

The Food Foundation's Early Years Nutrition Study

The Food Foundation is conducting an in-depth study on early years food and nutrition to investigate how the food system and food policy is contributing to the high levels of overweight and obesity in early childhood, and to identify what policy action is needed to address this.

We want to ensure that food systems and food policy support every child in the UK to enter primary school well-nourished and a healthy weight. In the lead up to the next general election, we want to raise early years nutrition up the political agenda. Transitioning through the life stages of a family, our Early Years Study will provide a foundation of evidence on which to advocate for better policies impacting early years diet and nutrition.

BACKGROUND

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY YEARS NUTRITION:

A considerable amount of the focus on children's food policy is placed on school-aged children. However, we know that by the time children start primary school (aged 4-5), more than 1 in 5 children are living with overweight or obesity. As early as from conception, the mother's diet can influence the future health of the child. What and how babies are fed in the first year is known to be critical in determining a child's long term obesity risk and establishing eating habits that affect health outcomes in adolescence and even adulthood. It is too late to wait until children start school before introducing effective childhood obesity interventions – preventative measures are needed much earlier.

To give children the best possible start in life, we need to identify the current gaps and issues in policy that allow so many children to be experiencing overweight and obesity at such a young age.

OUR PREVIOUS WORK IN THIS AREA:

In 2018-2019, we coordinated the **Children's Future Food Inquiry**, undertaking a thorough investigation into children's food across the UK and marking the first attempt to directly and systematically seek the views of children and young people experiencing food poverty. As part of this Inquiry, we explored issues for low-income families around early years and pre-school nutrition. This identified major gaps in existing policy to protect the youngest children, particularly around nursery food with many children in nursery not eligible for free meals and no mandatory nutritional standards (other than in Northern Ireland). Existing policies were also found to not be well implemented, most notably with the Healthy Start Scheme failing to reach many young families in need.

Since the Inquiry report, our **Children's Right2Food Campaign** has been campaigning for improvements to the Healthy Start scheme including increasing the eligibility and the value of the voucher, in line with the recommendation made in Part 1 of the National Food Strategy.

We will now build on this initial work and expand the evidence base on early years nutrition.

PROJECT DETAILS

PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to:

- Explore the underlying systemic failures in the food system that result in the structural, commercial, behavioural and nutritional determinants that lead to 1 in 5 UK children living with overweight or obesity by the time they reach primary school.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of existing policy instruments that seek to enable the consumption of a healthy diet during pregnancy, infancy, 1- to 2-year-olds and pre-school children and identify the critical gaps and issues in policy and practice that need addressing.

STRUCTURE

The study will be broken down into five work packages transitioning through a child's life course from pre conception to starting school. These work packages will be:

- Starting school (setting out the problem)
- Preconception and pregnancy
- Breastfeeding and formula feeding
- Introduction of solids to 2-year-olds
- Pre-school (2- to 5-year-olds)

For each age, we will determine what current diets look like, and the health implications of them. We will look at the drivers of these food choices (including affordability, influence by industry and the food environment, levels of support and awareness of nutritional advice). We will explore the barriers facing pregnant women in securing a healthy diet, and the challenges experienced by parents in providing a healthy diet for their children from birth to pre-school age.

ACTIVITIES

Each work package will synthesise the existing evidence base and generate new evidence to further strengthen knowledge and understanding of the issues. This will take the form of quantitative data analysis, literature reviews, focus groups and key informant interviews.

We will use this evidence to reshape public thinking and understanding on early years nutrition and provide a catalysis for purposeful action from public policymakers and businesses. We will also explore the culture change needed to tackle the stigma surrounding many of these issues. Crucially, we will highlight the experiences of people who have experienced challenges with early years nutrition to ensure that the project is informed by real life experience.

In addition, we will map existing policies to see where the gaps and issues are currently meaning that young children are falling through the net, and test potential policy recommendations to assess potential impact and effectiveness in addressing these gaps. This will allow us to make a clear set of evidence-informed recommendations to facilitate better early years nutrition and childhood obesity prevention. We want to empower people with lived experience to raise awareness, and campaign for change and the implementation of these recommendations.

We will form a Lived Experience Group to bring new insights and ensure that our work is grounded in the lives of real people with first-hand knowledge of the challenges and opportunities within early years diet and nutrition.

We will develop plans around policy and civil society engagement as the project progresses.

OUTPUTS

- A series of standalone reports on each life stage
- An “Early Years Data Dashboard” alongside our **Children’s Right2Food Dashboard**.
- A Policy Catalogue that will be developed together with a Policy Catalogue covering all our Children’s Food work.
- A final report bringing together all the findings, summarising all the evidence and making recommendations on how to improve early years nutrition.
- Early years recommendations to be incorporated into a wider manifesto for change – a clear set of key policy recommendations informed by the evidence on the actions that need to be taken by policymakers to address these issues in lead-up to 2024 elections.

COMMUNICATIONS OUTPUTS

- A drumbeat of communications moments in line with short reports for each work package – presenting key evidence to the media, parliamentary, government and CSO stakeholders.
- A series of webinars in line with the release of evidence will culminate in a launch event for the final report.
- A key set of communications assets (digital, short film, podcasts).

SCOPE

This study will look at all demographics and groups in the population but will particularly narrow in on where there are dietary inequalities experienced by certain groups (including socioeconomic groups, ethnic groups etc). We will be looking at the similarities and differences between the four nations in the UK.

Although important factor in child weight, physical activity is not in the scope of this study.

FUNDING AND RESOURCES

This project is funded by the Nuffield Foundation as part of the Food Foundation’s Dietary Inequalities project, and by Impact on Urban Health (formerly St Guys and St Thomas’ Charitable Trust) and AIM Foundation as part of the Food Foundation’s Children’s Right2Food project.

The work will be overseen by the Children’s Right2Food team at The Food Foundation with consultancy support in qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. We will partner with external providers for survey data collection and delivery of focus groups. Our work will be overseen by a Project Strategy Board.

TIME SCALE

The project will run from 2021-2023, with a drumbeat of communications outputs delivering key evidence from each work package, publishing the final report and manifesto ahead of the General Election.

WITH THANKS TO OUR FUNDERS

Impact
on **Urban
Health**

