

'One pot fits all' gives children healthier diet than children's meals, parents told

Mike Wade

Youngsters who eat the same food as their parents — and are not indulged with "children's meals" — have the most nutritious diets, new research has found.

A study of 2,200 five-year-olds in Scotland found that "left to their own devices, children enjoyed foods that are more calorie-dense and nutrient-poor" such as chips or pizza, but benefited much more if they learnt to eat the same meal as their parents.

While these findings may prove challenging for a mother faced with a sulky child who will not eat up his or her sprouts, they have profound implications for public health policy.

Valeria Skafida, a research fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research for Families and Relationships, claimed that the study proved that important eating habits develop during the early years.

"Preventing unhealthy eating habits from developing is likely to be easier and more efficient than changing food preferences that have become well ingrained," Dr Skafida said.

"Offering separate 'children's food' for a main meal may often result in children missing out nutritionally, for example if vegetables are omitted.

"It is likely that in cases where children eat different foods, they are eating a less nutritious option. This is already known to be the case with kid's menus



GETTY IMAGES

A rare sight, although eating together is less beneficial than eating the same food

in restaurants." The study, published in *Sociology of Health and Illness*, demonstrated that other eating habits had a much smaller impact on the nutritional value of diet.

Among these, not consuming a main meal during the day or at regular times, frequent snacking between meals and

eating in the living room or bedroom were all weakly associated with poorer diets. While the research found benefits in family meals, it also confirmed that meal times could be a difficult part of the day for some people.

A quarter of respondents — normally mothers — said that family meals

were never or only occasionally enjoyable for everyone. Nearly one in seven (14 per cent) families found that meal-times were rushed, with a fifth reporting that they never or rarely had the chance to talk during meals.

"Eating the same food is more important than eating together," Dr Skafida said. "It's good news for a parent with busy work schedules who can't eat with their kids. They shouldn't feel bad. I do think there are aspects of eating together which could be beneficial, such

It is likely that in cases where children eat different foods, the option is less nutritious

as getting to talk to a child. But if you can't eat with them, then at least make sure they eat the same food as you."

The paper recommends that government guidelines should be kept simple and that some existing targets, such as providing up to 2g of salt to children under 3, are unrealistic and impractical for parents.

The central message of the study was simple, Dr Skafida said. "There shouldn't be one meal for father, one meal for the older daughter, one meal for mum, and so on. Cook in one pot for all."