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1 **“That’s his choice not mine!” Parents’ perspectives on providing a packed lunch for**
2 **their children in primary school**

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Shortened version of the title: Parents’ perspectives on packed lunches

Key words: food choice; school nutrition; children; parents

3 **Acknowledgements**

4 The authors thank the schools and parents for participating in this study.

5 **Conflict of interests**

6 None.

7

8 **Abstract**

9 **Objective:** To examine the factors influencing parents' selection of packed lunches over a
10 school lunch, the food choices made in their preparation, and the role of children therein.

11 **Design:** A qualitative approach using semi-structured focus group and individual interviews.

12 **Setting:** Four primary schools in a UK local authority.

13 **Participants:** Twenty parents providing a packed lunch to their children (age 5-11 years).

14 **Analysis:** An inductive thematic approach was used to identify categories and themes.

15 Rigour in the data analysis was maintained through internal discussion and review by
16 researchers, until consensus was reached.

17 **Results:** Children emerged as active decision-makers, exerting substantial power particularly
18 in the initial decision to have a packed lunch and then in influencing their contents. The
19 packed lunch could be a source of anxiety for some parents; however, ultimately parents'
20 attitudes and perceptions revolved around their key requirement that the lunch was eaten and
21 providing a lunchbox was a means of achieving this.

22 **Conclusions:** This study highlights children's growing authority over everyday food
23 decisions, and further research to explore children's perceptions of their role in food
24 provision is needed. The study's findings have implications for school food, nutrition
25 education and school-based interventions. Frameworks that look to improve children's
26 nutrition in this area should reflect children's growing status as food decision makers and
27 consider how this can be employed to support and sustain positive changes.

28

29 **Key words:** *food choice; school nutrition; children; parents*

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INTRODUCTION

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Children spend a large proportion of their year in school and a packed lunch brought in from home is the preference for many UK children¹. As well as contributing an important element to a pupil's diet, packed lunches can represent overall diet and food provision available at home. Studies²⁻⁵ have raised concerns surrounding the nutritional quality of packed lunches, as has a government commissioned review of school food (School Food Plan)⁶. Strategies to improve the quality are gaining momentum at school and local government level. Many UK primary schools implement 'packed lunch policies'. These guidelines vary between schools but generally outline suggestions to parents, and encourage the exclusion of chocolate, crisps (potato chips) and sugar-sweetened beverages.

For pupils, the alternative to bringing in a packed lunch from home, is eating a school lunch (also known as a school dinner) which is provided by school caterers. Typically, this will comprise a hot meal (meat-based, or vegetarian, or baked potato with a filling) or a sandwich, as well as a drink and dessert/pudding. School lunches are subject to school food standards⁷, which restrict the food and drinks provided. These standards were reviewed as part of the national School Food Plan⁶, and the revised standards become statutory in England at the beginning of 2015. The price of a school lunch in England ranges from £1 to £3, with an average of £2.04¹; children from low-income families are eligible to receive free school lunches under the Free School Meal (FSM) program.

In addition, the UK government in September 2014 introduced a Universal Infant Free School Meal (UIFSM) program which offered a free school lunch to *all* 4-7 year-old pupils⁸.

56 One of the aspirations behind this initiative was to encourage the uptake of school lunches, as
57 an alternative to a packed lunch. Schools are increasingly utilised in public health
58 interventions, especially around diet and obesity prevention. Accomplishing this via schools
59 can be limited and therefore engagement with parents' perspectives around food provision is
60 critical.

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62 Parents play a key role as nutritional gatekeeper for their children, influencing the provision
63 of food both inside and outside the home. Significantly, parents act as key moderators of food
64 in the home⁹, and the influences of a positive home food environment, maternal diet quality
65 and parents' food practice on children's healthy eating behaviour are reported¹⁰⁻¹². The
66 difficulties that parents face in promoting healthy eating practices at home, and the strategies
67 that they implement are also reported¹³. Previous work indicates parents' desire to have
68 control over their children's diet at school¹⁴, and their ability to make accurate predictions of
69 their likes and dislikes¹⁵.

70

71 There is limited research on packed lunches from parents' perspectives, and whilst previous
72 research found a strong preference for packed lunches and emphasised their social aspects for
73 children⁹, a greater understanding of parents' perceptions is critical. This is particularly the
74 case given the current drive by local government and schools to improve the quality of the
75 foods provided by parents in packed lunches.

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77 In considering parents' perceptions and practices related to packed lunches and the primary
78 theoretical considerations of food provision by parents, parent-child interaction and school
79 settings, the socioecological model¹⁶ highlights the complex relationship between individuals
80 and the environment, with behaviour being influenced by multiple levels¹⁶, some proximal

81 and others more distal. The inner level of influence captures the individual's setting and
82 interactions with those closest, e.g. with parents, family members and with peers. The next
83 level of influence comprises the interactions between components e.g. between parents and
84 the school community, packed lunch policies. More distal factors comprise settings that have
85 indirect contact but nevertheless influence, e.g. parents' work patterns, as well as the social
86 and cultural values and customs exerting influence. Reciprocal determinism is relevant to the
87 socioecological model, whereby environment and behaviour influence each other and the
88 individual can also influence environment, e.g. home food environment. The socioecological
89 model has been used previously to consider dietary behaviour including obesogenic dietary
90 intake in young children¹⁷, fruit and vegetable intake in a preschool setting¹⁸, and maternal
91 considerations regarding how much food to offer their children¹⁹. Reciprocal determinism
92 also forms the central principle of social cognitive theory which emphasises the interaction
93 between the individual, environmental influences, and behaviour^{20,21}. Social cognitive theory
94 has been used widely to examine nutrition behaviour, including fruit and vegetable intake in
95 children²², farm-to-school programs²³ and parental attitudes and barriers to healthy eating²⁴.
96 Other work has focussed on modelling and control theories of parental influence, and
97 revealed children modelling parents' eating behaviour and attitudes, as well as the role of
98 control, e.g. parents imposing control over food or using food in an attempt to control
99 behaviour²⁵.

100

101 Given the paucity of studies examining parents' perspectives with respect to packed lunches,
102 this study sought to explore parents' perceptions and practices related to packed lunches,
103 their experience of providing a packed lunch, and children's roles therein. More specifically
104 the factors relevant to the decision to opt for a packed lunch (as opposed to a school meal)

105 and the choice of items included, were central to this work. The study was informed by
106 theory considered most relevant, and in particular was guided by socioecological theory.

METHODS

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Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach using an inductive thematic methodology²⁶ was considered most appropriate. Focus group interviews were selected to promote discussion between parents and to gain an understanding of contrasting viewpoints, i.e. to benefit from the group effect²⁷. Groups were limited to 5 participants to encourage in-depth discussion, leading to more relevant and interesting data²⁸. While focus group discussions were the primary interviewing method, where a parent had difficulty attending, an individual interview was offered and conducted. The latter afforded detailed insight into parents' experiences of providing a packed lunch, and a deeper understanding of their attitudes and behaviour. To support consistency across individual and focus group interviews, both were based on the same semi-structured interview format, and guided by the same interview guide. Data collection was conducted until saturation was considered reached, and no new relevant information was emerging, with themes and categories well defined²⁹. Four focus groups (12 parents) and 8 individual interviews (8 parents) were held. All were conducted in English, audio recorded following informed consent, and took place October 2014 – November 2015, with the majority lasting 50-60 minutes.

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Participants and recruitment

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A pragmatic approach was taken to recruit parents via their children's school, with a key requirement being that they provided a packed lunch for their children on most days of a typical week. Primary schools within an urban local authority formed the sampling frame for

132 this study. In order to enhance the generalisability of the work, a strategy of sampling based
133 on Free School Meals profile was adopted. This is the percentage of pupils eligible for free
134 school meals (FSM), which is a means-tested entitlement and is utilised as a measure of
135 socioeconomic disadvantage. Accordingly, primary schools were approached in sequential
136 order based on their FSM profile and their closeness to the national average (17.0%)³⁰. Initial
137 contact was made via telephone and email; this was followed by a school visit and face-to-
138 face discussion with the Head Teacher or other senior leader with specific responsibility for
139 school food. For consenting schools, an information pack was sent by ‘pupil post’ to all
140 parents, outlining the study and inviting parents providing packed lunches on most days of a
141 typical week to participate. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University’s
142 Faculty of Health and Social Sciences’ Research Ethics Committee.

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144

145 **Data collection**

146

147 An interview guide was developed in advance; this was based on relevant concepts from
148 literature and informed by theory considered most pertinent, and drawing on the
149 socioecological model. The emphasis in the interviews was on exploring specific key topics:
150 reasons for selecting a packed lunch; foods and beverages included and their selection;
151 thoughts on the packed lunch provided; role of children in preparation; and packed lunch
152 policies. A semi-structured format was chosen according to recommended practice³¹. The
153 guide was reviewed by the researchers and tested with 4 parents of primary school children
154 taking packed lunches. Between successive focus group and individual interviews researchers
155 reviewed and refined the interview guide where necessary, based on evolving insights.

156 The first and second authors were both trained in qualitative data collection methods and
157 conducted the focus group and individual interviews. These began with an opening which
158 introduced participants to the study and the format of the data collection method. This was
159 followed by introductory questions which were designed to encourage participants to engage
160 (e.g. *“I’d like to start by asking about how many children you have at school, and what years
161 they’re in?”*). The main questions revolved around the focus of the study, e.g. *“How many
162 days a week does your child take a packed lunch to school?”*; *“What would you say are the
163 main reasons for your son or daughter having a packed lunch?”*; *“What are the main
164 priorities when it comes to what’s included in your child’s packed lunch?”*; *“What are the
165 main foods and drinks that are typically included in a packed lunch?”*; *“Overall, how would
166 you say you feel about the packed lunch?”*. These were interspersed with probes and follow-
167 on questions as necessary. Throughout the discussion and interviews, topics, questions and
168 probes were flexible depending upon the progress of the interview and emerging issues. At
169 the end of all discussions and interviews, participants were asked about any topics or issues
170 that had not already come up, which they felt were important to include. In addition, a verbal
171 summary was offered to participants to assess data adequacy.

172

173 After each focus group discussion or interview, initial insights were noted and these
174 contributed to the data to be analysed. Audio files were transcribed using a denaturalised
175 approach, with an emphasis on the content and meaning of the discussions and the
176 perceptions created and shared ³² (rather than features of speech such as pause length,
177 intonation etc.). Transcripts were checked against the audio recordings for accuracy before
178 analysis. Strict measures to safeguard data and anonymisation were implemented.

179

180 **Data Analysis**

181

182 Parents' perceptions and practices related to packed lunches, and the main factors that
183 encourage their usage and determine their contents were the focus of the data analysis. An
184 inductive thematic approach ²⁶ was used and robust data analysis provided relevant themes
185 and categories. At the outset, familiarisation (listening to the audio files, reading the
186 transcripts and notes made immediately following focus group and individual interviews)
187 provided an overview, and allowed the analysis to begin. Initially, patterns, features or
188 aspects were identified. These were then used to systematically code the data ³³, using
189 software (NVivo10, QSR International, Victoria, Australia) which also supported data
190 management and analysis. Data analysis was conducted by the first and second author, both
191 trained in qualitative data analysis and NVivo. Coding was reviewed in an iterative fashion
192 until the complement of themes and their respective grouping categories was finalised. All
193 themes and categories were named with a phrase or quote. Rigour in the data analysis was
194 maintained through internal discussion and ongoing review of codes by researchers. This was
195 to gain consensus when considering and confirming themes and categories, and was done
196 until the data were satisfactorily described and represented. The quotations provided have
197 been chosen to represent the emergent themes and categories. All quotations have been
198 anonymised using unique identifiers with a prefix P1, P2 etc.

RESULTS

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202 All participants were from 4 urban primary schools; 2 schools had FSM profiles below the
203 national average and 2 above (16.8%, 13.3% and 18.3%, 22.5%, respectively). Key
204 demographic characteristics of the parents are given in the Table 1. All (19 mothers, 1 father)
205 were actively involved in preparing packed lunches for their primary school age children (age
206 5- 11 years), who ranged in year group (years 1 - 6) and had an almost equal split of boys and
207 girls. The most common household comprised 2 adult and 2 children. Almost all participants
208 were White British, and most were degree educated.

209

210 The themes fell into 4 broad categories: Child as decision-maker; Priorities when preparing a
211 packed lunch; Parents' anxieties and reassurance; School factors. Themes are explored and
212 described below, alongside representative quotes from different parents (P1 – P20).

213

214 **Child as decision-maker**

215

216 **Child chooses packed lunch – “That's his choice not mine!”** Parents reported the decision
217 to provide a packed lunch originated from children themselves.

218 *He just wants to carry on having a packed lunch – it's what he likes and it's just how*
219 *he likes it . . . P16*

220 *I let them ... I just see what they want to do [. . .] I just go with what they want to do*
221 *. . . P4*

222 *. . . he feels he's more satisfied by being in charge of what his own food is. P20*

223 Many parents expressed their *own* preference for school lunches and recounted how they had
 224 tried to persuade their children.

225 *I have tried to persuade him and I've talked about the menus and shown him how*
 226 *many different options actually he would like to eat on that, and actually [there's] a big*
 227 *range of food he'd like. He really just doesn't want to go from a packed lunch to school*
 228 *dinners. P16*

229 *I was saying to him, "You get pudding. If you get a packed lunch I'm not going to be*
 230 *giving you pudding every day!" P18*

231 Ultimately however, parents were reticent to insist.

232 *. . . she has chosen this year to have packed lunches. And I just didn't think it was*
 233 *worth the arguing and the upset to make her have school dinners [. . .] It's pointless to*
 234 *keep going . . . everyday, you have a conversation, "I want a packed lunch; I don't like*
 235 *the school dinners." In the end [I agree]. P17*

236 Parents viewed the introduction of the UIFSM program (which offered a free school lunch to
 237 4-7 year-old pupils) as an opportunity to 'take up the offer', and 'give them a go'. Some
 238 parents explained however that they had not been able to persuade their children.

239 *My little boy - he could've had free meals from the start and I have tried to get him to*
 240 *do that just 'cause I think it would make life a bit easier and it might be a bit more*
 241 *interesting for him...but he's not very keen... P16*

242 *. . . so now it's free every day and I encourage her . . . but she will not [have a school*
 243 *meal]. P10*

244 **Child-centric content.** Children were central to what was provided in the packed lunch. This
 245 ranged from parents being mindful of children's personal preferences, parents giving options

246 to children whilst making packed lunches, to children themselves making specific requests
 247 when shopping. Parents were aware of what would be ‘acceptable’ and explained that
 248 children were “not shy about giving feedback about anything they don’t like.” P8

249 *So yes, if we put tomato it will spoil the sandwich for him, so he'll have cucumber*
 250 *more frequently. P20*

251 *they will [say] “Can we get some yogurt”, “Can we get some of these cereal bars” or*
 252 *“Can I have tuna in my lunch this week?” P16*

253 *...we do Frubes (fromage frais product) ...but he won’t eat own brand ones...he will*
 254 *only eat Frubes – apparently they taste different! [laughs] P6*

255

256 **Priorities when preparing a packed lunch**

257

258 **What will be eaten – “Ultimately you want the child to eat at lunchtime, don't you?”** It
 259 was vital for parents, first and foremost, that the packed lunch was eaten.

260 *So I know if I put ham in the sandwiches, or salami, or whatever... I know that that's*
 261 *what she likes and there's a good strong chance she's gonna eat it. P11*

262 *I know that he will eat what I put in his packed lunch[...]It was more that, that I could*
 263 *guarantee he would eat his packed lunch because I'd put something in there that he'd*
 264 *like. P13*

265

266 **Providing a treat.** Providing ‘a treat’ in the packed lunch was important to parents, and
 267 interestingly they often qualified the inclusion of a treat, e.g. it was small, or “along the same
 268 lines” as school lunches, because the “kids on school dinners will be having a pudding”.

269 ...we tend to buy multipacks of Kit Kats or Twixes, tend not to go for the big chocolate
 270 bars but the two-fingered ones, or the single Twixes or sometimes it might be something
 271 like a 'Mr Kipling cake', or something like that, always have something like that. P20

272 I just put a flapjack in there...it's not chocolate - just raisins, stuff like that, just put ...
 273 that's a treat for that. P12

274 I let him have one kind of treat thing so whether it's like a small chocolate bar like a
 275 2-fingered Kit Kat, or a Penguin, or like half a bag of crisps... P19

276 Some parents talked about a 'treat lunchbox' on Fridays or for school trips.

277 And then on Fridays she has a treat lunchbox...where she will have say a cookie or a
 278 muffin...and a bag of crisps...but there's no crisps the rest of the week. P9

279

280 **Price.** When shopping for packed lunch contents, parents selected items based on
 281 supermarket offers, whilst also ensuring items were "acceptable" to their children.

282 ... it is mainly price and offers [...] so I know which kind of brand yoghurts they
 283 like... I'd always look for them if they're on offer... P6

284 ... it varies ... I'll often use the squeezezy tube yoghurt.....Frubes yeah [laughs] ...

285 Sometimes they will have Petits Filous or Little Stars (yogurt or fromage frais), very
 286 often – whatever is on sale in ASDA (supermarket retailer) in that range. P4

287 Generally parents avoided "expensive" pre-packaged lunch products, reserving these for
 288 special occasions only.

289

290 **Parents' anxieties and reassurance**

291

292 **Parents' anxieties.** The pressure to make an interesting lunchbox was raised by parents.

293 *it's a hard job with children now – they've got more choices – I don't like that. You*
 294 *know I suppose in the 70s you got your sandwich spread sandwich, you got your fish*
 295 *paste sandwich or chicken slices...that was all you got. That was tough – you didn't*
 296 *have a choice. And now children are going, “I don't like this! I don't like that!” and it's*
 297 *kind of, I think it's added pressure for parents. P14*

298 *I'd like to provide more variety than a sandwich as such but they don't eat it when I*
 299 *do so ... you know I think I've accepted that now after years and years. P8*

300

301 Ultimately parents were pragmatic and pointed to the fundamental aim that the lunch was
 302 eaten.

303 *I think you can get a bit wrapped up in trying very hard to make their lunch always*
 304 *seem exciting...but if you step back from that, you think, “Actually it doesn't really*
 305 *matter if they're eating pretty much the same thing every day - 'cause it is just their*
 306 *lunch” - I quite often just eat the same thing – so it doesn't really matter. P16*

307 *She's [daughter] fine with it. I personally think it's a bit boring to have pretty much*
 308 *the same thing every day: I wouldn't want to eat pretty much the same thing every day,*
 309 *but then I'm not 8...so it does the job and she's alright with it. P17*

310

311 **Checking afterwards.** Parents highlighted the ability to monitor lunchboxes and feel
 312 reassured that what they provided was eaten, or alternatively change the contents
 313 accordingly.

314 *. . . and we say that, “Your yoghurt pot and your wrappers or anything like that: put*
 315 *them back in the box, because then [you can] go out and make [the] most of your time*

316 *to play”, but really of course we said that so that we know what’s been opened, what*
 317 *she’s eaten, what she’s left . . . So I’d sooner find half chewed this [or] that and the*
 318 *others in there to sort out and know what she’s had. P9*

319 *You can always check in at the end of the day, “Did you like it?” and change what*
 320 *you've done there. P20*

321 This ability to monitor was seen as a distinct advantage over school lunches where “you don’t
 322 know how much they’re eating” and “you take their word for it”. Indeed, several parents
 323 (with one of their children on school lunches) voiced concerns over not knowing how much
 324 their child on school lunches was eating.

325 For some parents, the packed lunch not only provided valuable feedback but also then served
 326 as a focal point for parent-child interaction; parents appreciated the ‘connection’ a packed
 327 lunch provided:

328 *There is something about parents being involved with their children and in what*
 329 *they're eating and talking about it, enjoying putting it together. P20*

330 *He likes me to show him, in the morning, before we leave the house . . . what's in his*
 331 *lunch box, so he knows. He just likes that; it's kind of become part of our little morning*
 332 *routine. P19*

333

334 **School factors**

335

336 **Time to play** – “**he's in such a rush to eat and get out**”. Children rushing lunch was
 337 perceived as an important issue with parents reporting their children keen to consume their
 338 lunch quickly to maximise time in play.

339 *The other thing is he bolts his food and then he's straight out in the playground to*
 340 *play football. P13*

341 *I get the impression there's a little gang of them – they sit down, they wolf down what*
 342 *they can as quick as possible and then they're straight out. And I think sitting down to*
 343 *actually enjoy your meal is just not kind of happening. P18*

344 *I don't know whether it's because also there's an element maybe that children want to*
 345 *eat it as fast as they can so they can go have extra playtime . . . P8*

346 This rush to eat had implications for packed lunch contents, as this parent explains:

347 *I can really sense with him: it's the easiest thing to eat as quickly as possible. So if I*
 348 *put a carrot in...well I've stopped putting as much veg in because I've just found he just*
 349 *doesn't want to eat – he obviously doesn't want to spend the time to sit and eat*
 350 *it...sitting and chewing. P18*

351

352 **Packed lunch policy.** Parents relayed varying levels of knowledge and detail for their child's
 353 school's 'Packed Lunch Policy', with crisps, chocolate and fizzy drinks commonly quoted as
 354 prohibited. Overall, parents were in favour of the guidance, and felt the restricted items were
 355 "all the things you'd assume" and was "fair enough".

356 Nevertheless, parents asserted that the contents of children's packed lunches were parents'
 357 responsibility ultimately, and questioned whether enforcement was possible in any case.

358 *... not supposed to have sweets and chocolates but I don't know if that's a policy and*
 359 *what would happen if they did? I don't think they'd get whipped out the bag,*
 360 *but...[laughs]. . . P14*

361 *I kind of think as a parent I guess you want that freedom of choice, don't you*
362 *really?...and if you want to give your child something they're gonna eat at the end of*
363 *the day and obviously if children don't want to eat anything healthy then you still want*
364 *them to eat - so you're gonna give them something they're gonna eat - whether it's*
365 *healthy or not. P18*

366 Interestingly, an incident that happened a few years ago was brought up; parents seemed
367 reassured that it hadn't happened since:

368 *And I do remember there was a bit of a furore...when somebody came round and took*
369 *out of children's packed lunches everything that they considered to be chocolate, so*
370 *that included things like, I think chocolate coated biscuits - not even a chocolate bar -*
371 *and that did cause a bit of a...because it's not a Nazi state; you can put in what you*
372 *want in your child's packed lunch - regardless of whether they think it's right or not.*
373 *That did happen once but that hasn't happened since. P16*

374 Parents referred to children being aware of what was allowed with the packed lunch policy,
375 with some children trying to persuade parents to contravene the policy by reporting *other*
376 children bringing in restricted items.

377 *I followed it [policy] all of last year...didn't put any chocolate or you know Kit Kats*
378 *or anything like that. I didn't put any crisps in. . . . from talking to my son: he said to*
379 *me every day for a year, "But everybody else has this! Everybody!" P6*

380 *[daughter] insists that they are in everybody else's packed lunches but not hers*
381 *[laughs] [...]**I thought she were lying to me, I thought she were fibbin', that everyone*
382 *else has crisps and she doesn't. P5*

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DISCUSSION

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In this study, parents' perceptions revealed children as active decision-makers in their selection of foods for their lunch in school. These findings indicate a shift in the prominence of children in everyday food decisions. Whilst previous research has reported how children can negotiate food choice with parents including 'pester power'³⁴, and exert influence over family diets³⁵, the *extent* of the authority as shown in this study is revealing. This was most clearly seen in the initial decision to have a packed lunch (and not a school lunch). Further research to explore the perceptions of primary school age children themselves and their role as active decision-makers in packed lunches and more generally in food provision at home, is required.

Parents' focus was on fulfilling children's needs, preferences and specific requirements in providing a packed lunch. This concurs with other work^{36 37}, as does the importance that parents in this study placed on packed lunch contents being eaten³⁸. The inclusion of 'a treat' has been observed previously³⁷, and this study revealed parents qualifying the inclusion of a treat. This may reflect the growing scrutiny that packed lunches have attracted in recent years and parents wanting to explain their rationale.

Children were keen to consume their lunch quickly in order to maximise time in play, reflecting prior work to varying degrees^{34,39}. This study indicated how this influenced what parents provided, in particular the exclusion of certain foods, e.g. vegetables.

409 In accordance with other research ³⁸, the lunchbox could be perceived as a source of anxiety.
410 Ultimately however, parents in this study were pragmatic and as long as their child was
411 happy with the contents, then providing a lunchbox fulfilled their objective; parents had come
412 to accept what they were providing and felt they should not “beat themselves up about it”.
413 This may signal a shift in parents’ views, and reflect the growing status of children in food
414 decisions.

415

416 The connection provided by a lunchbox including the ability to monitor, is an interesting
417 outcome – especially alongside parents’ apparent ‘delegation’ of food decisions to their
418 children. Previous research has described the lunchbox in the context of some parents’
419 attempt to maintain influence over their children ³⁸ and retain control ¹⁴. In the presented
420 study, the lunchbox may also provide more of a reinforcement of the connection between
421 child and parent.

422

423 Whilst this study’s findings indicate that the child plays an important role in whether a
424 packed lunch is taken to school and its contents, this should be placed within the context of
425 the home food environment and family in forming these preferences in the first place. Parents
426 create home food environments that may influence eating behaviour ¹⁰, likewise the influence
427 of maternal diet quality on children’s has been reported ¹¹, as has the importance of parents
428 modelling food practice ¹².

429

430 The theory informing the study design, most notably socioecological theory, was effective in
431 identifying emergent relationships and describing parents’ observations of their children’s
432 behaviour related to packed lunches. Reciprocal determinism, where environment and

433 behaviour influence each other and the individual can also influence environment, was
434 evident, e.g. home food environment, parent-child interaction related to the packed lunch.

435

436 The study design enabled insights into parents' perspectives regarding packed lunches for
437 their children (age 5- 11 years) at primary school. The potential for individual participants to
438 exert influence within the focus group discussions however, is acknowledged. Further, the
439 findings should be considered in the context of the sample and school characteristics. Whilst
440 thematic saturation was evident, parents interviewed may not reflect other parents'
441 perspectives, and the full scope of parents' perceptions should be explored in further
442 research. In addition, quantitative empirical work to examine the presence of the identified
443 themes and parent-child interaction around food choice is recommended.

444

445

446

447 **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

448

449

450 Children's role in their packed lunch provision highlights their growing authority over
451 everyday food decisions. This has implications for staff involved in school food (e.g.
452 lunchtime supervisors, catering managers) and nutrition education (e.g. senior leadership,
453 class teachers), and provides an opportunity to develop initiatives to promote better food
454 choice and subsequent nutrition.

455

456 The introduction of UIFSM had influenced parents to encourage their children to try school
457 lunches, concurring with reported increases nationally⁴⁰. The overriding factor however was

458 acceptability by children, and some parents reported not being able to convince their children
459 to take up the offer of a free school lunch. This may be reflective of the current take up rate
460 of 85%⁴¹. Closer pupil engagement in school meals is worthy of further consideration, as is
461 the promotion of meals to children themselves.

462

463 Another issue of interest is the timing of playtime. Switching playtime to before lunch
464 removes the incentive to finish lunch quickly and may have a positive influence on pupils'
465 lunchtime consumption. Some US studies^{42,43} have indicated promise in this approach.
466 Whilst this has inevitable follow-on implications on the school day, it is an approach that is
467 worthy of consideration here.

468

469 Schools' unparalleled access to parents means that they are often called upon to support or
470 engage with parents. Increasingly they are utilised in public health interventions, especially
471 around diet and obesity prevention. Packed lunches provide a unique medium, as they
472 connect the school, parent and pupil. Given the central role of children in the food provided,
473 as highlighted in this study, efforts targeting children and parents together may be
474 particularly effective. Similarly, efforts to support parents in modulating children's authority
475 and for example, requests for foods, could be valuable.

476

477 In conclusion, this study has highlighted how children (age 5- 11 years) explicitly make
478 decisions about having a packed lunch in the first place, and also its contents. Further
479 research to explore children's perceptions of their role as active decision-makers in food
480 provision is needed. The growing authority of children over everyday food decisions has
481 implications for school food and nutrition education, and should inform the development of
482 public health initiatives looking to improve children's food choice behaviour. This is

483 specifically relevant given the ongoing utility of schools as arenas for public health
484 interventions, and for example co-targeting parents and children may provide a way forward
485 in improving children's food choice and subsequent nutrition.

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- 605

606 **Table 1** Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants in Focus Group Discussions
 607 and Individual Interviews on their Provision of Packed Lunches for their Children in Primary
 608 School

Gender		Child's gender [†]	
Female	19	Female	12
Male	1	Male	13
Age		Child's year group [†]	
20-24 years	1	Y1 (age 5-6 years)	5
25-29 years	0	Y2 (age 6-7 years)	3
30-34 years	4	Y3 (age 7-8 years)	8
35-39 years	6	Y4 (age 8-9 years)	3
40-44 years	6	Y5 (age 9-10 years)	5
45-49 years	3	Y6 (age 10-11 years)	1
Education *			
No formal qualifications	1	Household	
GCSE/O Level/ CSE	2	1 adult 1 child	3
A Levels or equivalent	4	1 adult 2 children	3
Degree or equivalent	12	2 adult 2 children	8
Ethnicity		2 adult 3 children	5
White British	17	3 adult 1 child	1
White Irish	1		
Any other white	1		
Asian/Asian British: Indian	1		

609 *not all participants provided all information

610 [†]children within the household, at primary school and taking packed lunches (currently or
 611 recently)

612