The effect of diet on the mental performance of children

Consumer expectations-how Parents and Teachers perceive that food affects mental performance

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Study partners

- England
- Germany
- Hungary
- Spain
Background

- A child’s cognitive development and mental performance are influenced by many factors, including nutrition.
- There is evidence in the scientific literature of the effects of diet on children’s mental performance, but what do consumers think?
Research questions

• What do parents perceive as the effects of diet on a child’s development and in particular on their mental performance?

• Do teachers perceive diet as affecting children’s mental performance in school?
Study details

- Interviews were conducted with parents and teachers in four European countries- England, Germany, Hungary and Spain.

- Parents (n=127) and Teachers (n=66) of children aged 4-10 years old were recruited through schools in the state sector.
Study details

• A semi-structured interview schedule was used with parents and teachers.

• Topics discussed included:
  – the effect of diet on children’s wellbeing and development,
  – the physical and mental effects of diet
  – the short and long term effects of children’s diets
## Results-Parents

| Effects of Diet       | • Individual differences  
|                      | • Mental effects  
|                      | • Physical effects  
| Healthiness of Diet  | • Effects of specific foods and nutrients  
|                      | • Use of supplements  
| Food Choices and Dietary Habits | • Meals  
|                      | • Parental role in development of eating habits and food preferences  
| Sources of information on feeding children | • Companies  
|                      | • Family &Friends  
|                      | • Health professionals  

Results-Parents

• Parents in all countries had a concept of a healthy diet, which involved balance, variety and moderation.

• Parents clearly distinguished between “good” and “bad” foods, based on the perceived effects of these foods.

• Very specific foods were identified as “bad” e.g. sweets, ready meals, processed foods.
Results-Parents

- Parents discussed the effects of diet on mental performance principally in terms of effects on Attention and Concentration.

- Often parents perceived the effects of foods as being manifested through changes in Mood and Behaviour e.g. many parents spoke of children becoming “hyper” after consuming too many sweets.
Results-Parents

• The majority of parents spoke of Breakfast as being very important for children before going to school.

• The energy supplied by breakfast is perceived as essential for children being able to concentrate and perform well in class.
Results-Teachers

- All teachers reported an awareness of the effect of diet on children’s performance in school.
- Many teachers also spoke of their own experience as parents when discussing the effects of diet.
Results-Teachers

- What children eat is seen to affect their *Energy* levels, which in turn affects their ability to concentrate.
- An unbalanced diet will either result in a lack of energy and tiredness or alternatively in hyperactivity.
Results-Teachers

- Teachers spoke of witnessing changes in behaviour after lunch and related this to what children had eaten.

- Breakfast was highlighted as being very important for children’s performance, but it needed to be healthy and balanced.
Key findings

• Parents and teachers in all countries acknowledge the effects of diet on children’s mental performance.

• Mental performance is most often spoken of in terms of attention and concentration.

• The effects of diet on attention and concentration are often mediated by effects on mood and behaviour.
Thank you for your Attention!