

Feeding young kids on a budget? Parents say the mental load is crushing

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Feeding babies and toddlers can be challenging at the best of times. But when families can't afford enough food, let alone the [recommended](#) range of different colored vegetables, or iron-rich meats, it's tougher still.

In our [recently published](#) research, parents told us how much effort they put in to feeding children when there is little [money](#).

They also told us how the ever-present juggle of budgets and the realities of family life strained relationships and increased their mental load.

Living in poverty

In the cost of living crisis, [one in six](#) Australian children live in poverty. More families than ever are [seeking help](#) from food banks.

So we asked parents what it was like to feed [young children](#) when money was tight. We interviewed 29 Australian parents with at least one child between six months and three years old. Most had an income around or below the poverty line.

The average age of parents was 32 years, including 28 mothers and one father. This is what they told us.

Family tensions rise

Families' financial position was precarious, with little buffer to cope with more financial strain. One parent told us:

"We're still on the one income [...] We try and get a lot of free

vegetables from the [food banks](#) and whatnot. We've borrowed money in the past, but the main thing we do is make sure [our child's] food is fine."

This uncertainty about money flowed into relationship tension, and stress about [food waste](#) and the food bill. Another parent, who said they had lost weight due to not eating proper meals, told us:

"Things have been tense, and [my partner's] pretty upset about outgoing money for [food ...]."

There was also strain when young children created a mess with food or threw it on the floor:

"But then my partner's like 'why are you buying that bunch of bananas? Most of it's, like, in his hair.' As trivial as it might sound to some households, [it] caused a lot of stress in ours."

Making trade-offs and sacrifices

Parents described feeding the family as a difficult balance. They put the needs of children and partners first. They often hid their sacrifices from their partners. One parent told us:

"My partner doesn't miss out anywhere near as much as what I do. He doesn't know that either. [...] But there is many, many, many days where I will go without a meal."

The unseen mental load

Not having enough money increased the load caused by the thinking, planning and emotional strain of getting enough food to feed everyone.

One participant said,

"It's always there in the back of my mind [...], what would I do if I really didn't have anything left to feed all of us."

Resilience and creativity

Parents described multiple strategies to make the most of the food they had.

"We will now go to the fruit and vegetable shop that's quite far away from our house because it's cheaper to buy it in bulk [... We] pre-plan, absolutely, and meal plan."

Despite hardships, parents adapted to challenges by being creative with food and cooking. One parent said,

"In the last food parcel I got there was this big bag of polenta, [...] you don't want to be wasteful [...]. I'll look at [...] simple recipes that have that ingredient [...] and go from there."

Parents valued mealtimes as family time, to connect and share. Parents tried to make the most of their situation and remember that when it comes to meals, "basic doesn't mean bad".

What does this mean for supporting families?

Health professionals working with parents need to know many struggle to feed their [family](#). It's not just a matter of budgeting or cooking; parents already do that. The high mental load parents experience needs to be recognized. Programs and support should be accessible, brief and realistic.

[Common advice](#), such as offering food many times and providing variety to children, may need to be adapted. Variety could be sourced from foods on special, and food waste reduced by offering small amounts of new foods at first.

We also need to ensure the food offered in childcare centers is [adequate and healthy](#). Providing good-quality school meals would relieve the pressure on parents to supply a healthy lunchbox, or give money for the canteen. This would give all Australian children the chance to enjoy a variety of nutritious foods, regardless of their situation at home.

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