



Nutrition Society Congress 2024, 2–5 July 2024

The Food-NEWS Project: How children and adolescents experience nutrition education and food messaging in today's food environment

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Food literacy is a valuable life skill, and developing these skills early in life is shown to have a positive association with cooking attitude and behaviours, health and diet quality in later life^(1,2). There is a plethora of food messaging available for children and adolescents but little evidence on which strategies are effective and why^(1,2). As part of a larger research programme funded by *safe*food, the current study explored the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of children (411yr) and adolescents (12-18yr) on existing models and approaches on food and nutrition education, and food messaging on the island of Ireland.

This research was based on qualitative methodology with friendship pairs with children and focus groups with adolescents to obtain their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes on existing models and approaches on food messaging. Data were collected to reflect different groups in terms of social class, age, region and rural/urban. Recruitment and data collection were completed in schools on the island of Ireland. Data were analysed using thematic analysis⁽³⁾. Ethical approval was obtained.

Using data from 12 friendship pairs (n = 10 males, n = 14 females; mean age 8 (SD2.0)yr) and 6 focus groups (n = 16 males, n = 30 females, mean age 15 (SD1.6)yr), three overarching themes were identified, namely (1) “*Food messages that made the most impact*”, (2) “*Food messaging through surveillance and monitoring*”, and (3) “*Ideas to improve food messaging*”. Overall, children and adolescents reported mixed experiences, perceptions and attitudes to food and nutrition education, and food messaging. They recalled food messages from social media, schools, sports coaches and family, with the most impact included an element of fun and practical components, such as cooking, tasting and gardening, being most memorable. They had an awareness and a basic knowledge of nutrition and food messaging, such as “*you need to drink more water if you are exercising*”, “*eat vegetables with this meal as you've had enough pizza this week*”, “*that's too much sugar*”, and “*we only have treats in our lunch boxes on Fridays*”. There was an indication that social media such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, presents both potential harms and potential benefits on the attitudes to and knowledge of nutrition, and subsequent dietary behaviours among children and adolescents.

This study found that children and adolescents had mixed experiences, perceptions and attitudes to food and nutrition education, and food messaging. Although children and adolescents may be aware of the healthy eating guidelines, there appears to be a disconnect in translating into practical everyday use. Food and nutrition education, and food messaging for children and adolescents needs to be communicated with simple clear messages, consistently with repetition using practical and fun methods in partnership with schools, and families, taking account of the harm/benefit potential of social media.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by Safefood.

References

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