



Mott Poll Report

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Parent Views on Fast Food and Family Meals

Busy lifestyles can have an impact on the diet families provide to their children. This C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents 3-18 years about changes in their family's eating habits over the past several months and explored how they varied according to parents' perception of their child's weight.

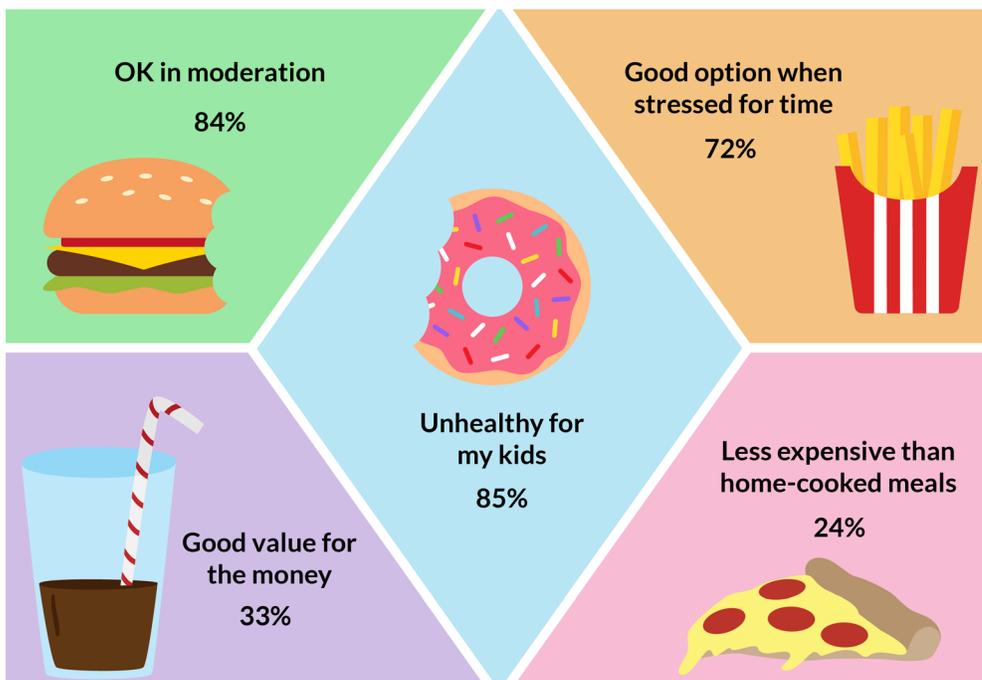
Overall, 76% of parents feel their child is about the right weight while 13% think their child is overweight and 10% underweight. Parents with lower incomes were more likely than those with higher incomes to say their child is overweight (21% vs 10%).

The COVID pandemic disrupted many family routines, including where and what they eat. Half of parents (50%) say their family has had home-cooked meals more often since the start of the pandemic, while 20% say they have had fast food more often. More parents of overweight children say their family has increased fast food meals, compared to parents who feel their child is the right weight (28% vs 18%). Most parents agree that fast food is unhealthy for their children (85%), but feel it is fine in moderation (84%). Three-quarters of parents (72%) agree with the statement that when stressed for time, fast food is a good family option. One-third of parents (33%) say that fast food is good value for the money and 24% feel it is less expensive than making meals at home.

When eating fast food, most parents allow their child to choose what they eat (88%), and few read the nutritional information (33%). Some parents encourage their child to choose healthier options (67%) and try to limit unhealthy items like fries and milk shakes (59%). More parents of overweight children report their child typically has a soft drink or soda with their fast food (54%) compared to parents of children about the right weight (31%).

Around two-thirds of parents (66%) agree their family meals have been healthier over the past few months while 20% of parents say their child has had fast food at least twice a week in the same timeframe. More parents of overweight than normal-weight kids say their children have fast food at least twice a week (33% vs 17%). Parents report barriers to having home cooked meals such as being too busy to cook (43%) and being too stressed (22%). These barriers were reported more commonly among parents with an overweight child.

Parent views on fast food for kids



Report Highlights

Around one in five parents say they are often too stressed to cook.

One in six parents say their child eats fast food at least twice a week.

Three in five parents try to limit unhealthy items when their child eats fast food.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in June 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 3-18 years living in their household (n=2,019). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 56% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±2 to 7 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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Implications

With busy lifestyles, families can find it challenging to maintain healthy eating habits for their children. For parents in this Mott Poll, the demands and stress of daily life required compromises. Most parents agreed that while fast food is unhealthy for their children, it is fine in moderation and a good option when pressed for time.

Most fast food items are loaded with calories, sodium, and saturated fat; one meal at a fast-food restaurant often exceeds the recommended fat, sodium and calorie intake for the entire day, while providing little nutrients or fiber. Although most parents reported that they allow their kids to choose what they eat at fast food restaurants, two-thirds say they encourage their child to choose healthier options when eating fast food, and many try to limit especially unhealthy items like fries and milk shakes. Parents should consider using the nutritional information to help their kids learn how to make healthier choices—however, in this Mott Poll, only 1 in 3 parents reported reading nutritional labels at fast food restaurants.

Sugary drinks are the single largest source of calories for many fast food meals and have often been found to be associated with childhood obesity. In this Mott Poll, parents of overweight children were almost twice as likely to report their child has a soft drink or soda with their fast food compared to children who are about the right weight. Consuming sugary drinks poses a real health risk to kids—and adults. It increases children's risk of excess weight gain and tooth decay, and preventable diseases such as obesity. Encouraging water or milk with their fast food can help kids moderate the calories and added sugar they consume. As more parents of overweight than normal-weight children reported frequent fast food meals, trying to make those meals more healthy can have an important impact.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on many aspects of the daily lives of parents and their children, including the patterns and rhythms of meals. Disruption of routines from lockdowns, school closures and altered work patterns all contributed to changes in what, how, and where kids were eating.

Around half of parents said their family has had home-cooked meals more often since the start of the pandemic. There are likely several factors contributing to this increase. Parents working from home may have had more time available and a greater opportunity to make meals. Many parents also may have felt unsafe going to restaurants. Financial concerns may have prompted some families to have more home-cooked meals, allowing parents to shop for bargains and plan additional meals with the leftovers. However, this may not be possible for families without a car or who live far from a grocery store; these situations may represent the one-third of parents who believe that fast food is good value for the money and the one-quarter who agree it is less expensive than making meals at home.

Around four in ten parents reported they were often too busy to cook at home and around one-fifth said they were too stressed. For some of these parents, it may be helpful to consider that cooking at home can increase family time. Parents can cook with their younger children, and for older children, they can encourage them to experiment in the kitchen on their own or take a turn in preparing a family meal. Although it may take extra time to prepare food with children or teens, it is also an opportunity share an experience or to learn something new together.