

Eating trends: adapting to kids' lifestyles

Barbie Clarke, The Kids and Youth Consultancy

Family eating habits have changed dramatically in recent years and eating together is increasingly a thing of the past. Barbie Clarke describes the impact of changed lifestyles on children's eating habits and predicts that children will increasingly decide on their own meals and direct their own diet. Parents will expect food retailers and manufacturers to rise to the challenge responsibly.

FAMILY LIFE has changed considerably in the past 25 years. The increasing affluence of families within Europe, work patterns and the changing role of women have had a profound impact on family eating habits. Each year more food products are being introduced by manufacturers and retailers to meet the needs of the busy, fast-moving culture that children and parents are living in.

It is obvious, but true, that mothers today are very different from those of 50 years ago. At that time women were encouraged to return to the home, and home-making was viewed as an important way to renew family life following the disruption of the war and the recovery period immediately post-war. By the end of the 1990s more profound changes had occurred in women's lives than ever before. Such changes were mainly brought about by the emergence of the career woman and career mother, so that by the end of the twentieth century, the highest proportion of women returning to work had children under age 10. In 1997 over three-fifths of couples with dependent children had both partners in employment compared to half that number in 1980. Added to this, work ethics have changed in the past decade, with a culture developing of working long hours and taking work home.

In the UK, there are now daycare arrangements for just under half of pre-school children aged 0 to 5, and over half (58%) of all children attend some form of daycare outside school. In the UK, relatives are still the most common source of care, even more so in other European

countries such as France, Italy and Spain.

A mother today may be many things and span a wide age group – a teenager or a young early twenties Victoria Beckham, or she can be an older Cherie Blair in her mid-forties. In fact the trend has been to wait longer to have children, and the average age of a mother across Europe has risen by three years in only 25 years, with 15,000 conceptions to women over 40 in the UK.

The increasing popularity of ready-prepared meals, especially among young families, is not surprising. Mothers today frequently complain of being tired, exhausted, and find it difficult to keep up with the increasing load of being a wife, mother and successful career person. In recent NOP research over half (59%) of mothers in the UK claimed to be always exhausted, nearly half (49%) said they never had any free time, and nearly three-quarters (72%) expressed a wish to have more free time. In the UK, people work the longest hours, with an average working week of 44.9 hours, compared to 41.7 in Germany, 41.1 in France, 40.5 in Italy and 39.9 in Denmark.

Clearly the changing role of mothers, work patterns and work ethics have had a huge impact on children's lives and their eating habits. Although similar patterns are emerging across Europe, in many ways the UK is more like the USA in terms of eating patterns than the rest of Europe.

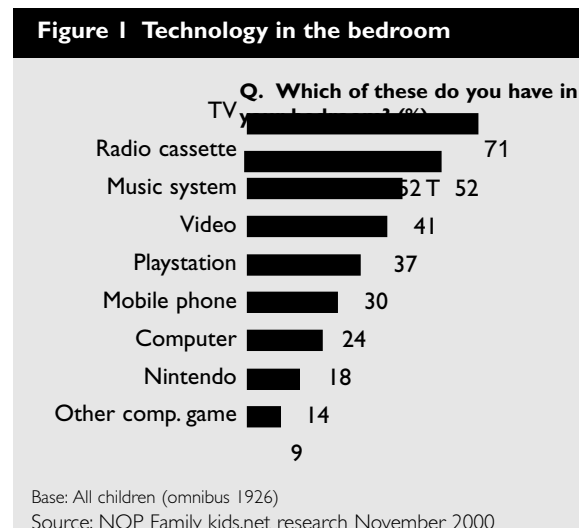
Changes have also occurred within the family. In 1997 the lowest annual figure for marriages in the UK was recorded, at 310,000, although marriage increased in 2001. Alongside

this change, sadly, has been a doubling in the number of children aged 11 to 15 experiencing divorce in the last 30 years of the twentieth century. Many couples of course do not bother to get married even when children come along, with the proportion of non-married women aged 18 to 49 cohabiting more than doubling in 20 years from 11% to 29%.

The impact of these changes within families, and to women's roles, means that annual expenditure on food has actually decreased. In the cash-rich, time-poor economy of the past couple of years, more has been spent on take-away meals at home, and spending on restaurant and café meals has also grown. Food manufacturers and retailers have been fast to follow this trend, with increasing shelf space in supermarkets being given over to ready-prepared meals.

Eating patterns have changed too. In the UK and the USA, fewer meals are eaten involving the entire family, with children often being fed first in the evening, and parents eating separately, or together, once they have arrived home from long hours spent at work. And parents – and by this we still mean mostly mothers – are more indulgent about allowing their children to eat what they like, so will happily give each child a separate meal. Longer working hours, more mothers working, less time, more cash and a need for exhausted parents to have 'quality time' together means that more children in the UK are losing a sense of the concept of family eating. Interestingly, research by the Kids and Youth Consultancy shows that this is not a pattern followed to such an extent in the rest of Europe, where families do mostly still eat together at home.

In the UK, as well as the USA, parents are using their increasing income to purchase more and more technology for their children. Children may be experiencing fewer family



meals, but they have more technology available in the home than ever before. NOP Family kids.net research shows that 71% of children aged 7 to 16 have a TV in their bedroom. Overall, 75% have access to the Internet, and 56% have a mobile phone of their own. In qualitative research, the Kids and Youth Consultancy have even come across children with kettles and microwave ovens in their bedrooms! Parents, busy and often absent from home, are concerned about their children being out on the streets; fear of 'stranger danger' and road traffic means that they would prefer them to be home. They are buying their children technology partly because they believe it will enhance learning opportunities, but also to encourage their kids to stay in the safety of home. So children go out alone less, but are able to communicate with the outside world through chat rooms and mobile phones. Eating patterns are of course affected by this, and we are finding in both the USA and the UK that children as young as 10 are becoming adept at preparing their own snack microwave meals.

To emphasise the similarity of eating trends in the UK and USA, as opposed to the UK and the rest of Europe, consider eating patterns at fast-food restaurants. In the UK, as in the USA, fast-food restaurants are used as a convenient means of feeding children in a way that parents know will appeal, with a 'happy meal'-type treat thrown in. Such treats are available in the rest of Europe, but it is much more likely that the entire family will visit the fast food restaurant, ensuring that the family eats together. That old adage – 'the family that eats together, stays together' – could have some meaning in this trend of all-family eating, especially when considering the higher UK divorce figures.

To illustrate this further, research from the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) (2000) shows that around 40% of families in the UK never eat together at weekends, and qualitative research reported that when interviewed in the spring, the last family meal teenage boys remembered sharing was at Christmas, some three months earlier. In the USA, 40% of families with teenagers have their main meal in front of the TV, a pattern increasingly repeated in the UK. There have even been recent reports suggesting that some younger households no longer bother to have a table for eating at all. Yet most of us are unhappy with this trend. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of adults questioned by the IGD felt that sitting down together to a family meal would be the best way to encourage children to eat more healthily.

Snacking – eating 'on the run' – has become an American way of life. The average American eats at a fast-food restaurant six times a month. The concept of eating three good, healthy meals with the entire family, or with colleagues at work, and at a table, may seem strange to many in the UK and the USA, but in countries such as France, Italy and Spain this is still not unusual

and, perhaps, is reflected in the far better health record of those countries. Recent research, again from the IGD, showed that nearly nine out of ten consumers (88%) regularly snack, out of hunger, through boredom, or to replace a meal, frequently breakfast. And, whereas older people prefer to snack on fruit, younger consumers are more likely to eat chocolate, sweets, crisps or nuts.

There is no doubt that eating with the family leads to healthier eating habits for children. Recent research carried out by The Harvard Medical School showed that children who ate with their families were more likely to consume fruit and vegetables, and to eat less saturated fat, fried food and soda. Furthermore, the research also showed that children who began eating with their families displayed improved school and psychological performance. It is interesting that the UK government has introduced an initiative in the UK to provide a fruit snack for children at school, and there is in fact global concern about children's diet. A World Health Organisation report in 1998 recorded that there were 18 million children under age 5 classified as overweight. A recent report from the US Department of Agriculture (2001) stated that, 'In the US the percentage of obese children has more than doubled since 1978'. The *New York Times* in early 2001 reported on a rise in childhood cases of 'adult diabetes', and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* has claimed that 'excess TV viewing is linked to obesity in children'. The American Heart Foundation (1997) has reported on the 'body fat distribution and heart disease risk in children and adolescents'. But it is not just a US problem. In the UK, the *Health of the Nation* report (DOH, 1998) stated: 'There is evidence that many people in Britain eat a diet which contributes greatly to Coronary Heart Disease.'

So do we have a situation where children are

becoming increasingly home-bound, technologically driven, suffering from dysfunctional family life, and prone to adult illnesses earlier and earlier? The encouraging sign is that children, and parents, are taking steps to improve their health and the way in which they eat. The plethora of recent health scares – foot and mouth disease, BSE, additives, concerns about tooth decay, fat, sugar, salt – all add up to anxiety, as well as confusion, on the part of mothers. Mothers want reassurance, and information, about the food their children eat.

When interviewed about family meals and children's eating, mothers are most likely to say that a meal should be 'healthy', as well as easy to prepare and palatable. They are not rejecting the ready-prepared meal; far from it, but it must meet several criteria. It is important to them that the child will not reject the food and waste money, but it is also important that the food is



Sainsbury's Blue Parrot Café range is targeted at busy mothers with young children

good quality, as well as good value. They want it to be free from additives, and preferably organic, although not surprisingly choice and price have an influence on this, but they also want the child to be attracted to the food, and demand fun packaging too. Our research shows that children tend to eat healthier diets if they have a say in choosing and preparing a meal, and mothers are aware of this. Added to this is a growing trend for children aged from around 7 or 8 to opt to become vegetarians because of concern for animals, the environment or their own health.

Many food manufacturers and supermarkets are responding to this challenge, and in 2001 the UK saw the launch of several product ranges targeted at the busy mother. Sainsbury's launched its 'Blue Parrot Café' range of 250 products targeted at children aged 5 to 12. Marks & Spencer introduced its 'Everyday Eating' range for children aged 3 to 6. And Tesco launched its 'Kids at Tesco' range. The message from these products is that children can eat healthily, but it does not have to be at great time cost to the parent.

Parents' concerns about kids' food across Europe

- Foot and mouth
- BSE
- Tooth decay
- Food additives
- Fat, sugar, salt

Source: The Kids and Youth Consultancy

What parents want

- Food free from additives
- Fun packaging
- Organic food
- Food the child won't reject
- Good quality and value

Source: The Kids and Youth Consultancy

Family lifestyle has clearly changed, and with it eating trends. Children are less likely to experience family eating in the way that was common in the mid-twentieth century. It is unlikely that the UK will ever again see the like of the 1950s mother, at home when the child gets home from school, eating with the family each evening. But parents will opt for healthy, and easy, products for their children. Fast food outside the home, and eating ready-prepared meals in the home, will continue to grow, but healthy options will always win. As foot and mouth disease affected children in a direct way, with restrictions on their movements, their ability to play sport or visit rural areas, children have become even more conscious than previously of issues relating to the food chain. And new technology, embraced by children with such enthusiasm, will be used to help this process. Children can already order pizzas through their digital TV, and many are helping mum or dad to do the online supermarket shop-

ping (and frequently adding items for themselves!). The twenty-first century will see children determining their own meals, and directing their own diets, and parents will demand that food manufacturers and retailers respond in a responsible way.

References

- Institute of Grocery Distribution (2000): *The Nation's Diet*.
- Harvard Medical School (US Department of Agriculture (2001) Number of obese children doubled.
- World Health Organisation (1998) *Childhood Obesity*.
- New York Times (1998) *Preventative Medicine* 27, pp. 645–656.
- Preventing children's television viewing to prevent obesity. *Journal of the American Medical Association*: 282, pp. 1561–1567.
- The American Heart Foundation (1997)
- Department of Health (1998) *Health of the Nation*.

Barbie Clarke

Barbie runs The Kids and Youth Consultancy, having previously run NOP Family, which she was brought in by NOP World to set up in 1997. A qualified psycho-dynamic counsellor, Barbie has worked in a therapeutic setting with young people in prison, and in school. A youth researcher for over 16 years, Barbie has appeared regularly on television and radio commenting on youth research, and is a regular speaker at international youth conferences.