

A warm, intimate photograph of a woman wearing a brown hijab and a young girl with long dark hair. They are sitting at a dining table, embracing each other affectionately. The woman is smiling broadly, and the girl is leaning in to kiss her on the cheek. The table in front of them is set with various dishes, including a bowl of soup, a plate of food, and a glass of water. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a cozy atmosphere.

**VEGPOWER**

# Making more of family mealtimes

Market Insight Report  
Edition 7: November 2025

How do the dynamics of family  
mealtimes influence children's  
diets?

# Foreward

Shared meals play a crucial role within the family unit, especially when children are present.

As we reported in 2022<sup>1</sup>, the benefits are wide-ranging. Teenagers who dine regularly with their families are significantly more likely to say they have a high-quality relationship with their parents; while younger children learn 1,000 rare words at the dinner table compared to just 143 from parents reading storybooks aloud.

Our primary interest, of course, is dietary. At a time when the nation's health and the eating habits that do so much to shape it have never been higher on the agenda, we wanted to explore the dynamics of family mealtimes. How often do they happen? What do they look like, in terms of the type of meals served and where and how they're eaten? To what extent do parents see them as positive occasions or sources of stress and friction? Perhaps most importantly, is there a connection between family mealtimes and healthier eating (using the amount of vegetables consumed as a proxy)?

To answer these and other questions, we commissioned a large-scale, nationally representative online survey. 3,000 parents with children aged 5-11 took part, with both the adult and their primary school child responding. Fieldwork was conducted in March and April 2025. All data in this report is from that survey unless otherwise stated.

This report details the key findings, supported by

secondary data as appropriate. But it takes things a step beyond that. If we are to improve how the country eats, family mealtimes must be a priority focus. Other settings also matter, but shared meals probably represent the single biggest opportunity. The task we set ourselves, therefore, was this:

**Using evidence-based insights as a springboard, how can we support families to come together over food in better, more positive and ultimately healthier ways?**

You'll find a summary of our initial thoughts and recommendations on page 21. As always, we don't have all the answers, we share what we have learned, and what we think, in the hope that it will encourage discussion and will help others who share our mission to improve children's dietary health.

This wasn't an easy challenge and it's certainly not one we took on lightly. To help us, we turned to a high-calibre taskforce of Veg Power expert friends and supporters representing diverse perspectives and expertise (see page 31). We are immensely grateful for their insight, guidance and support as we have explored this subject. Please note that the analysis, opinions and suggestions in this report are solely those of the Veg Power team.

<sup>1</sup>'Family Evening Mealtimes', Market Insight Report Edition 3, September 2022 available at [vegpower.org.uk/insight/](http://vegpower.org.uk/insight/)

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# Executive Summary

This report focuses on family mealtimes. We know these occasions are critical for family bonding, child socialisation and younger years' learning. They should also be the ideal setting to encourage healthier eating. When 64% of parents say their child is eating two or fewer handfuls of veg per day, such encouragement is desperately needed.

At the heart of the report are learnings from the 2025 Veg Power Survey. As well as revealing the attitudes and behaviours that surround mealtimes, they contain rich insights - most especially in terms of the importance of 'family harmony'. As you'll see in our working brief, we believe supporting family harmony at mealtimes is essential to unlocking increased vegetable consumption.

## The dynamics of family mealtimes

- Family mealtimes happen frequently. While scheduling conflicts sometimes get in the way, the average family shares 5+ main meals a week. This is significantly higher than we were expecting. In future research, we will probe exactly how parents are defining a 'family meal'.
- 5 out of 7 meals eaten by children are (in their parents' language) "home cooked". Of course, this doesn't mean every meal has been prepared from scratch using fresh ingredients. The figure will include ultra-processed freezer food that is heated in the oven or microwave and served with no vegetables.
- 13% of all families – and one in four of those with a household income (HHI) below £15,000 – do not own a table. When a table is available, children tend to eat at it 4+ times a week. Screens are often present; just 24% of parents say they're banned at every mealtime.
- 80% of parents say family mealtimes are 'important' or a 'top priority', and sentiment overall is strongly positive.
- 84% of the words parents spontaneously associate with family mealtimes are either positive or very positive. Dominant words include 'fun', 'togetherness', 'happy', 'talking' and 'love'.

## Mealtimes and vegetable consumption

- Our research found there is no correlation between the frequency of family mealtimes and the number of vegetables a child eats on the average day. This contradicts conventional wisdom and is a key finding.
- While the frequency of family mealtimes is virtually identical across socio-demographic subgroups, children's veg consumption is not.
- "Fussiness" is a complex topic, but it's the biggest marker of average veg consumption. 54% of children who are "highly fussy" eat just 0 – 1 handfuls of veg per day. That's 40% points higher than those of low fussiness.
- Different subgroups show varying levels of positivity towards family mealtimes, although scores overall are extremely positive. Parents with highly fussy or neurodiverse children are the least favourable, closely followed by those with lower household income.
- Our research underlines the importance of positive role modelling. The more vegetables a parent claims to eat, the more likely their child is to eat a healthy 3+ handfuls of veg per day.

This project has challenged our assumptions on two counts:

- 1 Family mealtimes do happen regularly (based on how parents are defining a 'family meal').
- 2 Family mealtimes do not translate to healthier eating (as measured by a child's consumption of vegetables).

Both are key learnings. The most important finding, however, is just how highly parents value the togetherness, bonding and harmony of family meals.

It follows that they will be highly averse to anything that risks disrupting or diminishing the occasion. Getting children who are "fussy" or veg-resistant to eat more vegetables will be seen as just such a risk.

This insight has led directly to our working brief. We believe there is a powerful opportunity to improve children's diets by leveraging the passion parents have for harmonious family mealtimes.

# Communications brief

The GET>WHO>TO>BY framework is a useful way to summarise our thinking to date:

**GET** Parents of the 64% of children who eat two or fewer handfuls of veg per day. These families will contain significantly higher than average concentrations of children who are neurodiverse or "fussy eaters". There will be a skew towards lower household income groups.

**WHO** Are concerned about their child's diet (especially at family mealtimes) and would like to see them eating more veg – but worry this could risk de-harmonising meal occasions.

**TO** Try a range of strategies and tactics aimed at encouraging their child to eat one more portion of veg per day, primarily at family mealtimes.

**BY** Encouraging healthier eating through ideas, techniques and resources that are specifically geared towards increasing mealtime harmony and family bonding. The most effective content and activations will also feel simple, affordable and achievable, be fun and involving for all the family, appear in environments and contexts where people are already looking for help and support and be tailor-made for amplification by creators and influencers.

# Veg Consumption

The latest data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS), covering the period between 2019 and 2023, doesn't make for happy reading. Its first main finding sums up the overall picture:

“Most participants did not meet the UK government recommendation to eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables each day. On average, children aged 11 to 18 years ate 2.8 portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Less than 1 in 10 children aged 11 to 18 years (9%) met the ‘5 A Day’ recommendation. On average, adults consumed 3.3 to 3.7 portions per day (depending on age). Less than 1 in 5 adults (17%) met the 5 A Day recommendation.”

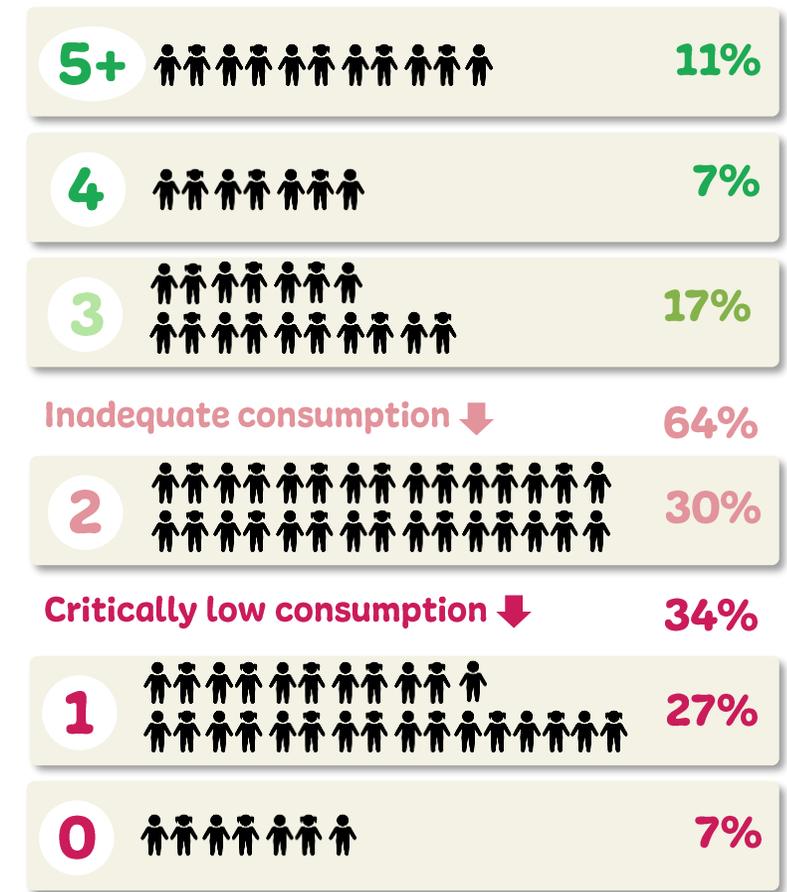
The story isn't any better among younger cohorts: on the mean average, 4 to 10 year-olds were eating 1.9 portions of vegetables per day (based on 50g portions) plus an average of 2.2 portions of fruit. We believe the minimum target for daily veg consumption should be three portions. Our research differs methodologically from the NDNS in three ways:

- We focus on 5 to 11 year-olds rather than 4 to 10 year-olds.
- We use an online survey instead of a food diary. This may mean our figures are slightly inflated due to respondents wanting to be seen to be doing ‘the right thing’.
- The NDNS sample size is 500 adults and 500 children, whereas the Veg Power survey is 3,000 adults and 3,000 children. This increase in scale allows for deeper segmentation and closer examination of the inter-related factors that influence behaviour.

These differences in method may account for why our 2025 findings are slightly – but only slightly – more positive. Once we exclude children who have taken part in the *Eat Them to Defeat Them* campaign, where average vegetable consumption levels are notably higher, our study found that children aged 5 to 11 are eating an average of 2.2 handfuls of veg per day. (This choice of language is deliberate. Over the last seven years, we have found that “handfuls” is a far more reliable measure in consumer surveys than the often misunderstood “portions” and so better support relative comparisons).

That's hardly cause for celebration. What's even more worrying is that 64% of parents say their child is eating two or fewer handfuls of veg per day (which we consider to be inadequate and 34% are eating less than two handfuls which we consider to be critically low vegetable consumption – the group for which Veg Power exists to support and so foremost in our considerations).

## Children 5 – 11: Average number of handfuls of vegetables per day



We're delighted the government is focusing more on the nation's diet. While initiatives like free breakfast clubs, the extension of free school meals, as well as a review of school food standards and the 'healthy food standard' for supermarkets (which will require large retailers to "make the average shopping basket of goods sold slightly healthier...whether by reformulating products and tweaking recipes, changing shop layouts, offering discounts on healthy foods, or changing loyalty schemes to promote healthier options")<sup>3</sup> may be overdue, and inadequate, but they're very much to be welcomed.

But system levers like these can only achieve so much. Price, placement and promotions in supermarkets are a case in point. Historically, they've tended to temporarily switch purchasing from one type of vegetable to another rather than increase overall category consumption.

Anything that makes healthier eating choices more affordable and more accessible is a step in the right direction...so long as we recognise that it's only one part of the story. For a truly whole systems approach, it's equally important that we address the underlying barriers that exist within many homes. Poverty is a central issue, of course – but the challenges run much deeper than that, and transcend all household-income brackets. They include time, stress, confidence, limited cooking skills, anxiety about wasting money on food that doesn't get eaten, poor parental role modelling and a host of others.

To tackle fundamental barriers like these, we need to provide inspiration and support on a family-by-family

basis. Above all else, the priority must be to make it as simple and easy as possible for parents to increase their child's veg consumption, and to recognise that "easy" is not as obvious as it might seem.

This is the driving insight behind *Eat Them to Defeat Them* and our hugely effective schools' programme. Everything Veg Power has done since 2018 has been geared towards encouraging children to be more receptive to vegetables and giving parents & carers the confidence and tools to help them succeed.

Our work is underpinned by a deep body of knowledge: an annual survey of 3,000 parents and their primary school-aged child that's now been running for seven years; countless focus groups and 1:1 interviews; the hands-on learnings that come from interacting with 1.8 million children and their families; and an invaluable stream of expert guidance from our board, advisory groups and the many others who so generously support our work.

The focus for this year's survey was family mealtimes. Study after study have shown how important these occasions are to family bonding, child socialisation and younger years' learning. Received wisdom also suggests they translate directly to healthier eating. We wanted to see if this last point was true. In particular, we were keen to examine the conditions, dynamics and behaviours that surround family mealtimes and shape what gets eaten.

<sup>3</sup>[Healthy food revolution to tackle obesity epidemic - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/healthy-food-revolution-to-tackle-obesity-epidemic)

# Family Mealtimes Dynamics

Let's start by defining our terms.

We asked our respondents to think of family mealtimes as “main meals your child eats at home (usually the evening meal) with at least one adult family member who is also eating”.

That obviously leaves plenty of room for interpretation. It would include pizza, chips, nuggets and other freezer food, for instance – so it would be wrong to think that ‘mealtimes’ necessarily comprise food that is cooked from scratch using fresh ingredients. Definitions of “main meals” are also likely to vary significantly across different households. We will probe the exact composition of ‘family meals’ (as defined by parents) further in subsequent surveys.

Our research found that family mealtimes occur regularly. On average, parents said they happened 5.2 times per week. At 5.6, the average claimed by children was slightly higher.

**5.2**  
FAMILY MAIN  
MEALTIMES  
PER WEEK



## Frequency of main mealtimes



(These figures are higher than we were anticipating, which may reflect the breadth of the definition used. That said, they're roughly comparable to other sources. Sorted Food, which attracts a more food-interested audience that is inherently likely to define 'family meals' more rigorously, found that 40% of families sit down together to eat dinner every night. Likewise, a You Gov survey we ran in July 2022 showed 20% of parents saying they'd eaten a home cooked evening meal with their family on two or fewer occasions during the previous seven days.)

# Barriers to mealtimes

One-third of our respondents said there was nothing that had prevented them from eating their main meals together as a family more often during the past week.

Among those who could cite a barrier, 'facts of life' were the dominant issue. A second group of barriers centred on adult versus child preferences. While they appeared at relatively low levels, we saw a third set of barriers that indicate how family mealtimes can sometimes be a source of stress and friction but for a small minority, the problems were more fundamental.

-  29% Conflicting schedules due to work
-  18% Conflicting schedules due to children's activities
-  13% TV, tablets and smartphones diverting attention
-  12% Preferred eating times differ
-  10% Preferred meals differ
-  8% Children's behaviour
-  7% No time / energy to plan or cook meals
-  5% Family tension / arguments
-  5% Nowhere to sit down together
-  3% Lack of food to cook
-  2% Lack of cooking facilities



# What's for dinner?

73% of meals eaten by children over the last seven days were considered by their parents to be a home cooked meal. 80% of children have a "home-cooked meal" for the majority of their meals (4+/week) but 20% don't. To reiterate, however, this is likely to include ultra-processed freezer food that is heated in the oven or microwave and served with no vegetables:

# 73%

OF CHILDREN'S

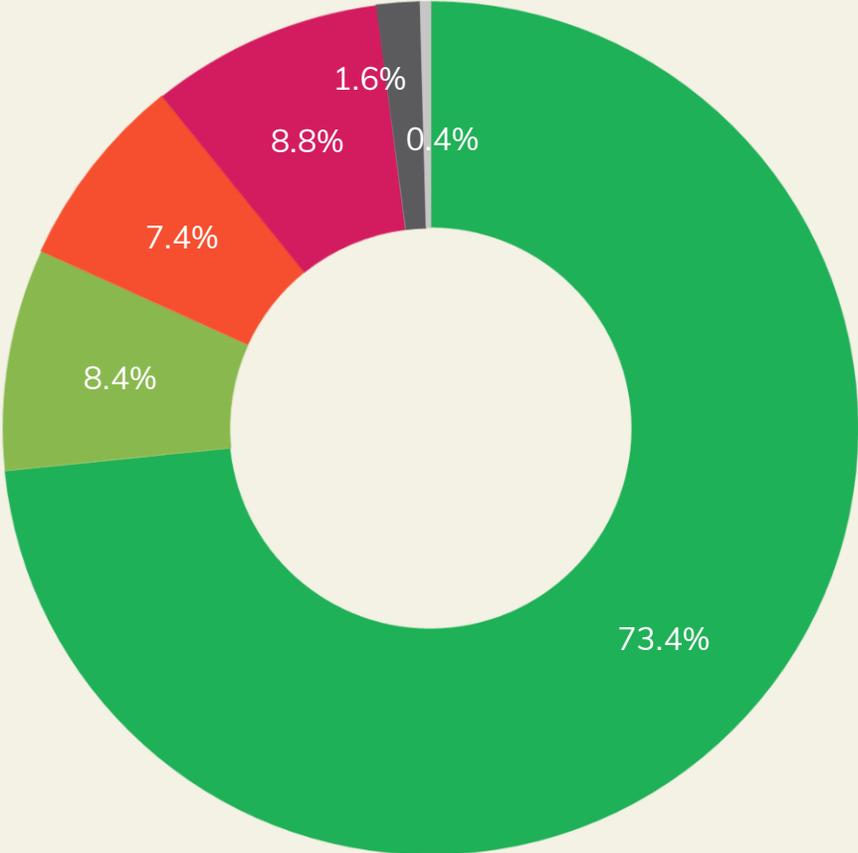
# EVENING MEALS

HOME COOKED



## Type of meal eaten by a child for their main evening meal

- Home cooked meal
- Sandwich or snack
- Ready meal
- Takeaway
- Other
- Nothing



# Do tables make a difference?

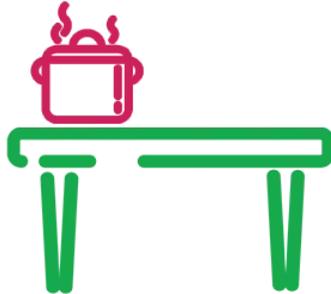
One of the most confronting findings from our research is the fact that 13% of parents say they simply don't have a table to eat at. Among families with household income below £15,000, that figure rises to 25%.

Not surprisingly, the impact of this is significant to family mealtimes, but makes no difference to the volumes of vegetables consumed by the child.

Some of this will be down to personal choice (as in, "I'm not going to buy a table because I don't think family mealtimes are particularly important or enjoyable"). More often, the cause is likely to be a lack of money or space. Whatever the reason, the absence of a table has a clear effect on mealtime frequency.

When tables are present, they're used regularly – but certainly not on every occasion:

**13%**  
OF FAMILIES  
**DON'T HAVE  
A TABLE**



## A table about tables...

	Families without a table	Families with a table
Average number of family mealtimes per week	4.6	5.3
Strongly agree that "I like eating with my family" (parent)	61%	76%
Strongly agree that "I like eating with my family" (child)	44%	63%
Say family mealtimes are important or a top priority	64%	82%
Average handfuls of veg consumed by child/day	2.5	2.5

We have to be quite carefully not to confuse cause & effect with correlation. Do people get a table because they value and enjoy eating together or do they value and enjoy eating together because they have a table?

## Over the past week, how often has your child's evening meal been eaten at a table?

Every day	46%
4-6 times / week	29%
2-3 times/week	13%
Once/week	6%
Never	6%



# Screens

Screen time suppers: how often do our kids dine digitally?

Habits are equally mixed when it comes to allowing meals to be accompanied by a TV, tablet or smartphone:

Younger parents, those from lower household income groups and those with “fussy” children are more likely to permit screens at mealtimes. Accepting screen usage would seem to indicate that parents are striving to ‘keep the peace’.

Even among those who allow screens at every meal, 23% think they mostly detract from mealtimes compared to 25% who believe they enhance the occasion.

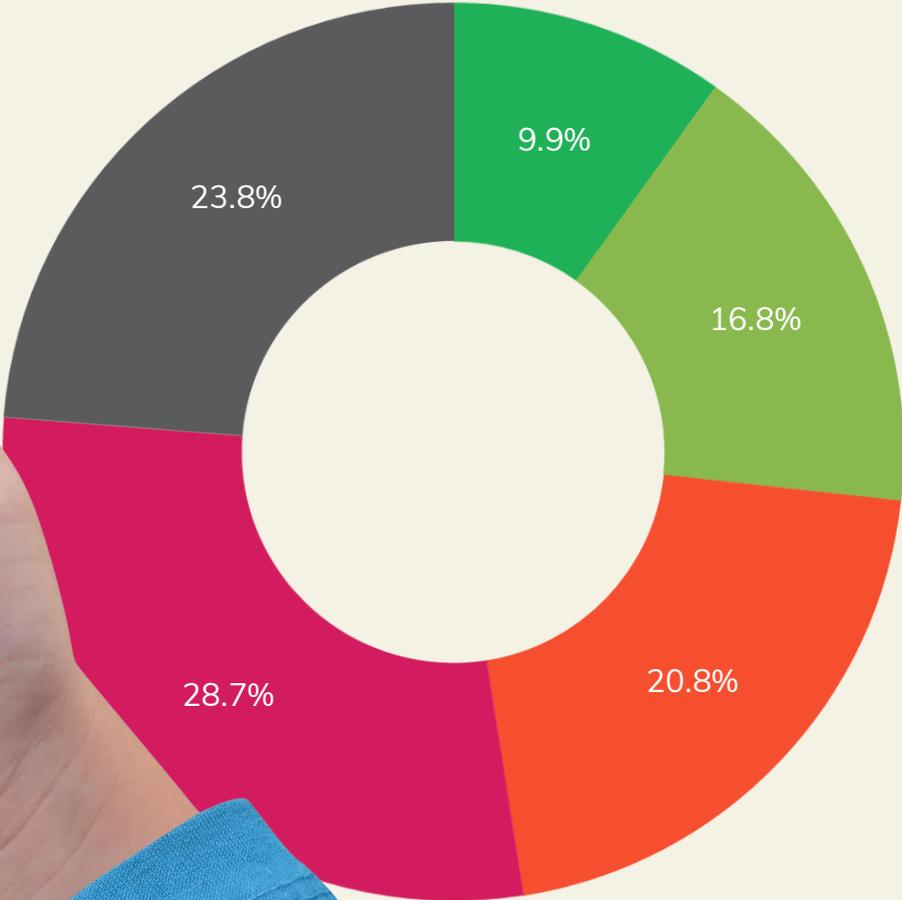
Overall, 34% of parents feel screens have a mixed impact. You can sense the trade-offs implicit in this figure: the missed opportunity for conversation and bonding versus the benefits of having a quieter, more contented child and an uninterrupted meal.

Does it effect vegetable consumption? Not really, children who never have a screen at the mealtimes eat marginally more veg (2.5 handfuls) than those that have it every day(2.3).



Over the past week, how often has your child’s evening meal been eaten with a screen on?

■ Everydat ■ 4 to 6 times ■ 2 to 3 times ■ Once ■ Never





## What we've learned in this chapter

- 1** Using the broad definition we gave respondents, the average family shares 5+ meals a week.
- 2** The primary barriers to family mealtimes happening even more often are 'facts of life' like scheduling conflicts.
- 3** Most meals eaten by children are hot and (in their parents' language) "home cooked".
- 4** When a table is present, the majority of children eat at it at least 4 times a week.
- 5** However, a sizeable percentage of families – especially those with low household incomes - do not own a table. This has a material impact on behaviours and attitudes but not vegetable consumption.
- 6** Many mealtimes are accompanied by a screen, even though parents are conscious this can detract from the occasion.
- 7** Most parents recognise the importance of family mealtimes, and associations overall are highly positive.

The good news, then, is that – in general - we have the right settings (lots of family mealtimes) and the right sentiments (prioritisation and positivity). This would seem to suggest grounds for optimism.

But what happens when we look at the picture from a different angle?



# Influencing Consumption

Historically, academic studies have indicated that people of all ages eat more healthily when dinner is a shared occasion. Perhaps because it plays to our inherent biases, this has commonly been accepted as fact.

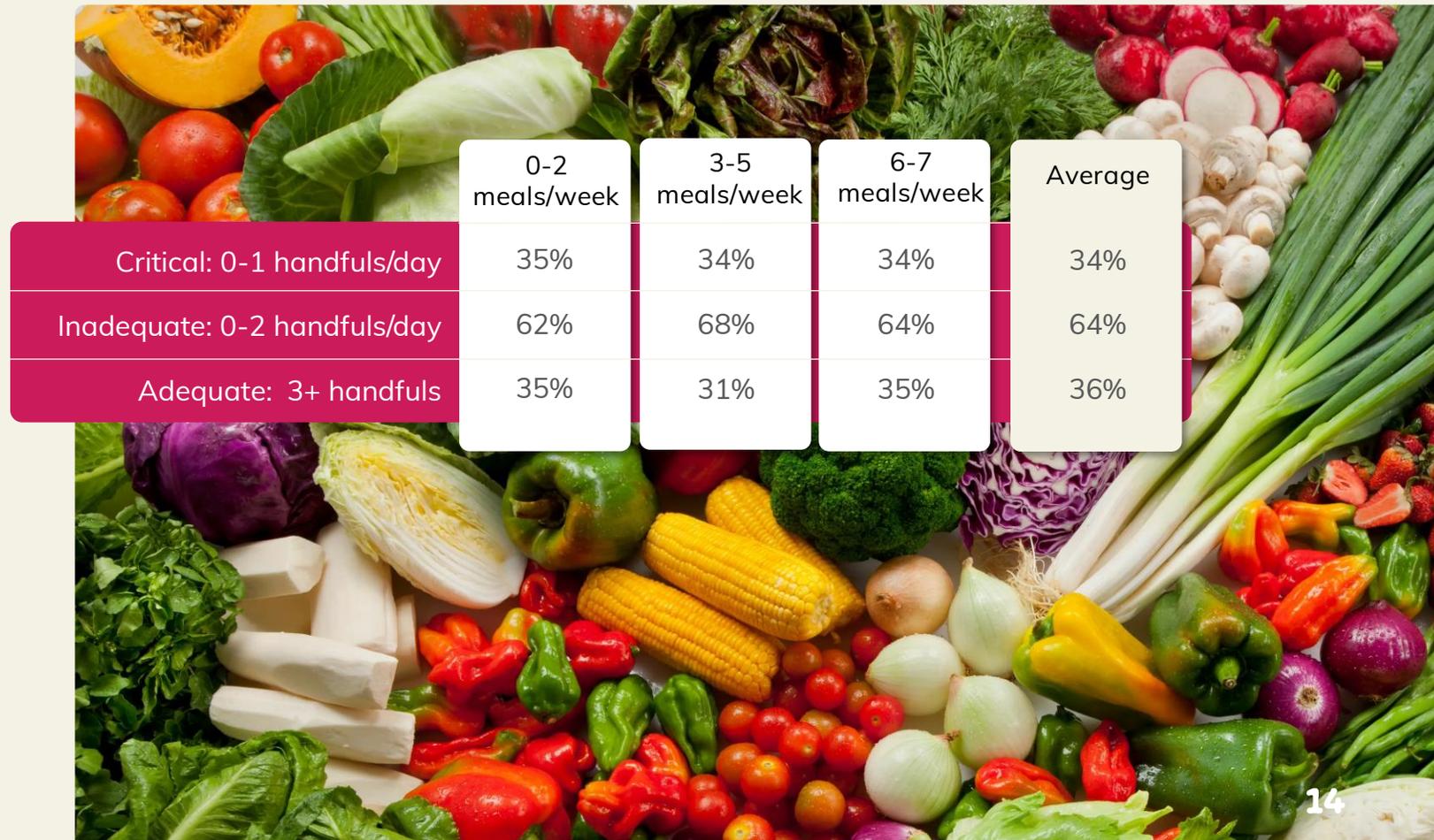
Our research explicitly contradicts the thesis, at least when measured by children's average daily veg consumption.

To emphasise the point: children who have 6+ family meals a week are no more likely to eat a healthy 3+ handfuls of vegetables on the average day than children who have 2 or fewer family meals. Nor are they any more or less likely to be in that critical 1 or less handfuls per day group.

This is clearly an important finding. Whether it's through habit and/or lack of headspace; the need for quick, convenient meal solutions; perceived cost; or an urge to minimise the risks of mealtime friction and waste by giving children something parents know they'll finish, the positive associations and 'desire to care' we highlighted in the previous chapter simply aren't pulling through into serving up healthier food. Certainly not in terms of the number of vegetables on the plate.

This is both a challenge and an opportunity, and it's something we'll return to in the final section.

## Child's vegetable consumption by frequency of family meal occasions



# Frequency

## The frequency of family mealtimes varies little across subgroups:

There is a lot of data in this chart, so it's worth unpacking.

There are some minor differences in meal frequency (most notably in terms of the complex issue of a child's fussiness when it comes to food), but none of the variances from the mean are greater than 0.3 points.

This throws up a related question, which we need to explore in future research. It's possible that different subgroups define what constitutes a family meal in different ways. Regardless, the argument holds true at the perceptual level. Each group believes it's sharing a similar number of family meals each week.

## How does this compare to children's average veg consumption by subgroup?

- While claimed consumption is notably higher in the AB group, Household Type or Household Income do not appear to be significant factors (at least on these breaks).
- While the frequency of family mealtimes is slightly higher amongst white children, veg consumption is lower than it is among those of other ethnic origin.
- Neurodiverse children are significantly more likely to have very low veg consumption.
- A child's fussiness – with all the nuances this brings – is clearly the biggest marker of average veg consumption.

		Influencing Consumption			
		Average family meals / week	Child's average consumption of veg ( handfuls / day)		
			0-1	2-3	4+
All		5.2	31%	49%	18%
Child's age:	5	5.2	28%	51%	21%
	6	5.4	31%	49%	19%
	7	5.1	29%	53%	17%
	8	5.4	31%	50%	17%
	9	5.3	37%	45%	17%
	10	5.1	29%	52%	18%
	11	5.2	33%	46%	18%
Socio-economic	AB	5.1	23%	53%	23%
	C1	5.5	35%	48%	15%
	C2	5.3	34%	48%	17%
	DE	5.1	36%	46%	16%
HH Income	<£30k	5.1	36%	47%	16%
	£30-60K	5.5	36%	47%	15%
	£60k+	5.2	22%	54%	23%
HH Type	Single parent	5.0	32%	49%	17%
	Spouse/partner	5.3	31%	50%	17%
Ethnic Origin	White	5.3	32%	49%	18%
	BAME	5.0	28%	50%	18%
Fussiness	High	4.9	54%	33%	12%
	Medium	5.3	30%	51%	18%
	Low	5.5	14%	59%	27%
Autism/ADHD	Yes	5.0	34%	43%	23%
	No	5.3	28%	52%	19%

## Understanding fussiness

“Fussiness” is a complex idea and a term many choose to avoid. However, it is a description of the parent-child-food dynamic which is widely used and understood by the people we are trying to support – so it’s not a term we can shy away from if we want to connect with them.

To calculate “fussiness”, we ask parents a series of question about how their child responds to food in general, and new food types in particular. What is very clear is that “fussiness” is profoundly the most significant determinant of poor vegetable consumption, far more so than household income.

What makes a child “fussy” or perceived to be “fussy” by their parents? What at this life stage is the balance between nature and nurture? Should we focus on managing or preventing fussiness?

We don’t know, but last year when we asked the 48% of parents who say they struggle to get their child to eat more vegetables what the reason was, the most common answer was “They refuse to even try them” 36%, 20% complained about the effort involved, and 17% said attempts to persuade their child to eat more veg made mealtimes unpleasant.

“Fussiness” may be a complex topic, but it’s also a critical one. We plan to explore the issue in greater detail in future studies. We would welcome any third-party opinions or evidence that can help guide our research.

**Children characterised as being highly fussy are 40 points more likely to only eat 0 – 1 handfuls of veg per day than those of low fussiness. Equally, they are 15 points less likely to eat 4+ vegetables per day.**

# Positivity towards family mealtimes by subgroup

Our research shows that the subgroups that differ most in terms of a child's vegetable consumption are also the ones that manifest the biggest variance in their attitude towards family meals.

We approached the topic of 'positivity' by using a word-association technique (see page 12) . Parents were asked to provide the first three words that came to mind when they thought of family mealtimes. They were then asked to rate each of those words on a scale from very positive (+2) to very negative (-2), with a neutral midpoint. This allows us to calculate average affective attitude scores for both the sample overall and the individual segments within it.

As we've said, sentiment overall is highly positive. Across our sample, the mean score was +1.3.

However:

- With average affective attitude scores of +1.5, parents from the AB socio-economic group and those of non-white ethnic origin demonstrated higher levels of positivity.
- Conversely, those with a neurodiverse or highly fussy child viewed mealtimes less positively. The respective scores for these subgroups were +1.0 and +0.9.

- There was also a gap by Household Income (HHI). Those with a HHI of <£30,000 had an average affective attitude score of +1.1 compared with +1.4 where HHI was £50,000 or more. The difference isn't huge, but it probably hints at the greater level of struggle faced by lower income families.

Looking at affective attitude scores uncovered another result that's worth mentioning.

**Parents who regularly involve their child in cooking gave an average ranking for the words associated with family mealtimes of +1.5. The figure dropped to +1.0 among parents who wouldn't consider trying this.**

This last finding takes us nicely to the topic of parental influence around mealtimes.



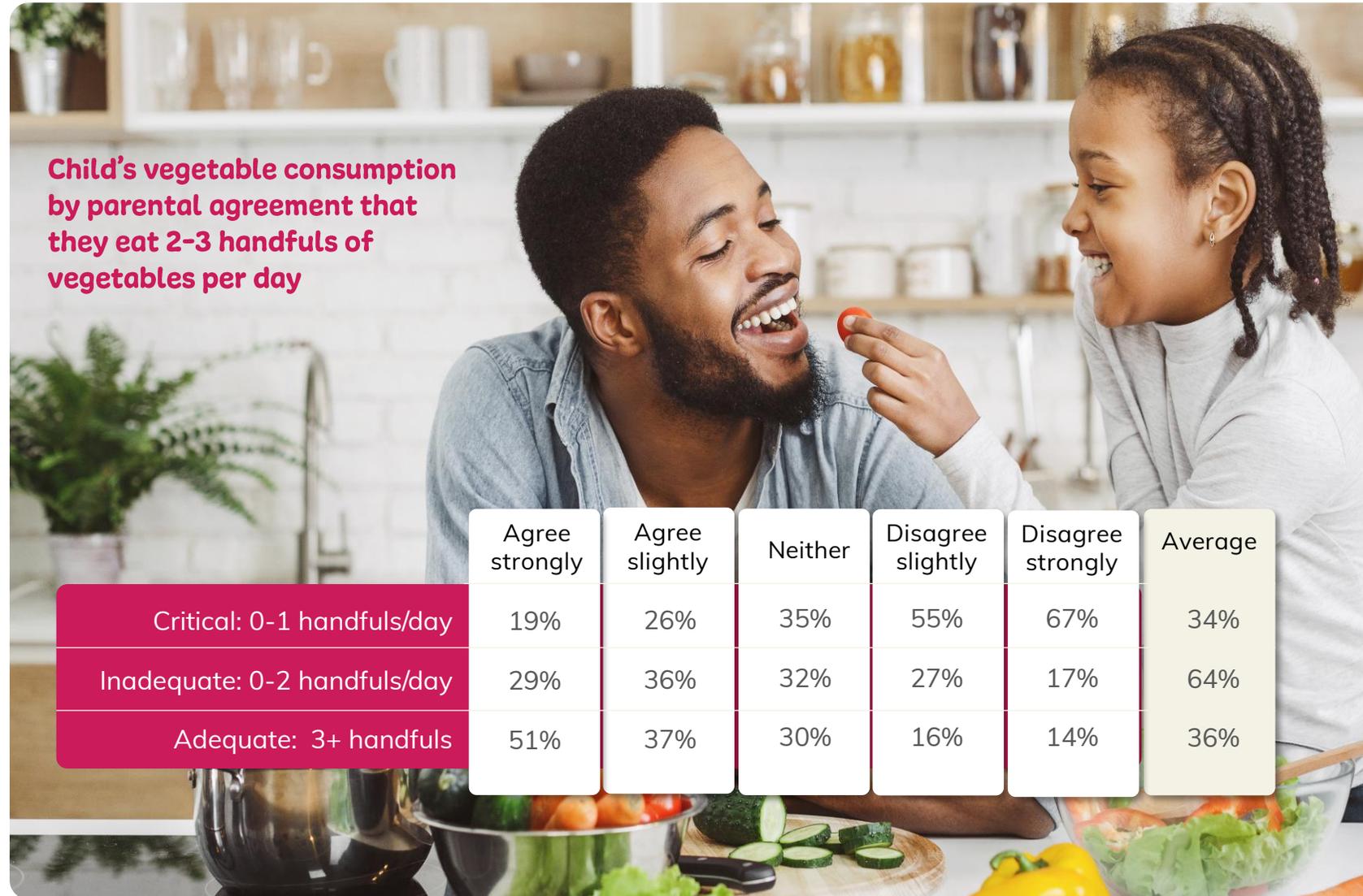
# Parental food habits

The strongest indicator of a child's veg consumption is parental food habits.

We've reported this before, but it remains one of the stand-out findings from our 2025 research. Parents who strongly agree that they themselves eat 2 – 3 handfuls of veg per day are over three times more likely to have a child who eats 3+ handfuls of veg per day than parents who strongly disagree.

The degree of correlation in this chart is almost perfect. It underlines one of our core beliefs: parental food habits and culture are the greatest influence on how a child feels about food and how they eat today – and therefore how their diet is likely to look in later life. (As an important aside: 62% of parents whose child has taken part in the *Eat Them to Defeat Them* schools programme say they've also started eating more veg. So, the benefits flow both ways, creating a virtuous circle that we need to leverage).

Good parental role modelling is a prerequisite for success, and family mealtimes provide the ideal stage. Talking about veg, buying a wider variety of veg, preparing veg, serving more veg with each meal and demonstrating an enjoyment in eating veg – they'll all have a positive knock-on effect, especially if children are encouraged to participate in each part of the process.



**Child's vegetable consumption by parental agreement that they eat 2-3 handfuls of vegetables per day**

	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	Neither	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly	Average
<b>Critical: 0-1 handfuls/day</b>	19%	26%	35%	55%	67%	34%
<b>Inadequate: 0-2 handfuls/day</b>	29%	36%	32%	27%	17%	64%
<b>Adequate: 3+ handfuls</b>	51%	37%	30%	16%	14%	36%

# Cooking skills

Improving parents' cooking skills will be helpful but is a lower priority.

We also found some correlation between a parent's confidence in cooking a meal from scratch using only fresh ingredients and their child's veg consumption.

However, the benefits are only apparent at the top end of the scale: those who are very confident in the kitchen (which is likely to indicate a household where the food culture is widely positive). Even then, the impact is modest compared to positive role modelling.

Finding ways to improve parents' cooking skills certainly won't hurt, especially since such skills have eroded significantly over the past two or three generations. But it isn't going to be the most powerful lever available.

This data raises a second point. Recipe ideas and tips are always helpful...but we need to ensure they're designed and framed in ways that feel simple and achievable by all, not just more confident cooks. People's mental space is limited. If we're going to encourage better habits, we need to make the first steps as easy to take as possible.

Child's vegetable consumption by parental confidence in cooking a meal from scratch

	Very confident	Fairly confident	OK	Not confident
Critical: 0-1 handfuls/day	29%	35%	35%	34%
Inadequate: 0-2 handfuls/day	59%	68%	68%	66%
Adequate: 3+ handfuls	41%	32%	32%	34%

## Cooking together

Our 2024 Veg Power survey showed that 48% of parents always or often cook with their children. In these families, 60% of children eat 2-3 handfuls of vegetables per day. The figure falls to just 35% among children who rarely or never cook with their parents.

This is clearly a significant difference. It may be a direct by-product of engagement through cooking, or it might reflect households where the food culture is more broadly positive. Either way, cooking together is clearly something we must continue to encourage and support.



## What we've learned in this chapter

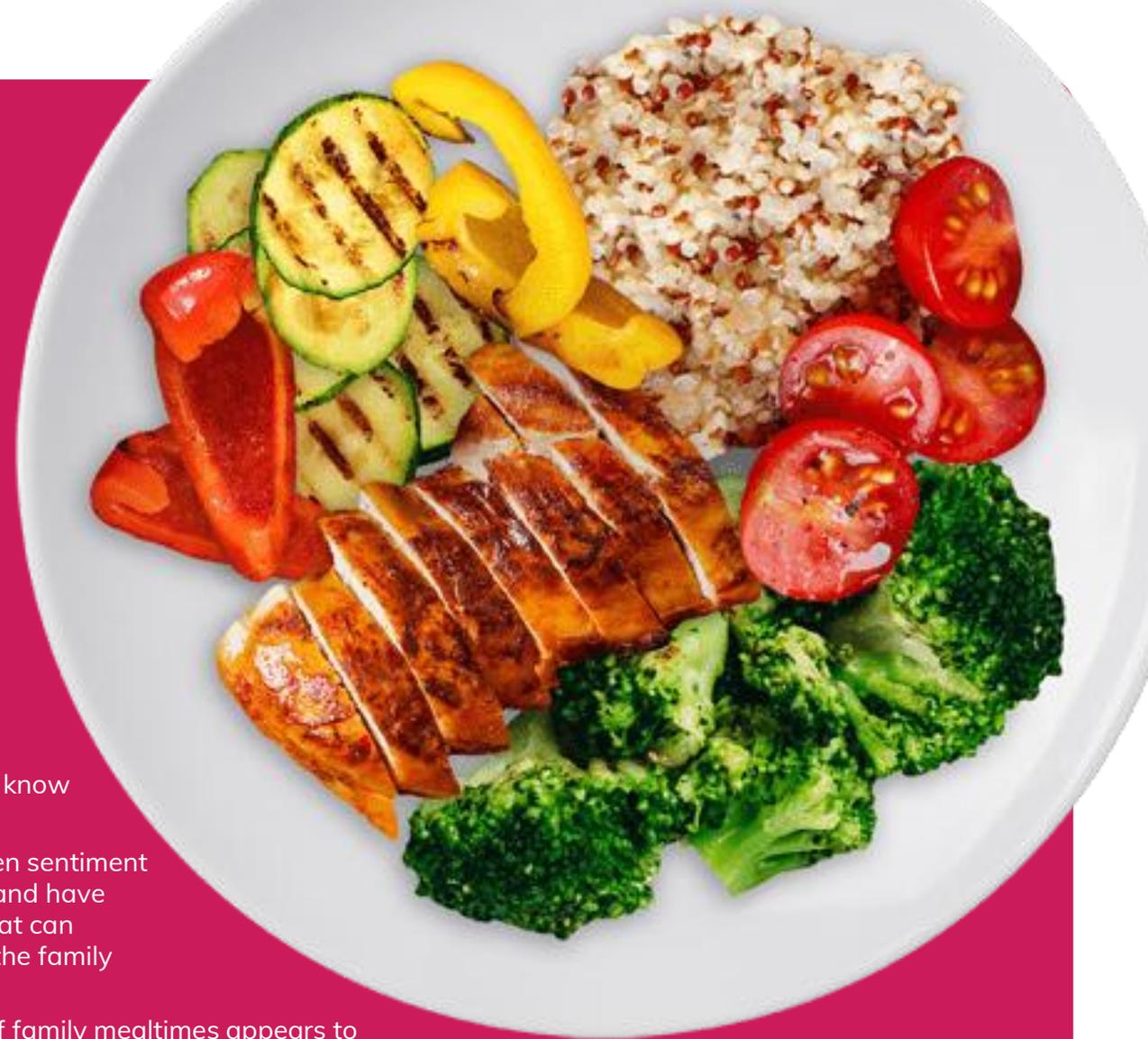
- 1** Contrary to popular wisdom, more family mealtimes do not necessarily equate to healthier eating (as measured by the number of vegetables consumed by children per day).
- 2** The frequency of family meals - based on respondents' own definition of the term - is remarkably similar across subgroups.
- 3** Other factors, particularly the complex topic of 'food fussiness', more clearly signal a child's average veg consumption.
- 4** Different subgroups show varying levels of positivity towards family mealtimes (although scores overall are very positive). Parents with highly fussy or neurodiverse children are the least favourable, closely followed by those with lower household income.
- 5** Positive role modelling is critical. The more vegetables a parent claims to eat, the more likely their child is to eat 3+ handfuls of veg per day.

When it comes to healthier eating (in general) and veg consumption (in particular), we know there is a clear intention / behaviour gap.

Our research into family mealtimes flags a second, equally important gap; that between sentiment and behaviour. Across subgroups, parents recognise the importance of shared meals and have powerfully positive feelings about the occasion (despite the frustrations and friction that can sometimes occur). They understand mealtimes are an invaluable opportunity to bring the family together and bond it.

However, positive sentiment isn't translating into positive behaviours. The frequency of family mealtimes appears to have no impact whatsoever on children's veg consumption.

This insight sets up the marketing challenge...and the opportunity: How can we unlock the positivity around family mealtimes to increase children's veg consumption, without jeopardising the harmony and sense of togetherness that parents so cherish about a shared meal?



# Effective Communications

## Building the communications brief

Every piece of research we undertake has the same ultimate purpose: to help ourselves and others create policies and interventions that will be effective in improving family diets.

With each study, we discover a little more about this complex and intriguing challenge. We also uncover areas that demand further investigation.

Our approach has always been to share our research findings, together with what we've learned from experience, openly and candidly. Part of our role is to stimulate new thinking and better, more impactful ideas - regardless of whether they come from Veg Power, the alliance of people and organisations who support us, or the wider world. The more minds that are focused on the problem of dietary health, the better.

In that spirit of transparency, this final chapter sets out what we have learned from this work and the brief we are setting ourselves for our ongoing mission to support families to eat healthier diets.

We hope it can help inform your work too.

## What the 2025 survey has taught us

When we started this project, our assumptions were that families weren't eating together enough...and that when they do share a meal, the food would be healthier. The research shows we were wrong on both counts:

**1** While parents' work or children's activities occasionally get in the way, 'family mealtimes' happen 5+ times per week on average. That's quite a high frequency and it's probably unrealistic to expect more.

**2** We also found that there is no correlation between the number of family mealtimes and increased veg consumption by children.

Please note: We recognise there may be limitations to how we defined 'family mealtimes', and that individual families may be interpreting the phrase differently. We will seek to clarify this in subsequent research.

What our survey did highlight is that parents (in general) greatly value the togetherness, bonding and harmony of family meals. It follows that they will be highly averse to anything that risks disrupting or diminishing the occasion.

Our hypothesis is that getting children who are deemed to be "fussy", cautious or veg-resistant to eat more vegetables is seen as just such a risk. To mitigate the threat, many parents may be choosing the easier route over the healthier one. The issue is likely to be compounded by the fact that techniques such as re-offering or positive role modelling can be seen as stressful and hard work. We intend to explore this hypothesis in the 2026 Veg Power survey, and we'll report back next year.



# What we know works

Veg Power already has good insights into how best to communicate with this audience. The success of our *Eat Them to Defeat Them* schools' programme provides strong clues as to how we can channel the passion and positivity that surround family mealtimes into healthier, more veg-packed diets. 1.8 million different children have now taken part.

87% of participating parents say they want to take part again. This could be because they know it makes a difference...or simply because it's fun and unites parent and child in a shared mission to 'defeat' veg. Most importantly, children who have taken part in the programme more than once eat an average of 3.3 handfuls of veg per day compared to 2.4 among those who haven't.

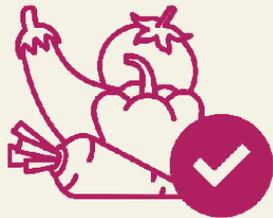
**82%**  
**PARENTS**  
of children who took part said they  
**ATE MORE VEGETABLES**



**62% PARENTS**  
of children who took part in schools  
said they also  
**ATE  
MORE  
VEG**



**60%**  
**OF PARENTS**  
REPORTED A LASTING CHANGE IN  
**THEIR CHILDRENS DIET**



**60% MORE**  
**VEGETABLES**  
EATEN BY CHILDREN  
**WHO TAKE PART**

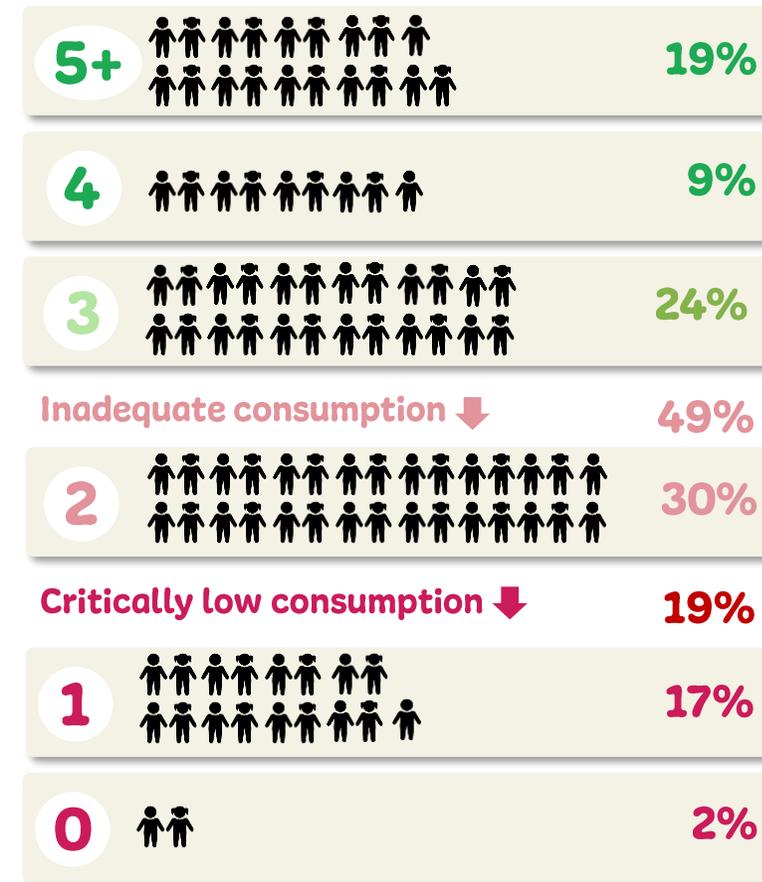
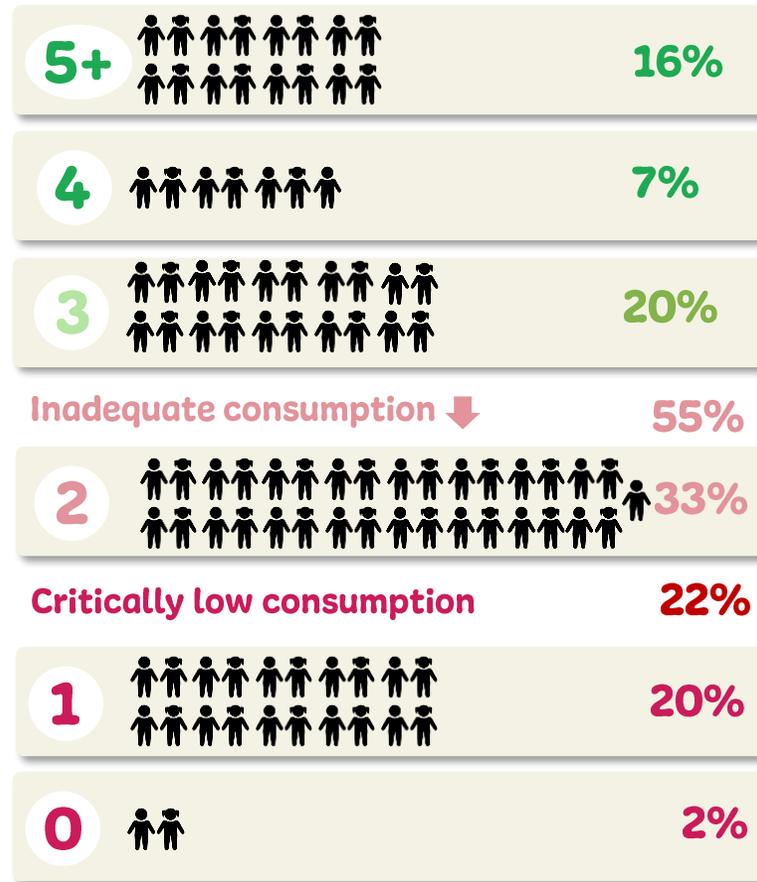
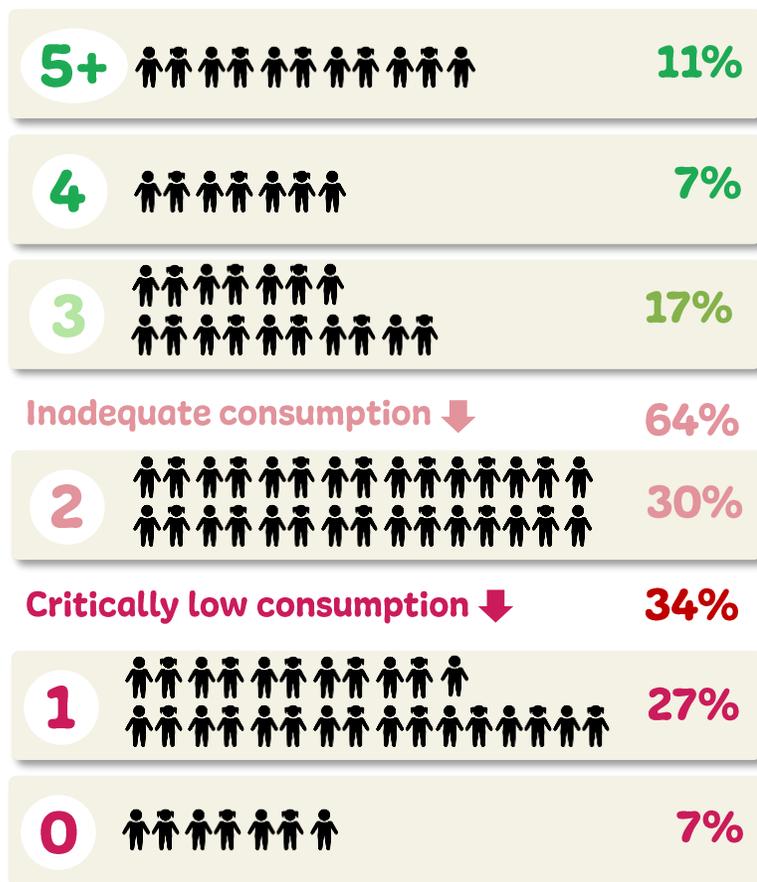


# Average handfuls of vegetables per day

All children aged 5 – 11

Children aged 5 – 11 who have taken part in Eat Them to Defeat Them

Children aged 5 – 11 who have taken part in Eat Them to Defeat Them more than once



# Winning with reward charts

We've learned that simply instructing parents on nutrition, cookery, waste reduction and techniques such as role-modelling, re-offering or engaging their children through shopping, cooking or growing veg isn't effective in isolation. Such efforts fail to address the parents' primary concerns around stress and mealtime jeopardy.

*Eat Them to Defeat Them* repositions increased vegetable consumption from a parent-led ambition which risks mealtime harmony to a shared, fun-based, child-led activity which adds to the togetherness and bonding of a family meal.

Children come home from school wearing the sticker they've just earned and proudly tell their parents they had fun "defeating broccoli today". This lifts parents' confidence and encourages them to say something like: "How about we defeat the carrots together this evening?".

To support parents further, we provide chart and sticker packs that help reward, embed and normalise their child's new vegetable consumption. These also create the perfect channel to communicate expert advice and useful techniques at precisely the moment they're likely to be most effective.

## Winning with reward charts

Over the last seven years, Veg Power has sent home over 4.2m reward charts and sticker packs. This year's survey revealed that 82% of these charts get used, of which:

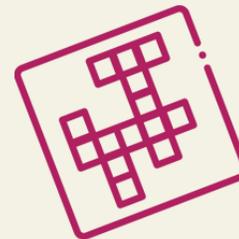
- 42% are stuck up on the fridge door and
- 43% on the kitchen wall.
- 59% are fully completed and 39% are partially completed.
- 93% are enjoyed by the child.
- 74% of participating parents claim their child ate more veg.

# 82%

## OF PARENTS

say their family **enjoyed** using their

# REWARD CHART



## **Our conclusion**

A key output from our Families & Food taskforce is that successful interventions require a fully inclusive design that encourages joint participation between parents and children, offering rewards to both. Rather than being seen as possible sources of conflict, these initiatives must be perceived as having high potential to strengthen family bonds during meals.

# Towards a brief

With these thoughts in mind, how might we go about leveraging the passion people have for harmonious family mealtimes to improve children's diet? We've used the GET > WHO > TO > BY framework to capture our thinking to date:

## GET

**Define a clear, accurately segmented audience.**

Our research defines four clear segments, delineated by the frequency of family mealtimes and children's average daily consumption of veg:

	0-5 family mealtimes/week	6-7 family mealtimes/week
Inadequate: 0-2 handfuls/day	Group 3 17%	Group 2 20%
Adequate: 3+ handfuls	Group 1 29%	Group 2 34%

There are approximately 5.5 million children aged 5 to 11 in the UK, so these are all mass audiences.

Groups 1 and 2, where children eat two or fewer handfuls of veg per day, are the obvious priority. Both will contain significantly higher than average concentrations of children who are neurodiverse or considered "fussy eaters" by their parents. They will also skew towards lower household income groups.

Family mealtimes should be the main focus of activity for both groups, although it'll be worth considering complementary initiatives for Group 1. Our Attack the Snack campaign, which aims to get children eating fruit and veg snacks more often, will fit well.

## WHO

**Describe the audience, emphasising shared problems, perceptions and barriers.**

Are concerned about their child's diet (especially at family meals) and would like to see them eating more veg – but worry any effort made in this direction risks de-harmonising mealtimes.

They're looking for help and support that:

- Feels simple, affordable and achievable.
- Will be fun to try.
- Provides easy ways to get their child involved.
- Mitigates the threat of unwanted disruption or disharmony...or better yet, promotes greater family bonding at mealtimes.

# Towards a brief

## TO

**Identify the desired behavioural goal, ideally in quantifiable terms.**

Try a range of strategies and tactics aimed at encouraging their child to eat one more portion of veg per day.

This feels realistic as a behavioural goal. It matches what we've achieved among children who've participated more than once in our *Eat Them to Defeat Them* schools' programme.

We should know by now that, among groups with the greatest need, the 5-a-day target is wildly ambitious and (for the foreseeable future) almost certainly impossible to reach.

## BY

**Propose specific, achievable actions that will trigger change and deliver the goal.**

Encouraging healthier eating through strategies, ideas, techniques and resources that are specifically geared towards increasing mealtime harmony and family bonding.

We believe many parents will be highly motivated to try something new if they can immediately see how it will promote family harmony. As an example: our Attack the Snack campaign this summer includes a theme for making your own fruit and veg-based ice lollies. We cover the 'how' and the 'why', but the main focus is the fun and laughter that result from the whole family (and their dog) participating together.

This is the lens that we need to apply to every intervention. The most effective ideas will tick three boxes:

- They will be “fun for kids”.
- They will be “simple for parents”.
- Just as importantly, they will promise a clear and valued reward: more harmonious mealtimes.

We are only at the start of the process, and we know that not every creative concept will come as easy. But we do have a good jumping-off point. Our research tells us what strategies and tactics parents are already trying (or are predisposed to try) to encourage their child to eat more vegetables. Alongside developing wholly new ideas, we can take these existing behaviours and seek to reframe them as drivers of increased mealtime harmony.

# Tactics

## What strategies and tactics are parents already trying?

	Do this regularly		Do this occasionally	
	% Parents	0-1 Veg	% Parents	0-1 Veg
Eat more vegetables in front of my child	50%	29%	25%	30%
Get my child to lay the table or help serve	27%	24%	34%	29%
Get my child involved in cooking	25%	23%	41%	30%
Give them new / different veg to try	24%	19%	37%	27%
Let them choose the veg we buy	24%	20%	34%	25%
Offer veg as snacks	23%	17%	34%	26%
Get my child involved in growing veg	15%	19%	22%	19%
Search for advice and tips	14%	26%	24%	28%
Get advice from friends and family	10%	23%	24%	27%
Hide vegetables in recipes	22%	36%	28%	27%
Insist my child finishes their vegetables	25%	27%	28%	25%
Average		34%		34%

Again, we would caution this only shows correlation rather than the direction of cause & effect.

## Number of strategies tried regularly

	0	1	2	3	4-5	6+
Average handfuls of veg eaten by child per day	2.39	2.8	3.3	3.3	3.79	4.30

- There is already a broad range of strategies deployed (and this list certainly won't be comprehensive).
- With the exception of "eating more vegetables in front of my child", most strategies are only used occasionally. None are used universally.
- Parents appear to be thinking up strategies by themselves. Few are actively searching out tips and advice.
- Many of these same strategies are cited by parents as enablers of positive family mealtimes. So there would seem to be a win/win and an opportunity to close the sentiment / behaviour gap we described earlier.

What are the implications for campaign design?

Experience tells us there won't be a one-size-fits-all solution to this challenge. What resonates with parents and children, nudges them into action and ultimately proves effective will vary significantly from family to family.

This is why we need to seed multiple different ideas. Success will require a true diversity of content and activations. It will also demand re-iteration. We'll need to find fresh ways to inspire parents to revisit - or stick with - the most promising strategies.

Research shows a clear correlation between the number of strategies tried regularly and children consuming more veg:

In summary: to be effective, the campaign must be both broad (covering multiple different strategies and tactics) and deep (bringing those strategies and tactics to life in new and interesting ways).

# Maximise impact

How will we maximise impact?

We are talking to an audience that has limited headspace and 101 other things to worry about. We'll need to be strategically and creatively smart to have any chance of grabbing their attention.

The surest way to create cut-through is to deliver a highly relevant benefit. That's why we're placing such weight on the positivity people feel towards family meals and their absolute determination to preserve – or ideally increase – mealtime harmony. By tapping into that positive sentiment, while mitigating the threat of disruption, we're confident we can unlock interest and action. Focusing on the end-benefit of more harmonious mealtimes is therefore our first priority.

The second imperative is tonal. We're looking to drive actions that parent and child can take part in together...and that process should start with the content itself. We need to produce material that each party will want to share with the other. Anything that is overly instructive or complex is likely to be ignored or even rejected. To increase impact, every piece of communication should be fun, entertaining and easy to act on.

The third lever we can pull is to prioritise channels where people naturally go for help and support. That's why we're so excited to collaborate with Netmums, which has 3 million active users. It provides the ideal environment for a campaign like this.

Finally, we should seek to leverage the impact of creators and other influencers. We are lucky to be supported by the generosity of amazing experts and creators who genuinely share our passion such as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Bettina Campolucci Bordi, Suzanne Mulholland, Sam Nixon, Dr Lucy Porter, Tom Aikens, Charlotte Stirling-Reed. Tom Hunt, Nessie Welschinger, Charlotte Radcliffe, Zoe Griffiths, The Happy Pear, Ben Ebbrell, Dr Clare Holley, Kim Smith, Ian Tavener, Dr Glenys Jones and Christine Bailey all of which has leaned in so generously this year. We'd welcome the chance to collaborate with others that share this passion.

At Veg Power, we've always believed that creativity is king. The conjunction of AI and social media means the world is about to get noisier than ever. It will take a clear vision and a bold approach to ensure our messages get heard. Whether it's through content creators, influencers or the creative talent that already supports us so generously, we'll need to be prepared to push the boundaries if we're going to fully unlock the power of creativity for good.

Final thought: For years conventional comms has focused on making it "easy". Easy has practical implications for cooking skills, affordability, accessibility, time and even tables. **The one thing we have learned from this report is that "easy" is not enough, we have to put healthy eating at the heart of harmony in the home.**



# Families & Food Taskforce

This project was developed through a series of workshop and a survey of 3,000 parents and children of primary school age. We are immensely grateful for the generous support of our Families & Food Taskforce who kindly shared their insight and expertise to help guide us in this project. Please note that the analysis, opinions and suggestions in this report are solely those of the Veg Power team.

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Veg Power is a not for profit alliance dedicated to improving children's diet by making healthy, sustainable eating irresistible. Through collaboration, creative communications, and real-world insight Veg Power gets kids excited about fruit, vegetables and beans and empowers parents to make healthy eating easy.

Veg Power is only made possible by generous support of our members:

