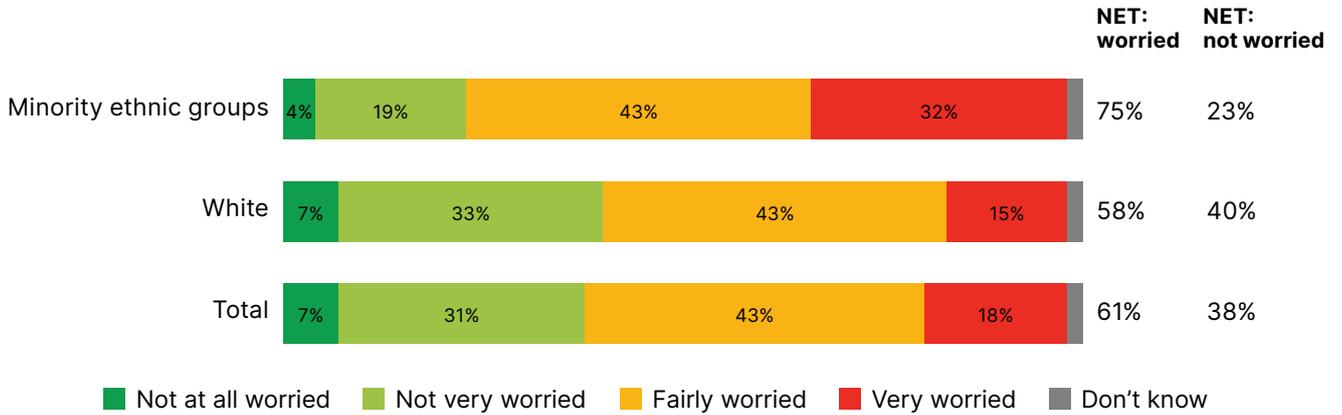


Companies employ highly paid experts whose sole aim is to encourage children and young people to act directly against the healthy upbringing they have been given by us as parents. Prioritising sales of products that make our young people less happy and less functional is wrong, both morally, and long term financially. Our main message, as a society, should encourage good living, and we can only achieve this by limiting the constant stream of negative influence our young people behold."

Ben, parent of 12 year old

While **6 in 10 parents (61%)** are worried about advertising of unhealthy food & drinks. Levels of concern are even higher, nearly **8 in 10 (75%)**, among minority ethnic families.

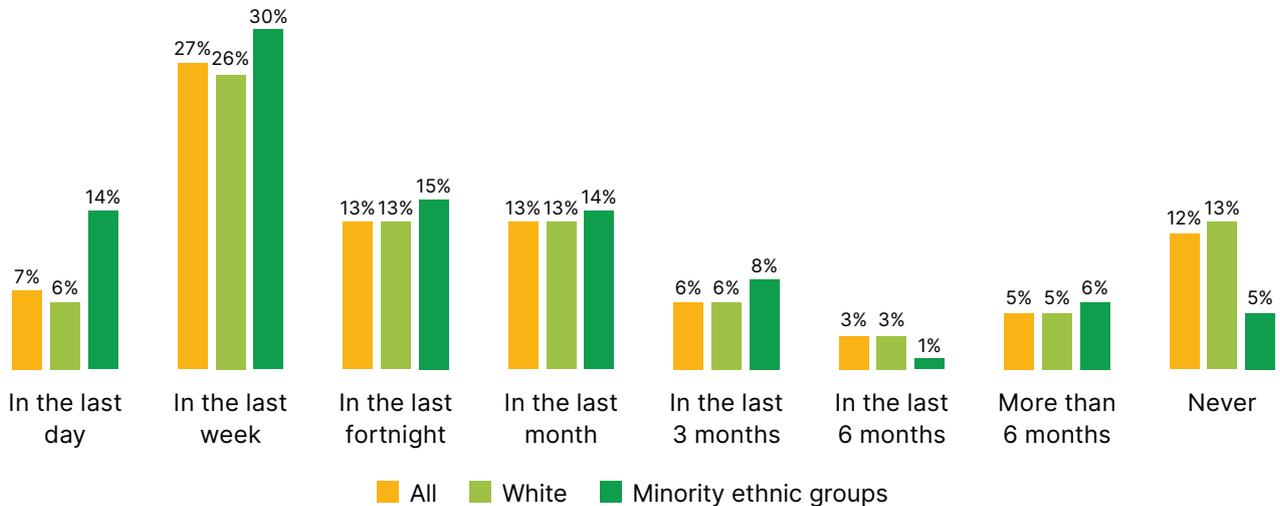
Parental concern for children’s exposure to unhealthy food and drink advertising (%)



Q13. How worried are you, if at all, about the amount of advertising for unhealthy food and drink that children are exposed to?

1 in 3 parents (34%) reported that their child had asked them to buy a food or drink product in the past week based on something they’d seen advertised. This was even higher among parents from **minority ethnic backgrounds**, nearly **half (44%)** of whom reported this.

Most recent occasion child asked parent to buy food/drink item seen in advert – by ethnicity.



Q16. When was the last time your child / any of your children asked you to buy a food or drink product based on something they’d seen advertised?

“ This is one of the policies the UK government has delayed. The argument that we don’t want to be a nanny state and we don’t want to influence what people are doing but we are influencing them anyways, so I don’t see why we can’t influence them in the right direction.”

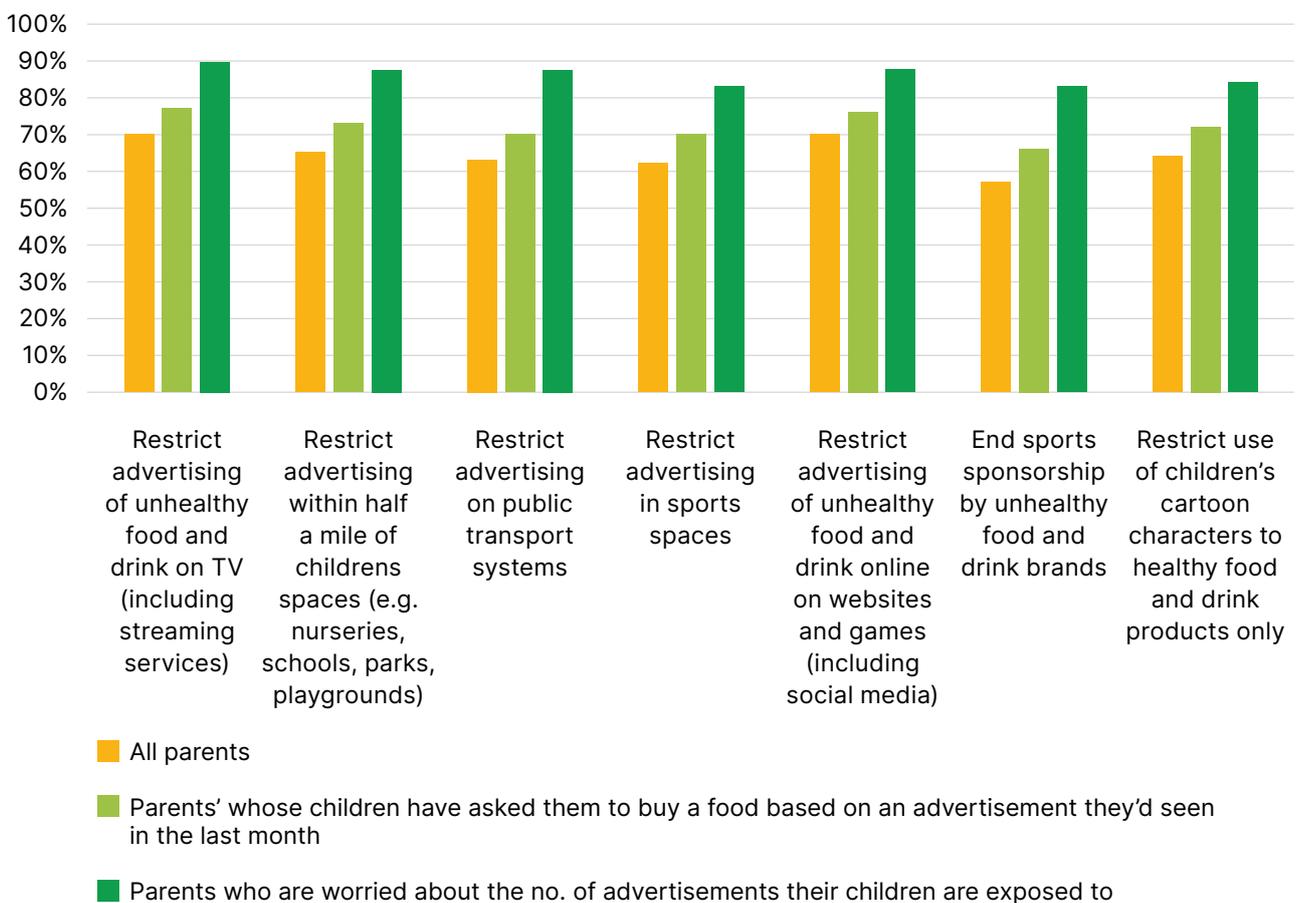
Jaynaide, parent of 22 month old

“ My concern as a parent of two young children, is that without the correct food environment, it becomes impossible for children to eat healthy foods. My local leisure centre, which offers healthy activities such as swimming and skating lessons, also provides easy access to smart vending machines, i.e., vending machines with a digital interface where an M&M’s cartoon character entices children to buy unhealthy food products.”

Dr Rounaq Nayak, parent of 2 and 8 year olds

Parents support policies aimed at limiting advertising and marketing, especially among those whose children have directly requested a food item due to advertisement exposure. This support is even greater among parents who are concerned about the number of advertisements their children are exposed to.

Parental support for advertising policies by child exposure and level of concern (%)



Q17. To what extent would you support or oppose the government restricting advertising of unhealthy food in the following places?

MANIFESTO CALL TO ACTION



The government must protect our children from the flood of unhealthy food advertising and marketing

- Our children shouldn't be bombarded with unhealthy food advertisements. We need the government to restrict unhealthy food advertising to children.
 - On TV, by implementing the 9pm watershed
 - On social media
 - Around children's spaces
 - On public transport systems
 - In sports spaces
- Our children should not be exposed to frequent promotions of unhealthy food on their mobile phones. The government must regulate access to, and promotions on, food apps that target our children.
- The government must take action to restrict advertising of less healthy food and drink using celebrities, sports personalities, social media influencers or cartoon heroes that attract children directly. These promotional tactics should be restricted to healthier food and drinks only.
- We need the government to put an end to multi-buy offers and promotions on unhealthy food and drinks e.g. 3 for the price of 2.



Labels and packaging we can trust

Context

When shopping for children's food it can be challenging for parents to spot the healthy options available on the supermarket shelves. Although parents often use the information on packaging, the health claims on food products targeted at children can be misleading. Claims like 'one of your five a day' and 'no added sugars' create a health halo effect, giving the impression of a food's goodness without conveying much about the overall healthiness of the product. 97% of snacks targeted for babies and toddlers feature front-of-pack nutritional or health claims, despite often containing excessive sugar levels for children of this age group¹³. While the UK has guidelines for presenting nutritional information on the front of packaging, such as the traffic light labelling system, it is not mandatory, and when used, it is not always colourful and easy to read. Moreover, it is seldom found on commercial products designed for children under the age of 3.

There is also growing concern among parents about the amount of ultra-processed foods available to children. Over 65% of children's daily energy intake comes from ultra-processed foods¹⁴ yet it is very difficult to tell when a product is ultra-processed by looking at the packaging.

Additionally, the use of child-friendly characters on food and drink packaging creates another challenge for parents. Two thirds of parents think child-friendly characters on food and drink packaging make it more difficult to feed their children a healthy diet and 9 out of 10 parents agree that the use of child-friendly characters results in children asking for the product¹⁵.

3 in 5 parents say they trust manufacturer-led health claims.

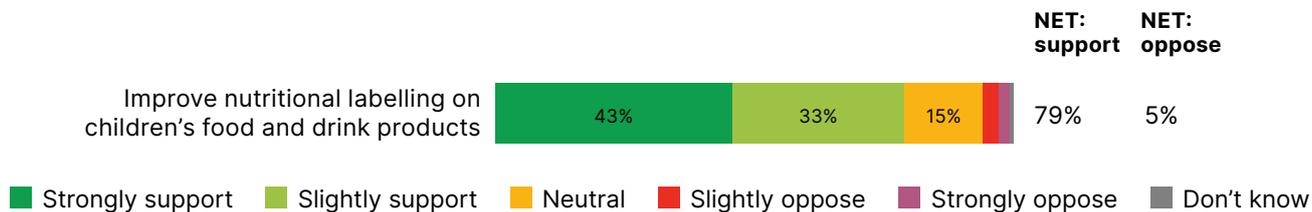


When my children were little, I wasn't getting a lot of sleep. Looking at the snacks on offer words like "apple", "carrot" and "oats" jumped out at me. Others claimed to contain vitamins and minerals. I may have been exhausted but I was sure that I could make good decisions about snacks for my toddler. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the products were not healthy. Most are UPFs (ultra-processed foods). Many contain salt and sugar. Almost all are devoid of nutritional value. They are certainly a worse choice than a real banana, carrot or apple. I was always trying to make the best decisions for my children, but I was being misled every step of the way. And I worry for those parents facing similar choices now. It is time for the government to take action.

Mandy, parent of 8, 11 and 13 year olds

8 in 10 parents (79%) want the government to improve nutritional labelling on children's products.

Parental support for policy (%)



Q23. 7. There will be a General Election in 2024 and a new government. To what extent would you support or oppose the following policy ideas being included in any new government children's health strategy?

“ Parents need those visual cues as you don't have a lot of time to sit through and read the ingredients, you need to be able to see it really quickly through clearer labelling. I also trust the information that is being provided and I find it gobsmacking that companies will be allowed to mislead.”

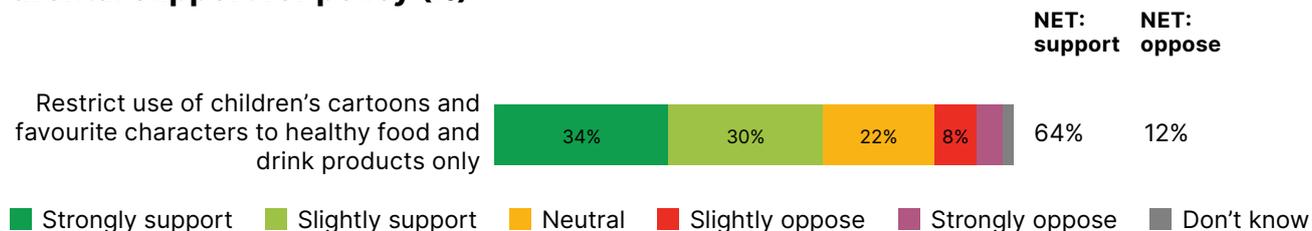
Alice, parent of 5 year old

“ My children have grown up with ultra processed foods around them and I would like us all to be better informed when making choices. UPFs should be clearly labelled so we can all identify products quickly and easily when shopping.”

Clare, parent of 9, 12 and 14 year olds

More than **6 in 10 parents (64%)** support the government restricting the use of children's cartoons and favourite characters on children's products.

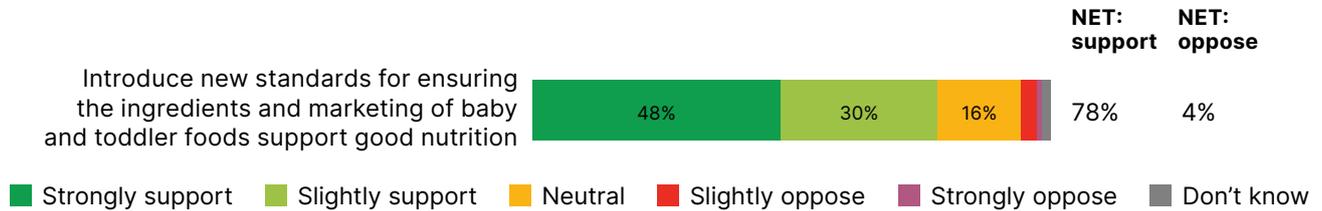
Parental support for policy (%)



Q23. 4. There will be a General Election in 2024 and a new government. To what extent would you support or oppose the following policy ideas being included in any new government children's health strategy?

8 in 10 parents (78%) want improved standards for the ingredients and marketing of infant and toddler foods.

Parental support for policy (%)



Q23.11. There will be a General Election in 2024 and a new government. To what extent would you support or oppose the following policy ideas being included in any new government children's health strategy?

“ The marketing of baby and toddler foods is incredibly clever. I was horrified at the level of sugar in the baby pouches.”

Jaynaide, parent of 22 month old

“ All children have the right to a healthy and nutritious diet and I feel this is being taken away by the current lack of regulation around children's food. As a parent I feel bombarded with misinformation, frustrated by health claims on packets and see my children influenced by glamorous fun characters giving a positive impression of food that is inherently unhealthy.”

Clare, parent of 9, 12 and 14 year olds

MANIFESTO CALL TO ACTION



We need honest and trustworthy information on food and drink packaging

- Review and improve the current traffic light labelling system making clear, colour-coded labels compulsory and consistent across all products.
- Consult on ways to respond to growing parental concerns about the level of unhealthy, ultra processed foods being sold as 'healthy' or suitable for children and families.
- Remove misleading health claims on our children's products.
- Restrict the use of cartoons, child friendly characters and other design or promotional on-pack features on packaging that appeal directly to our children.

Make nutritious family food affordable and accessible



Context

The cost of living crisis and the surge in food prices has made it even more challenging to feed our families. In the UK, 1 in 5 households with children are now experiencing food insecurity, with families with preschool-aged children facing an increased risk compared to those with school-aged children¹. Healthy foods cost twice as much per calorie compared to less healthy options¹, and a substantial 41% of price promotions focus on foods high in fat, salt and/or sugar¹⁶. It is unsurprising that achieving a nutritious and sustainable diet remains beyond the means of many families.

Many food and drink products marketed to our children contain excessive amounts of salt and sugar. 85% of the salt we eat is already in our food¹⁷ and 60% of sugar comes from just three categories: biscuits, confectionery, and desserts.¹⁸ Even seemingly healthy options favoured by parents contain hidden sugars, with just 7% of breakfast cereals and 8% of yoghurts marketed to children qualifying as low in sugar¹⁹. Some of these products contain as much as four teaspoons of sugar in a single serving²⁰, contributing to over one-third of a child's recommended daily sugar intake. The same can be said for products marketed at young children, where some baby and toddler foods, despite recommendations to avoid sugar entirely, contain as much as two teaspoons of sugar per serving.²⁰

The affordability of healthy options and the availability of unhealthy options are parents' biggest challenges to ensuring their children eat healthily. For parents from the most vulnerable socio-economic groups, **affordability is their greatest obstacle.**



The expectation that food can be healthy and affordable feels out of reach."

Clare, parent of 9, 12 and 14 year olds

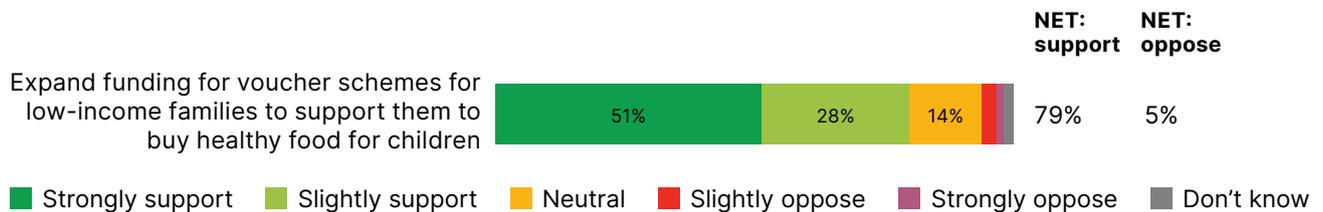


I would love to be able to access healthy and minimally processed food for my family when outside of the home."

Zoe, parent of 8 and 11 year olds

8 in 10 parents (79%) want the government to expand funding for voucher schemes for low-income families to support them to buy healthy food for children.

Parental support for policy (%)



Q23.12. There will be a general election in 2024 and a new government. To what extent do you support or oppose the following policy ideas being included in any new government children's health strategy?

“When I became a mother five years ago, I became even more passionate about accessible, cost-effective and nutritious food for all, regardless of postcode.”

Agnieszka, parent of 5 year old

“I think that's why the voucher scheme is so amazing because parents can spend the vouchers in a variety of different places. They can buy fruit and veg that is culturally appropriate and that they are familiar with.”

Mandy, parent of 8, 11 and 13 year olds

Healthy Start

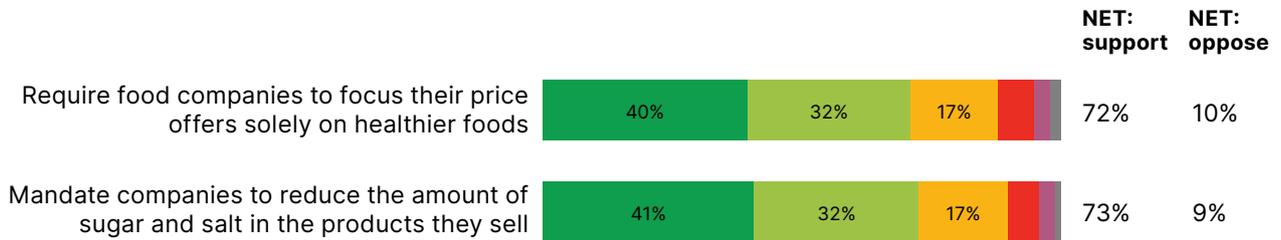


The Healthy Start voucher scheme provides vouchers to low-income families with children under the age of four and pregnant women to buy fruit, vegetables, milk, pulses, and infant formula. Despite helping to tackle health inequalities, in some areas only 55% of eligible families are receiving the vouchers²¹. This means that many families are missing out on

this important support. Updates to the scheme are needed to increase the value of payments, expand eligibility for the scheme, improve access and uptake and to support the scheme to meet its nutritional objectives. Further details of the reforms needed to the scheme can be found [here](#).

7 in 10 parents want government regulations mandating food companies to prioritise price offers for healthy foods (72%) and decrease the levels of salt and sugar in their products (73%).

Parental support for policy (%)



■ Strongly support
 ■ Slightly support
 ■ Neutral
 ■ Slightly oppose
 ■ Strongly oppose

Q23. There will be a General Election in 2024 and a new government. To what extent would you support or oppose the following policy ideas being included in any new government children’s health strategy?

“ We need to be able to trust that the food we buy for our children is healthy so I implore government to mandate companies to minimise the salt, sugar and fat used in children’s food products.”

Jaynaide, parent of 22 month old

RECIPE FOR CHANGE

Building on the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy the Recipe For Change campaign calls on the government to introduce a levy to help make food healthier.

MANIFESTO CALL TO ACTION



We need the government to make nutritious food affordable and accessible for all families

- To better support our most vulnerable families we need the government to reform the existing Healthy Start Voucher scheme and ensure councils have funds to support families on low incomes.
- We need supermarkets to make healthier food and drinks more affordable when we go food shopping by increasing discounts and special offers on healthy products like fruit, vegetables, and pulses.
- We urge the government to do more to make food companies reduce the amount of salt, sugar and saturated fat in our children's products, without resorting to an increase in the use of artificial sweeteners.

End the sale of energy drinks to children



Context

In recent years, there has been a surge in the availability of new energy drink brands and products targeting our children, contributing to sales of sports and energy drinks exceeding £2.2 billion in 2023²². Typically containing 140-200mg of caffeine per bottle or can, these energy drinks also often contain large amounts of sugar. Despite warning labels indicating their unsuitability for children, one-third of children in the UK consume energy drinks on a weekly basis²³ and children from more deprived areas in the UK drink significantly more than children from more affluent households²⁴.

Alarmingly, research indicates that regular consumption of energy drinks can have significant adverse effects on children's health. These effects include headaches, poorer mental health, diminished academic performance, and sleep problems in children²⁵.

In 2019 the government announced its intention to ban the sale of high energy caffeine drinks (with more than 150mg of caffeine per litre) to children under 16. However, no further action has been taken since this announcement. While some major supermarkets have voluntarily implemented a ban, other retailers plus most smaller and local stores still sell energy drinks to children.

When parents were asked to select their top three food policies from a list of twelve, **banning the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children** emerged as their number 2 priority.



Energy drinks pose serious health risks to our children. As a parent, it's concerning to see the ingredients in these drinks, the harm it can cause to young people and how it may contribute to rising anxiety levels too. Government regulations should limit access to under 16s to prioritise children's health and safety."

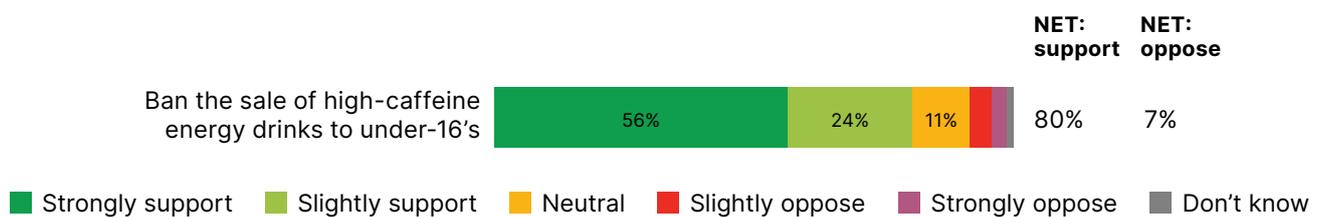
Aneita, parent of 12 year old

Energy drinks marketing is often heavily targeted to extreme sports, street sports and influencers that are popular with young people, as well as via online gaming. New drinks such as Prime Energy have also arrived on the market. Backed by high profile social media influencers they have had huge youth appeal, with parents naming this brand specifically as one that is talked about by children. While there is a non-caffeinated Prime Hydrate range which is widely sold and popular with children, the branding is very similar. This

similarity increases the risk of confusion, and potentially encourages young people to want to trade up to the caffeinated product.

8 in 10 parents (80%) support the government banning the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children under 16. Parents of children in secondary school are considerably more likely to want the government to restrict the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks.

Parental support for policy (%)



Q23.6 There will be a General Election in 2024 and a new government. To what extent would you support or oppose the following policy ideas being included in any new government children's health strategy?

“ My daughter used to have a [brandname] energy drink every gymnastics training session (4 times a week) as we thought this would be good for her. However, she put on loads of weight and found concentration difficult - this improved when we stopped the drinks.”

Parent of 16 & 17 year olds, South East, source: *Sustain's response to consultation on proposal to end the sale of energy drinks to children*

“ There should be measures in place for the people who knowingly sell energy drinks to young people.”

Parent of 1 & 3 year olds, West Midlands, source: *Sustain's response to consultation on proposal to end the sale of energy drinks to children*

**MANIFESTO
CALL TO
ACTION**



We want the government to put a stop to the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to our children

- Our children should not be drinking high-caffeine energy drinks. The government must restrict the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children under 16.
- Energy drinks need to carry much more visible warning labels indicating that they are not suitable for children.
- Clearer information about the levels of sugar, caffeine and other additives should be displayed on the packaging of all energy drinks.

Conclusion

Food is a vital part of children's lives and healthy development. Ensuring the food our children eat is balanced and nutritious is a daily challenge for millions of parents. It ought to be easy for children to eat healthily, but too many parents feel their job is being made harder by a range of factors that are out of their own direct control.

With a General Election due in 2024, this manifesto is a clarion call from parents to all political parties to make child health a priority. That must include ensuring every child, regardless of where in the UK they live, or the socio-economic status of their family, is able to access healthy food to support their growth and development.

Parents would like every school to provide healthy food for every child.

Parents are demanding honest food labelling, and an end to misleading packaging claims.

Parents want their children to be protected from predatory advertising and marketing, both on and offline, with the advertising spotlight on healthy food, not junk food.

Parents want the law to ensure that products like energy drinks, which say 'not suitable for children', will never be sold to their children.

And healthy food should be more affordable and accessible to all families, with extra support provided to low-income and marginalised families and communities to cope with the cost of living.

The parents in our research are clear on their priorities. Now it is for government to act.

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Our Children, Our Future

A parents' manifesto for healthy children's food

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Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity. It represents around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

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