

# School lunch decisions made by the child and not the parent

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While school lunches in the UK are subject to food standards, the

contents of packed lunches are not as closely scrutinized, and studies have raised concern regarding the nutritional quality of packed lunches. A new study published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* found that children, not their parents, are often the primary decision maker of whether they will eat a school lunch or what is packed for their lunch.

"Children's role in their packed lunch provision highlights their growing authority over everyday food decisions. Packed lunches provide a unique medium because they connect the [school](#), parent, and student. There is limited research, though, on parents' perspectives and perceptions related to [packed lunches](#), specifically the role of [children](#) in [food choice](#) and preparation," said lead author Hannah Ensaff, PhD, School of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

Study participants were twenty parents providing a packed lunch for their children (aged 5 - 11 years) attending four urban primary schools in the UK. Focus groups were conducted to promote discussion among parents to gain an understanding of contrasting viewpoints. Key topics explored included reasons for selecting a packed lunch, foods and beverages included and their selection, role of children in preparation, and packed lunch policies.

After analysis of the data, four key themes emerged: children as a decision maker; priorities when preparing a packed lunch; parents' anxieties and reassurances; and school factors. Even though parents preferred taking advantage of [school lunches](#) that are provided at no cost to some families, they were unwilling to force this decision when the child disagreed. The child's food preferences also took precedence when the packed lunch was prepared. Children themselves made specific requests when shopping or the parent packed what they knew would be enjoyed and eaten. The ability to monitor that a lunch had been eaten was cited as a benefit of a packed lunch over a school lunch and

providing a treat in the packed lunch was also important to parents. The inclusion of treats and other items such as chips, chocolate, and soda is often prohibited by packed lunch guidelines, but parents questioned whether enforcement is possible. They also reported children trying to persuade [parents](#) to ignore the policy by reporting on what other children had brought to school.

Children's growing authority over food choice has implications for staff involved in providing school food and presents an opportunity to develop initiatives to promote [better food choices](#) and subsequent nutrition," said Dr. Ensaff. "This is particularly important as schools are being used for public health interventions." Further research is needed to explore children's perceptions of their role as active decision makers in food choices both in packed lunches and school meals.

**More information:** "'That's His Choice Not Mine!' Parents' Perspectives on Providing a Packed Lunch for Their Children in Primary School," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2017.12.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2017.12.008)

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