

The Big Conversation with Parents in Wales

BRIEFING: Parents' Views on Healthy Eating, Physical Exercise and Wellbeing



Background

In September 2025, Parents Connect Wales held a focus group with parents and carers in Ceredigion to explore family experiences of healthy nutrition and physical exercise.

The session took place at Plant Dewi Family Centre in Tregaron and focused on families with children aged 0- 5 years. The sessions were delivered by practitioners using resources in the [Parents Connect Wales consultation toolkit](#).

The aim was to gain a better understanding of the realities of food choices, barriers to healthy lifestyles and what families feel would make a difference.

This briefing presents the main themes arising from the focus groups. It provides an overview of parental experiences, concerns and priorities and highlights where further support and policy development may be required.

Key Findings – Healthy Eating and Nutrition

Healthy eating is shaped by cost, access and time

- Parents are aiming to keep diets balanced, but **time pressures and convenience** strongly influence choices.
- Family diets are described as **mixed**, with both healthy and less healthy days.

- Parents regularly rely on **freezer foods** for speed, ease and to reduce waste.
- Most aim to ensure at least **one shared healthy meal** each day.
- **Breakfast is prioritised**, and many parents encourage healthier snacks such as fruit instead of crisps or sweets.

Children's fruit and vegetable intake varies

Parents said they try to provide fruit and vegetables daily. However, some factors make this difficult while others help

- Most parents said their children eat fruit and vegetables daily, but amounts vary. Fruit is often a quick snack but goes off, frozen veg is easier to use.
- The high cost of fruit and vegetables, plus limited transport to cheaper supermarkets pushes some families towards cheaper processed foods. Children often prefer the taste of these snacks.
- Access to the Family Centre cooking sessions help families make affordable healthy meals despite time pressures.

Barriers to healthy eating are limiting families' choices

- **Cost** is the most significant barrier, with healthy food perceived as more expensive.
- **Time pressures**—particularly for working and farming families, limit opportunities to plan meals, shop for fresh produce and cook from scratch.
- **Local access is limited**, with few fresh food options and no readily available allotment spaces.

Free school meals (FSM) reduce pressure and support healthier eating:

- They save families money and time.
- They remove the stress of preparing packed lunches.
- They benefit families with seasonal workloads, such as those in farming.
- Children try a wider range of foods and receive at least one guaranteed nutritious meal each day.
- Parents strongly support FSM, viewing it as an **effective and valued policy**.

Key Findings – Physical Activity

Children's physical activity is supported by outdoor play and family routines

- Most parents reported that children are active **daily** through outdoor play, walking to school and farm-related activities.
- Activity levels increase in summer, though farming families noted **year-round outdoor activity**.
- The **Family Centre** is highly valued for promoting physical activity through games, cycling, group play and ideas for at-home activity.

Barriers to physical activity keep children indoors

- Parents said **screen use and practical pressures** are reducing children's activity levels.
- They expressed concern that online socialising is **replacing outdoor play**.
- **Cost and lack of transport**, especially in rural areas, limit access to organised activities.
- **Parents' limited time**, particularly during seasonal farming peaks, makes it harder to take children outside for walks or bike rides.

POLICY, PRACTICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Healthy eating

- Clear, practical guidance on healthy eating and meal planning.
- Expansion of the Healthy Start Scheme to include more families.
- Improved school meal provision during school holidays
- Better access to affordable fresh food in local shops.
- Support for community food initiatives such as allotments.

Physical activity

- More local parks and safe play spaces.
- Safe walking and cycling routes for families.
- Increased school sports provision, including for girls.
- Clear information about local activities for children and families.
- Better public transport links for families in rural area.

Wellbeing

- Earlier funded childcare provision from 9 months.
- Wider and more consistent access to breakfast clubs and wrap around care provision.
- More affordable school holiday activities
- Wider access to warm spaces.

There needs to be a co-ordinated, Wales-wide approach where Welsh Government, local authorities, Family Centres and schools can work together. The aim must be to improve access to affordable healthy food, strengthen early years support and expand opportunities for physical activity. There should be a particular focus on rural communities where options and transport links are more limited. This will help families to access services and activities without additional pressure falling on them.