

Home cooking - dying or thriving?

Research, conducted by Added Value UK for UK retailer, Sainsbury's, amongst British families and children, into the attitudes of children and their families towards cooking reveals that there are a number of key barriers to cooking and healthy eating - access to ingredients, attitude, time and knowledge.



According to Sainsbury's website, "the recession saw a spike in home cooking for the first time in fifty years." The UK retailer wanted to understand how it could encourage the next generation to continue the trend into the future.

Sainsbury's CEO Justin King revealed the findings and a panel of experts, at the "Will anyone cook in 2030?" event held on Wednesday 23 June 2010, at its head office in central London. The debate panel included chef Jamie Oliver and Tim Loughton, Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Children and Families.

The research coincides with the investment of a further £3 million (about R34.6 million) by Sainsbury's to enable schools to purchase essential cooking equipment and ingredients through its Active Kids scheme.

Results

As a nation, Britain is on a culinary journey with 68% of people saying they enjoy cooking. However, how people define "cooking" can be very different, ranging from 'homemade from scratch', 'part homemade using a cooking sauce' to 'assembled' and 'warming up convenience foods'.

Further investigation showed that only 11% actually cook entirely from scratch.

However, the study highlighted a number of reasons why some families are not placing the same degree of importance on 'cooking from scratch and using fresh ingredients'. These barriers include a lack of interest in food, lack of awareness or concern towards nutrition, a lack of confidence or enjoyment of cooking, fussy kids who prefer prepared food, a perception that cooking from scratch is more expensive and a reluctance to change routines that work.

Kids cooking at home

Twenty-two percent of households claim they never or rarely cook with their kids/parents (18% of parents and 37% of kids

claim this). This suggests that kids have broader perception of what 'cooking' means to them and include 'assembly' rather than pure 'cooking from scratch with fresh ingredients'. Given the dramatic rise in convenience foods such as cooking sauces, this is not surprising.

Whilst parents' own attitudes to food and cooking undoubtedly plays a large role, the study identified a set of common barriers for 'cooking together' regardless of how personally engaged parents are with food. The major barrier is time (too many other activities) but also the 'faff factor' - cooking together requires patience, creates mess, chaos in the kitchen and often results in arguments. Other factors include safety concerns, lacking ideas or know how, concern that food will be wasted or a perception that kids are not interested.

Today 'cooking together' is the domain of special activities versus frequent behaviour.

However, kids have a desire to better their cooking skills in the future - 75% would like to be able to cook a meal for their family, 78% think it is important that they learn how to cook meals and 83% would like to improve their cooking skills. Parents support this - 90 % of parents with 5-16 year old children think it's important that children learn how to cook food/meals.

Kids cooking at school

The study underlines perceptions that when kids do have positive cooking experiences at school that this converts into behaviour at home. 62 % of children and 46% of parents say, "I have/my child has cooked the same thing at home after a lesson."

The research supports findings of the Licence to Cook www.licencetocook.org.uk/ report that when practical, interactive and hands-on lessons are thoroughly enjoyed, there is an appetite to learn to cook when given a chance. However, approximately half of the children in the study only cook a maximum of twice a year at school.

Changing behaviours

The research provides a basis for the retailer to help parents and children bond over food. This is particularly relevant for younger children: having fun, being creative, providing a tangible understanding of nutritious meals, pleasure and sense of achievement gained from a tangible and practical result. This can provide long-term benefits: helping teens take a step on the journey to independence and adulthood.

In addition, there is a clear opportunity to build food confidence by encouraging creativity versus the 'right' outcome. The research indicates that cooking is most successful when it is built on a foundation of fun.

That means households need to be realistic about the frequency that cooking together is likely to happen. These occasions are most likely to be weekends/ holidays for low-pressure environments. Generating kids buy-in (or at the very least responding effectively to pester power) at home is key. Households need to think foremost about what children want to cook - and have access to recipes that are easy to follow, featuring mainstream ingredients, which require minimal weighing and measuring. Importantly, preparing a meal should not take too long.

Says Jo Faithorn at Added Value, "Despite all the noise around healthy food and the importance of kids' nutrition, for many households it just isn't on the radar. Giving kids the confidence and tools to cook is a step towards healthier homes."

More information is available on Sainsbury's website www.j-sainsbury.co.uk/index.asp?pageid=511 including a series of videos and the debate is on www.emincote.com/sainsbury058/index.asp.

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