

Children pushed to eat junk food over holidays by UK government campaign

Supermarket 'meal deals' aimed at low-income families fall below schools food standards, says expert

Tom Wall

The Observer Sun 24 Jul 2022

Struggling families are being encouraged by the government to feed their children on discounted supermarket cafe menus comprising ultra-processed junk food over the summer holidays, experts have claimed.

The government's Help for Households campaign last week urged families hit by the cost of the living crisis to take advantage of new or existing supermarket meal deals, including a "kids eat for £1" offer in Asda and "kids eat free" with an adult paying customer in Morrisons.

David Buttress, the government's "cost of living tsar" and a co-founder of the food delivery company Just Eat, said the first phase of the campaign covered the school holidays. "It is a good way to support people over the summer holidays when school meals aren't available," he said.

However, analysis by Professor Greta Defeyter, whose research has informed the government's holiday food programme, suggests the menus fall below school food standards.

Defeyter said: "The majority of these foods are ultra-processed, which have been linked to obesity and cancer. The token nod to vegetables is the serving of peas and one meal being accompanied by a salad."

Children in the Asda superstore cafes can choose hot meals such as chicken nuggets, fish fingers and all-day breakfasts. But only two of five hot food options include vegetable or salad sides. Morrisons cafe offers children chicken nuggets, fish fingers and sausages. But only one of five has a vegetable side.

Primary schools should only provide deep-fried starchy food once a week but, the analysis found, Asda's menu lists chips on three occasions.

Schools should also provide at least one portion of fruit and vegetables a day, but Asda's hot food menu lists no fruit options, and while Morrisons provides a single piece of fruit, peas are served with just one meal. Schools should only serve manufactured meat products once a week, yet these ultra-processed foods are available every day on the supermarket's menus.

Professor Defeyter added that these menus do not meet children's dietary needs. "The government should not be promoting menus primarily consisting of ultra-processed foods. Families should have quality, nutritious food all year round," she said.

"If charitable organisations delivering the government's holiday activity and food programme are expected to provide children with meals that comply to school food standards, why can't big supermarkets do the same?"

Asda said it launched the scheme to help the thousands of children who experience hunger when the schools close for summer. "The menu includes hot and cold meals, fruit and vegetables to provide different options for children," said a spokesperson.

Morrisons said all its children's menu items are served with a piece of fruit and a drink. "We support local communities by donating nutritious food to schools and groups throughout the summer holidays," they said.

Barbara Crowther from food charity Sustain said children's menus were often overloaded with foods full of saturated fat, salt and sugar. She said: "Too much consumption of those types of meals over the summer could store up major health problems for children in the longer term."

Over 40% of children aged between 10 and 11 are obese and overweight in England, while children in deprived areas are twice as likely to be obese as those in wealthy areas.

Under pressure from charities and campaigners concerned about rising numbers of parents using food banks outside of term time, the government rolled out a national holiday activity and food programme

last year. However, the schemes, which are put by councils, only run for 16 days of the 6-week summer holiday, and only children eligible for free school meals are entitled to attend, leaving over 800,000 children in poverty, without any specific government-funded provision.

Crowther added: “Once again, we see the government looking to supermarkets and big businesses to cover up their own failure to ensure all children can access healthy food these summer holidays.”

A government spokesperson said: “Ensuring children have healthy meals is a priority, which is why our £200m-a-year holiday activities and food programme provides healthy meals to children from low-income families. Last summer over 600,000 children accessed the programme, including over 495,000 eligible for free school meals.”