

Research shows few children receive a healthy lunch

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Lunchbox contents photographed during the research.

Only one in 10 school lunch boxes contains food that meets nutritional guidelines for children, new research has found. And bad news for parents who do make the effort to provide healthy food is that the study found 80 per cent of the food thrown into school rubbish bins is the sandwiches, fruit and yoghurt children should be eating.

A survey of more than 900 lunchboxes was carried out by a team of Massey academics specialising in marketing, health sciences and human nutrition. Researcher Dr Emma Dresler-Hawke says that the packed lunch policy at most schools means that the content of the lunch box is a

significant proportion of a child's nutritional uptake.

“One lunchbox had no fruit, no sandwiches, no yoghurt, just three packets [containing convenience snacks]. We don't know why, if it's because children are making lunch themselves, perhaps parents aren't seeing lunches as important?”

The research was undertaken at six Manawatu primary schools, covering both the most and least deprived as determined by the Education Ministry's decile rating. Dean Whitehead of the School of Health Sciences and Jane Coad of the Institute of Food, Nutrition and Human Health joined the project to work on policy recommendations and nutritional analysis.

Contents of lunchboxes were photographed at the start of the day to accurately capture contents and to ensure the children were anonymous. The contents were categorised by portion size and food group according to guidelines. While fruit or vegetables were present in 70 per cent of lunchboxes, only 32 per cent contained the recommended two servings. Most food found was moderate to high fat, salt and sugar, with 15 per cent including sweets and 57 per cent containing potato chips. The typical lunch box contained three items of junk food.

Dr Dresler-Hawke reported that there was no significant difference in the lunchbox content from different decile areas. Sandwiches were most common, found in 71 per cent of lunchboxes, with 37 per cent containing dairy items and protein items were found in five percent. Almost half (44 per cent) of the children had been given cakes, biscuits or muffins, while 45 per cent had muesli bars of varying nutritional value. The average lunch contained a white bread sandwich, a packet of potato chips and a biscuit or chocolate bar.

Worse news was to come after lunchtimes, when Dr Dresler-Hawke

emptied all the rubbish bins in the schools to assess what was actually being thrown away. More than 80 per cent of the unconsumed items were sandwiches, fruit and dairy products.

“We collected all the unconsumed food, spread it out – it was incredible, the amount of healthy food like sandwiches, not even unwrapped. Good, nutritious fillings including tomatoes, cucumber and cheese sandwiches. Bananas never peeled, yoghurt not even opened – a real waste.”

One class from each year (one to six) was assessed for the study. A follow-up with one school last week showed little had changed, Dr Dresler-Hawke says, but she hoped to be able to assist by developing some policy recommendations which would provide guidance for parents and caregivers.

“A question raised here is ‘how do well-meaning parents ensure the healthy lunch they prepare does not get thrown into rubbish at school?’. One option would be a zero-waste policy, whereby parents can monitor what their children consume.”

Improving nutrition in children is one of our most pressing public health challenges, Dr Dresler-Hawke says. She suggests that a partnership approach is needed, between schools, parents and children, in order to develop a healthy lunch and overall food policy, within the school environment.

Source: Massey University

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