The Challenge:
Childhood obesity is a major challenge to public health. In Wales the first National Child Measurement Programme, published in 2013, found that 22% of reception class pupils (4–5 year olds) were found to be overweight or obese.

The UK Government has raised concerns about the overconsumption of food high in salt, fat and sugar and the long term negative health consequences for children and health inequality. Attempts to change dietary behaviours have ranged from providing information and healthy lifestyle incentives, to regulatory measures such as: school meal guidelines, improved food labelling and restricted advertising of unhealthy food products aimed at children. However, junk food advertisements continue to be viewed by children during family viewing times.

The current levels of obesity, demonstrates that education on healthy choices does not necessarily guarantee improved dietary habits, and obesity levels remain high. This study explored the main barriers to dietary choices faced by parents with infants, and the types of interventions and policy recommendations parents themselves would like to see put in place, to promote a healthier food environment.

The Research:
61 interviews with prospective parents and parents of infants (61 mothers and 35 fathers) were conducted. Families were selected according to community deprivation levels and were representative samples from deprived and affluent neighbourhoods.

The Results:
• Parents identified triggers which led to unhealthy dietary choices such as reliance on fast food outlets due to; shift work, lack of access to personal transport, inability to cook, their own childhood dietary experiences, peer pressure and family relationships.
• Parents who made healthy dietary choices reported learning cooking skills while at university, attending community cooking classes, having access to quality food provided by church and community organisations or access to Healthy Start vouchers.
• They called for a reduction in supermarket promotion of unhealthy food and improved access to affordable and high-quality fresh produce in the local area and in supermarkets. There was a strong message to policy makers to work with food manufacturers to lower costs and target healthy eating messages at a diverse population.
• Parents also suggested that public transport should be made cheaper to enable families to access better-quality produce further away from home.
• There should also be more emphasis in schools to promote healthy eating and more direct engagement between parents and schools.
• Furthermore, it was proposed that work places could be used to provide information on healthy lifestyles, and how to make lifestyle changes.
• Parents recommended that ‘fast food’ outlets should be restricted, and that the way neighbourhoods were planned and built should facilitate access to local, healthy food.
• The study revealed the need for the provision of targeted advice to fathers, minority ethnic parents, and tailored and practical advice and information on how to purchase, prepare, store and cook food was requested, along with community cookery classes and improved school cookery lessons.
• It was widely felt that the government needs to play a more active role in improving work-life balance as shift work was a major influence on families who had adopted unhealthy dietary behaviours.

The Impact:
The recommendations from this study provide health professionals, local and national policy makers, the media and the food industry – with a valuable insight into the various barriers to health eating that parents encounter. The findings can be used to engage with the public, to challenge causes of inequality in dietary consumption, and to tailor information towards those most in need.

For further information visit: http://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-1561-4

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