



46th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Nutrition Society of Australia, 29 November – 2 December 2022, Sustainable nutrition for a healthy life

Providing school lunches for Australian primary school children: Parents' practices and the challenges

J. Nanayakkara¹, A. Booth¹, G. Aydin¹ and C. Margerison¹

¹*Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia*

Primary school lunches significantly contribute to children's nutrition intake. Parents play an important role in planning, purchasing, and preparing food for the home-packed lunch of their primary school-aged children. Previous studies identified several barriers to providing a healthy school lunch for primary school children. These included some school-related barriers (e.g., inadequate time allocation for eating, lack of refrigeration), parent-related barriers (e.g., cost, food safety concerns, time for preparing lunch), and child-related factors (e.g., preference, convenience).^(1,2) The above studies were conducted several years ago and there are no data on parents' school lunch attitudes post the COVID-19 pandemic where children experienced long periods of remote learning. The COVID-19 pandemic-induced changes in people's lifestyle including changes in the parents' working arrangements (e.g., working from home, blended working models) and children's learning patterns (e.g., remote learning) potentially make the previous data on Australian parents' attitudes to school lunches outdated for the policymakers and nutrition advocates trying to improve primary school children's food habits post COVID-19. Therefore, the authors designed an online survey in 2022 to explore Australian parents' current practices and the challenges in providing school lunches for their primary school children, and their perceptions of ways of supporting them in this food provision role. The data collection was started in July 2022 and some preliminary results are presented here. Most parents (82% out of 357) reported their child takes a home-packed lunch to school daily and parents spend an average of 13 minutes (SD: 7, range 3–60 minutes) preparing food for the school lunches. One-quarter of parents were spending \$25–\$50 per child, per week and nearly 50% of parents were spending \$15–\$24 per child per week on food items for their child's school lunches. Most parents (58%) were willing to let their children use school-provided meals if the school were to start a school meal program. Once the data collection is completed, the parents' responses will be analysed using descriptive statistics and the findings will be presented at the NSA 2022 conference. The findings of this survey will provide a holistic picture of current obstacles faced by parents in providing a healthy school lunch for their children. Importantly, the contemporary data obtained through this survey will enable us to devise some discrete strategies to improve primary school lunches.

References

1. Bathgate K & Andrea B (2011) *Nutr Diet* **68** (1), 21–26.
2. Casado FC & Sharyn RH (2015) *Young Consum* **16** (4), 438–453.