

## INCREASING CHILDREN'S VEGETABLE CONSUMPTION



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[www.vegpower.org.uk](http://www.vegpower.org.uk)



**'Eat Them To Defeat Them' is a campaign developed by the not-for-profit alliance, Veg Power, in partnership with ITV, to increase children's vegetable intake. Its approach combines the power of advertising with a schools' programme, and evaluation suggests it is having a much-needed impact on children's vegetable eating habits. Here, we look at the results of the 2021 campaign.**



Currently, vegetable consumption levels in the UK are not meeting government recommendations.

According to the NDNS, almost a third (29%) of primary school-aged children are eating less than one portion of veg a day, decreasing to just 23% of 11-16 year olds.<sup>1</sup> Research published this year from the University of Norwich corroborates these low consumption levels, with 28% of primary school children eating the recommended five-a-day and just under 1 in 10 not eating any fruit or vegetables at all.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Hayhoe et al (2021)<sup>2</sup> found that children who eat five or more portions of fruit and vegetables a day also have improved mental health, suggesting that the benefits of vegetable consumption extend beyond our physical health.<sup>2</sup> We also know that parents can find it a struggle to get their kids to eat vegetables.<sup>3</sup>

Veg Power was formed in 2019 to inspire children into vegetable-loving habits that will remain for life and, in turn, be shared with their children. Its ambition is to get every child aged 2-19 eating one more portion of veg every day by moving away from the traditional five-a-day messaging to a concept that children will find fun and engaging.

Veg Power aims to create a lasting shift in vegetable consumption by slowly reshaping children's perceptions of vegetables. To do this, a wide range of professionals with differing skills and experience were involved in the concept development phase of the Eat Them To Defeat Them campaign, including dietitians, nutritionists, public health professionals, school caterers, children's entertainers, child psychologists, chefs, supermarkets and advertising executives.

Children were also consulted via wide scale online surveys and smaller focus groups. The research resulted in a campaign centred around a counter-intuitive, fun and humorous idea that vegetables are trying to take over the world and the only way they can be beaten is for them to be eaten. A TV advert was created and has since been supported by ITV, Channel 4 and Sky. Celebrity supporters have included Ant & Dec, Team GB, Will.i.am and Jamie Oliver.

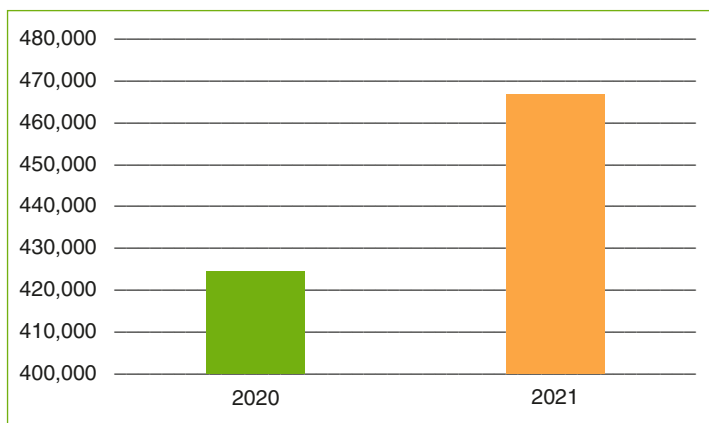
### WHAT DID THE 2021 SCHOOLS' CAMPAIGN CONSIST OF?

The schools' campaign followed the same branding and design as the TV advertising and was launched just after the ads appeared during primetime family viewing slots. A different family

### REFERENCES

Please visit: [www.NHDMag.co.uk/article-references.html](http://www.NHDMag.co.uk/article-references.html)

Figure 1: The number of primary school children participating in the 'Eat Them to Defeat Them' schools programme, 2020 and 2021



favourite vegetable featured each week (broccoli, peas, sweetcorn, peppers, carrots and tomatoes). These were chosen because of their accessibility and affordability, plus they are easy for kids to like and, while some children are routinely eating these varieties, Veg Power research suggests that many aren't.<sup>4</sup>

To encourage children to try new vegetables, a range of materials were provided to inform and brief schools and catering teams (eg, guidebooks and an assembly idea to kick off the campaign) and to create a positive peer environment (eg, posters and table decorations). Once children tried the veg in school, they were given stickers and reward charts to encourage them to share their experiences with their families and to repeat, reward and normalise new vegetable-eating habits.

The school catering teams have been essential to the success of the campaign and have played a pivotal role in bringing it to life within participating schools. For example, they prepare spreads of tempting healthy veg-based tasters and treats, as well as support pupil engagement in learning projects, craft, growing and preparing food. To recognise their creativity, enthusiasm and commitment, a 'Caterer's Challenge' competition has also been run recognising their involvement.

#### HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS THE 2021 CAMPAIGN?

During last year's campaign, 468,000 kids were reached in 1800 primary schools across 235 local authorities. This was an increase on 2020 figures (the first year of the schools' programme).

To understand the campaign's impact (claimed vegetable consumption, perceptions of fun and enjoyment, coupled with a desire to repeat the experience), it was evaluated in a number of different ways: a national YouGov survey involving 955 parents and 1045 children aged 6-18 across the UK to measure the impact of the advertising and media campaign;<sup>4</sup> a schools' survey of 103 participating senior leaders, teachers, caterers and local authority public health teams;<sup>5</sup> and a family survey of 479 parents and children aged 4-11 who participated in the schools' programme.<sup>6</sup> This measured the impact of the TV and media campaign and the schools' programme together.

#### Children ate more veg

The results from the YouGov survey found that 21% of primary school-aged children in the UK who viewed the advertising and celebrity support, ate more veg as a direct result of the campaign.<sup>4</sup> This equates to 1.2 million children nationally and an increase of 290,000 children compared with the 2020 campaign. In children who were involved in the schools' programme, the results were higher with 59% claiming to have eaten more veg.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the schools' programme has greater impact and effectiveness compared with the advertising alone. Interestingly, the impact of the campaign extended to parents and older children (12+ years) in the household, with 11% and 16% respectively stating they had eaten more veg.<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNT TO SHAPE OTHER HEALTHY EATING INITIATIVES IN SCHOOLS?

### Veg Power's key five pieces of advice coming out of the campaign:

- 1 Focus on the fun. From the numerous school visits and feedback provided by participating schools, catering teams, parents and children, engaging primary school children in a fun way is an essential motivator.
- 2 A need for positive reinforcement in the home setting, so that a campaign has longevity and results in a sustained change in behaviour past the weeks it is running in schools.
- 3 Ensure the content produced is teacher-friendly and curriculum compliant.
- 4 The success of a campaign is due to a collective effort across different groups of experienced individuals; their support enables the best results.
- 5 Listen to the feedback provided, discuss with the team and amend the programme accordingly so that the campaign improves year on year.



### Success in lower-income families

The campaign was also more effective in families on lower incomes (classified as a combined household income of under £30,000 per year) compared with families on higher incomes (classified as a combined household income of more than £30,000 per year).<sup>4</sup> For example, 20% of parents from lower income families claimed their child had tried new vegetables compared with 9% of higher income families. Also, 23% of parents from lower income families ate more vegetables after the campaign compared with 6% of higher income families.<sup>4</sup> These results can be explained by the fact that the campaign was created to be accessible, affordable, supportive, non-judgemental and low pressure. In addition, the creative element of the campaign was designed to appeal to children who had low baseline levels of vegetable consumption.

### Other findings

In addition to increased vegetable intake, other areas were looked at. For example, just over three quarters of children (77%) found it made the topic of vegetables fun, which confirms that the concept works for this age group.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there was resounding support for the campaign to return, with 84% of children, 90% of parents and 93% of schools stating they would like the campaign back this year.<sup>5,6</sup> Importantly, as children were more likely to finish the vegetables on their plates during the campaign, 66% of schools confirmed there was less veg wasted.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT NEXT?

We know that changing children's perceptions of vegetables won't happen overnight. Encouraging children to eat more veg will always require sustained focus and effort. For many children, vegetables are not a desired food group and part of the problem, as identified in the recent National Food Strategy, is our food culture.<sup>7</sup> Programmes like Eat Them To Defeat Them and smaller scale grass-root initiatives are making a difference, but there is more that can be done, for example the launch of an 'Eat and Learn' initiative within schools as proposed in the National Food Strategy.<sup>7</sup>

For Veg Power, the focus in the short term will be increasing the reach of the schools' programme and exploring ways in which we can support parents to make the most of the positive opportunity the programme creates. As stated at the beginning, Veg Power's ambition is to get every child aged 2-19 eating one more portion of veg every day. Our most recent econometric analysis back in 2020 found that over 500 million extra portions of veg were consumed by children in the first 18 months of the campaign.<sup>8</sup>

Eat Them To Defeat Them 2022 will be returning as a five-week programme running from 28<sup>th</sup> February to 1<sup>st</sup> April, once again supported by a huge advertising campaign donated by ITV, Channel 4, Sky Media and with support from key supermarkets, as well as the Welsh Government. To find out more about Veg Power and their campaigns and for downloadable resources, please visit [www.vegpower.org.uk](http://www.vegpower.org.uk).