

HCF CONSUMER INSIGHTS SERIES

Healthy Families, Happy Students:
A Strong Start to 2022 Report



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Report prepared by HCF Public Relations, January 30, 2022. Contact: rpage@hcf.com.au

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2579 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 29th October - 3rd November 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Australian adults (aged 18+).

HEALTHY FAMILIES, HAPPY STUDENTS: A GOOD START TO 2022 REPORT

Welcome to the second in a series of consumer insights reports that help start conversations about the healthcare issues and trends that matter most to Australians.

Now more than ever, at HCF we're committed to showing members a level of care that is uncommon. That's why we've surveyed Australians to find out more about key health trends, opinions and experiences. These insights will help us to guide members to the right care at the right time, so they're empowered to lead healthier lives.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 7.3 million families in Australia in June 2021. That's 7.3 million reasons to think about what to put on the dinner table every night, and how to keep the whole family healthy and happy.

There were also more than four million students enrolled in almost 10,000 schools in Australia in 2020.

Four million young minds feeling a range of emotions from enthusiasm, excitement, anxiety, boredom, or confusion, and often needing a helping hand from loved ones and peers to navigate new experiences.

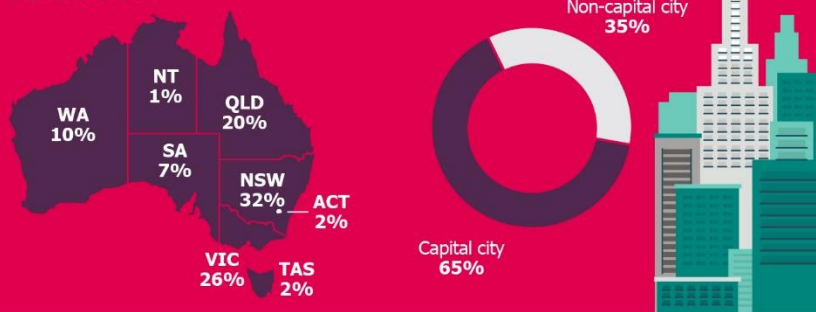
2022 means a new school start for many Australian families, and as HCF's Summer Health Report revealed, the top priority in the new year for Australians was to lead a healthier life with more exercise and improved nutrition.

This report delves into the concerns and aspirations Australian parents have for their children, from challenges at the family table to emotional concerns about their school environment. We've also spoken to experts from our partner services to provide practical solutions to problems so many Australian parents face.

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

Their survey of 2,579 Australians was conducted on behalf of HCF Australia by YouGov.

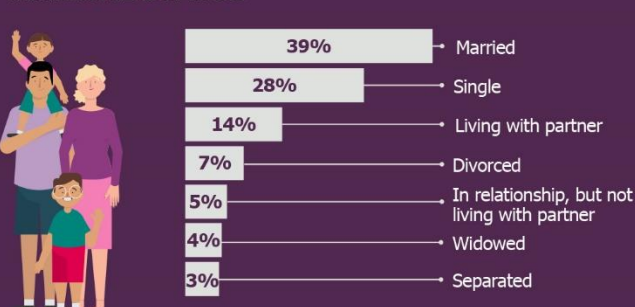
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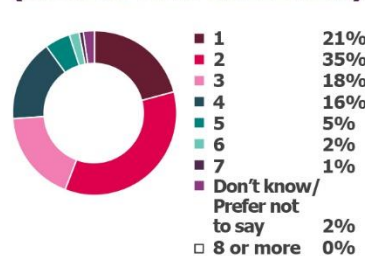
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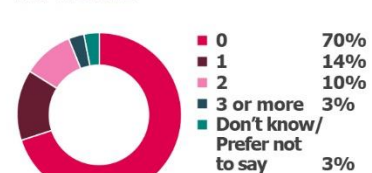
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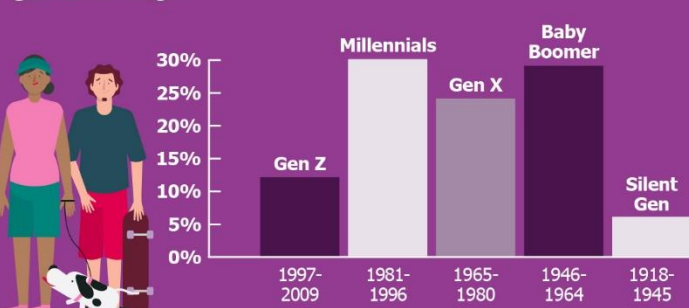
HOUSEHOLD SIZE (ADULTS AND CHILDREN)



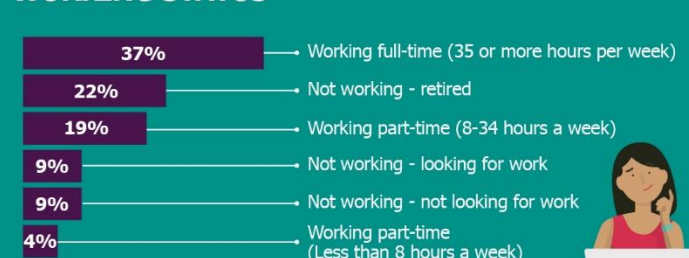
CHILDREN UNDER 18 AT HOME



GENERATION



WORKING STATUS





KEY
FINDINGS



1. THE PARENT TRAP: TOP CONCERNS FOR CHILDREN

PARENTING WORRIES

From the moment parents find out they are expecting, life can be full of 'what ifs' and worries for their children.

Our survey asked Australian parents about some of their biggest concerns. Unsurprisingly, more than 90 per cent of parents with children under 18 said they had concerns about their children, which can be a very normal part of raising a family.

At HCF we set about finding out what those worries are, so that parents know they are not alone, and can be guided towards the right advice to help them navigate the struggles and juggles of raising happy and healthy kids with confidence and support.

OVERALL CONCERNS

- The most common concerns parents had about their children were that they were getting too much screen time (61%); were lacking face-to-face social engagement outside of school (46%); and that they weren't getting enough physical movement each day (44%)
- Other concerns parents had were that social media could have a negative influence on body image (40%), that their children spend too much time on video games (39%), the pressure of social media to make their children want to please or impress others (38%), their children not getting the right amount of nutrition in their diet (37%) and that they are not getting enough quality sleep (34%)
- Dads were more likely to be concerned about time spent on video games (43% compared to 34%) and the pressure of social media to make their children want to impress others (43% compared to 32%). In contrast, mums were more likely than dads to be concerned about their children not getting the right amount of nutrition in their diet (43% compared to 31%)
- Gen X parents were more likely than Millennial parents to be concerned that their children were not getting enough physical movement into their day (55%

compared to 37%), that social media could have a negative influence on body image (46% compared to 37%), and that they were not getting enough quality sleep each day (41% compared to 27%)

- Parents with children under five were more likely to be concerned about their children not getting enough nutrition in their diets than those with children aged 13-17 (42% compared to 31%)
- In contrast, parents with children aged 13-17 (49%) and 9-12 years (51%) were more likely than parents with children under 5 years (37%) to report feeling concerned about their children not getting enough physical activity. Parents with teenage children were also more likely to report feeling concerned about their children not getting enough sleep (41% compared to 29% of parents with children under 5)

SCHOOL CONCERNS

- More than eight in ten (83%) parents with school aged children had concerns for them while they were at school
- The top three concerns parents with school aged children had for their child/ren when they were at school were bullying/cyber-bullying (51%), not paying attention or learning to their capacity (43%) and not fitting in/being accepted by peers (37%)
- Other issues parents rated in their top three concerns were that they would experience pressure that they needed to excel that could lead to anxiety/depression (33%), that their 'big' feelings would get them into trouble (21%), and that they would not get the best teacher in a subject (19%)
- In addition, three in ten (30%) parents with teenagers who had concerns about their children while they were at school said they were concerned about peer pressure to drink/smoke/take drugs
- Mothers (41%) were more likely to be concerned about their children being not accepted by peers than fathers (32%)



WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

IT'S NORMAL TO WORRY

Almost all of the parents we surveyed told us they had concerns for their children, both in and out of school.

While the concerns might be varied and valid, they're most certainly not uncommon.

Clinical Psychologist Kirrilie Smout from *Calm Kids Central*, which has partnered with HCF to help kids and their parents understand and better manage their feelings, said parents should remind themselves that many concerns are not indicative of bad parenting or that the child has some kind of unusual psychological disorder.

"I have talked to many hundreds of families over the last 25 years and the things we worry about are things that many kids, in many families do ALL the time," Ms Smout said.

"Because when it comes to our children, worry (guilt, frustration, helplessness) is very easily triggered."



STICKS, STONES AND KEYBOARDS

The research revealed that bullying and cyber bullying topped the list of concerns of parents for kids at school.

The Australian eSafety Commissioner reports that one in five young Australians reported being socially excluded, threatened or abused online, and that just 55 per cent sought help from their parents.¹

With many parents experiencing the concept of cyber bullying for the first time through the experiences of their children, and with added layers of protection for bullies like anonymity, this is a very real concern for parents.

Ms Smout said that with both schoolyard and online bullying, it was important parents coached their kids to know how to manage these situations.

"Concerns about bullying are quite common but to some degree what we need to be focused on is how to help children deal with social conflict and exclusion with their peers, rather than being fearful of bullying," Ms Smout said.

"Talking about what's likely to happen and what they would do can be very helpful. Not telling them or nagging but sharing opinions, ideas and thoughts."

FRIENDS AND FOES

Fortunately for the more than half of parents concerned about bullying and cyber bullying at school, Ms Smout said bullying might actually be less common than many thought.

"Most kids have got someone in their class who they don't like," Ms Smout said.

"And most kids will have fights with their friends."

Rather than worrying about bullying too much, Ms Smout said parents should help kids deal positively and resiliently with arguments between friends and learn the fact that people are not going to be kind to them all of the time.

"While our job is to care about our children's experiences and validate their distress, it is also to help them think about how to cope with situations and workshop helpful things to say.

"It's a great idea to always be thinking about how you can help your child have great relationships. And remember, they often tell us the difficult stuff but not so much of the good stuff, or even the times they've been rude themselves. Know that we don't have the full picture all the time," she said.

"If they are bullied, which is much less common, it can be very serious because it can have long term implications for their mental health.

"In these situations, it is more important for parents and teachers themselves to step in to protect children."

¹ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/cyberbullying>

FINDING SUPPORT

Just because it's common to worry, doesn't mean it's not difficult. That's why HCF offers parents a range of support options to help them navigate the tricky years.

Our mental health and wellbeing support includes free access for HCF members with hospital or extras cover for children aged 4-11 to *Calm Kid Central*, an online educational and support program to help kids aged 4-11 learn to act bravely and confidently, behave in positive ways, develop good friendships and manage tough life situations.

Parents and carers get fast and confidential access to a team of experienced child psychologists, who'll answer unlimited questions within 48 hours; and videos and articles to help you know what to say and do to support your child emotionally.

For children, the program has courses, video lessons, activities, posters and animations to help them understand and better manage their feelings. There are also resources for parents and children who are worried or unsettled by COVID-19.

HCF members also have access to video sessions with *PSYCH2U*, for both children requiring additional support or for their parents in managing the stress/anxiety associated.

For more information, visit:

www.hcf.com.au/members/manage-your-health/mental-health-support/children-and-parents



2. MEALTIME DEAL BREAKERS

THE TUG OF WAR AT THE TABLE

Food, water, shelter and clothing may be the simple necessities of life but they are not always simple tasks for many Australian families.

In Australian homes every morning, noon and night, there are wars being waged over what's being plated up and how to convince the smallest members of the family to eat.

Our survey reveals, perhaps with some reassurance to many parents, that the perception of fussy eating in children is indeed common. Fortunately, thanks to our partners at HCF, there's help at hand.

PICK YOUR BATTLES

- As many as seven in ten (69%) parents with children under 18 say they have a child who is a fussy eater
- Amongst parents with a fussy eater, two in five (41%) say they often have to prepare two or more additional meals at dinner time to accommodate for fussy eaters in the household and just over three in ten (31%) admit that having a fussy eater causes stress for the family
- Parents with younger children are more likely to admit that having a fussy eater causes stress for the family (38% of those with children under 5 compared to 25% of those with children 13-17)
- In addition, parents of children aged 9-12 (50%) are more likely to say that they often have to prepare two or more meals at dinner time to accommodate fussy eaters than parents with children under 5 (38%) or 13-17 years (40%)



BRIBING CHILDREN WITH A SWEET TREAT IF THEY EAT THEIR MAIN MEAL

- Two thirds (64%) of parents with a child under 18 admit to bribing their child/ren with a sweet treat to get them to eat their main meal, with these parents saying this occurs 2.2 days per week on average
- Unsurprisingly, those with younger children are more likely to admit to bribing their children with a sweet treat to get them to eat their main meal compared to those with older children (76% of parents with children under 5 and 79% of parents with children aged 5-8, compared to 66% of parents with children 9-12 years and 50% of parents with children 13-17 years)
- Interestingly, Millennial parents are more likely to admit to bribing their children with a sweet treat than Gen X parents (74% compared to 54%)

BRIBING CHILDREN WITH SCREENTIME

- More than half of parents with a child under 18 (56%) admit to bribing their children with screen time if they eat their main meal, with these parents saying they do this 2.3 days per week on average
- Millennial parents are more likely to bribe their children with screen time to get them to eat their main meal several times per week or more often (30% compared to 18% of Gen X parents)
- Parents who work full time are more than twice as likely as those working part time to bribe their children with screen time to get them to eat their main meal several times per week or more often (32% compared to 15%)

BRIBING CHILDREN WITH AN ACTIVITY/NON-FOOD REWARD

- Two thirds (64%) of parents with a child under 18 admit they bribe their children with an activity or non-food reward to get them to eat their main meal, with these parents saying this happens 2 days per week on average
- Millennial parents are more likely than Gen X parents to bribe their children with an activity or non-food reward to get them to eat their main meal several times per week or more often (29% compared to 18%)
- Parents working full time are twice as likely as those working part time to say that they bribe their children with an activity or non-food reward to get them to eat their main meal several times per week or more often (32% compared to 16%)
- Parents of younger children are also more likely to employ an activity or non-food bribe several times per



week or more often to get their kids to eat their main meal, than those with teenagers (29% amongst parents with children under 5, 33% amongst parents with children 5-8 and 27% amongst parents with children 9-12, compared to 16% amongst parents with children aged 13-17)

TAKEAWAY FOOD PURCHASING HABITS

- The vast majority (96%) of parents with children under 18 admit that their family eats takeaway food that they know is not healthy because it is fast and convenient, with half of these parents (52%) saying this happens at least once a week
- Millennial parents (26%) were more likely to purchase takeaway several times per week or more often compared to their Gen X counterparts (17%)
- Parents working full time purchase takeaway food for their families they know is unhealthy because it is fast and convenient more often than those who are working part time (1.7 days per week compared to 1 day a week, on average)
- Parents who say they have experienced poor sleep, lack of focus or irritability from changes to their lifestyle due to COVID over the past 12 months are more likely to purchase takeaway food several times a week or more often compared to those who have not experienced these issues (23% compared to 10%)

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TABLE

HCF Chief Officer Member Health, Julie Andrews, said families didn't need to battle the pressure of mealtimes alone.

"Our research found a staggering 77 per cent of parents find meal time difficult or stressful for their family, with almost half finding dinner the most stressful meal," Ms Andrews said.

"At HCF we want parents to know that they're not alone, and that there is help at hand."

HCF members have access to the *Healthy Families for Life* program, which is designed to encourage kids to develop positive eating habits for growth and development.

"We know that setting kids up with strong nutritional foundations early in life can help reduce the risk of chronic conditions in their future," Ms Andrews said.

"It's also important we encourage parents to role model healthy eating behaviours themselves, to make sure everyone in the family is developing healthy habits to last a lifetime."

Dietitian Dr Jane Watson from *Healthy Families for Life* said it was important to acknowledge that feeding children could be challenging.

With the research finding that working parents were twice as likely to bribe kids with screens to eat their main meals, Dr Watson said interfering with hunger and fullness cues could be problematic.

"Allow your child to get hungry between meals and snacks, then offer them the foods you'd like them to eat, alongside smaller portions of those they already eat," Dr Watson said.

"Almost half of the parents surveyed said dinner was the most stressful meal, which is a catch-22: mealtimes are unlikely to go well when parents are stressed."

WORTH FUSSING OVER?

Dr Watson said that if children are growing well and eating foods from each food group, it's likely they're getting the nutrition they need from the foods they prefer.

"Children won't increase the variety of foods they eat if they are filling up on their favourite foods."

She recommended working towards providing the same meal for everyone in the family.

"Any changes to your child's usual eating patterns will need to happen at the child's pace. Be guided by your child regarding how quickly you can make these changes.

"Providing the same meal for everyone sends your child a strong message that they don't have a special meal and also that we expect and believe they will be able to eat 'family foods', if not today then sometime in the future.

"Offer your child the food you'd like them to eat - if it's not offered, they can't eat it."

And finally, Dr Watson advised that parents make sure children aren't tired by dinner.
"A tired child is unlikely to be a willing eater," she said.

BACK OFF THE BRIBERY

While a commonly used tactic, Dr Watson said bribery didn't work.

"Using treats to coax your child to eat healthy foods just reinforces the idea that the healthy food is undesirable, and the treat is highly desirable," she said.

To avoid the bribery trap:

- Remove the reward status of dessert. Dessert is not a reward for eating other things. It is a type of food that happens to taste great.
- Decide ahead of the meal whether you will offer dessert and offer a very small dessert without any expectation about what or how much of the meal is eaten.
- Of course, it's quite possible that your child will only eat dessert and refuse everything else. It helps to remember that they have other opportunities to eat every day so their nutrition is not likely to be affected by just one mealtime.
- Also, dessert can be absolutely anything and can be nutritious – for example, yoghurt and fruit or even a 'grazing plate' with fruit, cheese and whatever else you want to include.
- Allow your child to get hungry between meals and snacks, then offer them the foods you'd like them to eat, alongside smaller portions of those they already eat.
- Work towards screen-free meals. If screens are helping your child stay at the table, explore strategies that support them to be able to sit calmly at the table during the family meal.



3. BREAKING THE HABIT

PREPARATION MAKES PERFECT

The barriers to the picture-perfect family meal may not always sit with children, however. We asked parents what other hurdles they have faced, from grocery shopping to perfecting the back-to-school lunchboxes.

With working parents making up such a large part of our membership base, we have also found ways to make life a little less stressful when it comes to meal prep and improving family nutrition.



BARRIERS TO NUTRITIOUS EATING WITH THE FAMILY

- More than three in four parents (77%) with children under 18 say their family faces barriers to healthy eating
- The most common barriers to healthy eating these parents identified are that buying good quality healthy food is more expensive overall (46%), getting everyone to agree to make the change to healthier eating (37%), and lack of time to find healthy recipes, create healthy meal plans and shop for the right food (32%)
- Other barriers these parents face include that it is difficult to break out of eating routines everyone is used to (30%), less healthy take-away food is cheap and convenient to access (27%), and that it is not always easy to access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables (27%)

- Millennial parents are more likely than Gen X parents to cite lack of access to quality fresh fruit and vegetables as a barrier to healthy eating (29% compared to 16%).
- Unsurprisingly, those with children under 5 (38%) and 5-8 years (39%) are more likely to mention lack of time as a barrier compared to those with children aged 13-17 (27%)
- Interestingly those who experienced poor sleep, lack of focus or irritability from lifestyle changes due to COVID-19 are more likely to say their family faces barriers to healthy eating (83% compared to 53%)

MEAL PLANNING AND SHOPPING

- Nine in ten (88%) parents say they take responsibility for most of the meal planning, shopping and cooking for the family at least once a month
- Mums (43%) are almost twice as likely to do the shopping and cooking for the family every day than dads are (23%)
- Dads are more likely to never be involved in meal planning and cooking than mothers (9% compared to 4%)

GETTING THE KIDS INVOLVED

- Eight in ten (80%) Aussie parents are actively involving their children in the planning, shopping and preparation of family meals
- However, the remaining one in five (20%) are not, including 14% of parents with teenagers 13-17 years.
- Amongst parents who are involving their children, fathers are getting their children involved with cooking more often than mothers (2.3 days a week compared to 1.8 days a week, on average)
- Similarly, Millennial parents are getting their children involved more often than Gen X parents (2.3 days a week compared to 1.7 days a week, on average).

SCHOOL LUNCHBOXES

- The majority of parents (84%) send their child/ren to school with a packed lunch
- Amongst these parents, seven in ten (71%) say that the majority of the time all the food is eaten, however, the remaining three in ten parents (29%) say their child/ren only eat all the food they pack occasionally or never
- Amongst parents who pack lunchboxes, those with children under the age of five (34%) are more likely to find their child hasn't finished their food compared to parents of children aged five to eight (26%) and nine to twelve years (23%)
- Interestingly, parents with children aged nine to twelve years (32%) are more likely to find their child has

finished their packed lunch every day they take one than parents with children aged five to eight years (25%)

FAMILY MEALTIMES

- Almost two thirds (65%) of parents say their family sits down all together for the main meal of the day on most days, however only 40% manage to do this every day
- More than one in ten (13%) parents say their family sits down all together for the main meal of the day

MOST DIFFICULT OR STRESSFUL MEAL

Eight in ten (77%) parents say that they find meal occasions difficult or stressful for their family, with almost half (48%) finding dinner the most stressful meal.

Mums are more likely than dads to find dinner difficult or stressful (55% compared to 41%), while dads are more likely than mums to say breakfast is the most difficult/stressful meal occasion for their family (17% compared to 11%)

- Millennial parents (85%) are more likely than Gen X (70%) to say they find meal occasions difficult/stressful
- Parents with younger children under the age of five (87%), 5-8 years (81% and 9-12 years (81%) are more likely to find meal occasions stressful compared to parents with teenage children 13-17 years (73%)

TAKE STRESS OF THE MENU

With almost half of the surveyed parents identifying dinner as the most stressful meal, Dr Watson shared her tips for a calm and predictable mealtime environment:

- **Take short-cuts:** Have quick meals or leftovers or even a 'picnic' dinner (any food you can find in the house!).
- **Keep it simple:** Don't expect yourself to prepare a gourmet meal. There are plenty of quick options that provide as much nutrition as meals that take hours to prepare.
- **Be realistic:** Keep your high expectations for days you can meet them. Maybe one meal no the weekend could be something that takes a bit more time. On other days, provide the food you can and enjoy eating with your child.
- **Create a pre-meal routine:** Let everyone know that it's almost time to eat and to finish whatever they are doing. This might mean putting toys away, turning off screens or finishing whatever they are doing. Follow this with getting ready to eat washing hands and setting the table. A routine helps everyone get ready for a meal in a predictable way.

- **Plan ahead:** Planning meals ahead can save money, time, reduce stress, improve nutrition and contribute to calmer mealtimes. Meal planning avoids the end-of-day panic about what's for dinner and helps the sometimes-fraught afternoon/evening run more smoothly. You can even write up your plan for the week and display it somewhere for everyone to see (pictures can be used for very young children). That way, everyone knows in advance what's for dinner which helps convey to children that the family meal has been decided and no amount of 'pester power' will change it. When meal planning for the family, ensure that each meal includes at least one food that children will eat.
- **Expect that kids may eat nothing at all for that meal:** If children are tired, not hungry or not in the mood for eating, they are unlikely to eat much (if anything). All you can do is offer the family meal and include at least one food your child will usually eat. Let them know it's ok if they don't want to eat it, but don't offer anything else.
- **Remember:** it's not what they eat at each meal, but what they eat over a few days or a week that matters. If your child is in the habit of not eating anything for dinner, consider what may be contributing to this and explore strategies that either increase their hunger and/or support them to be able to sit calmly at the table during the family meal.

IN THE (LUNCH) BAG

The survey showed that lunchboxes do not always come home from school empty, but Dr Watson said parents need to remember that for many kids, running around the playground is more important than sitting still to eat.

"If your child is regularly coming home with a full lunchbox, avoid commenting on it," she said.

"Continue to pack small amounts of healthy food and let your child decide if, what and how much they eat. Children have small tummies, so pack small portions and include food that's quick and easy for them to eat.

"Some children just don't eat much at school. If they are growing well, they are getting enough energy from the food they are eating at other times of the day. Start the day with a good breakfast of cereal, fruit or toast. That way your child won't start the day on an empty tummy.

"If your child is hungry after school, this is a good time to offer a substantial snack. For example, cheese & crackers, fruit, nuts, yoghurt, milk or even a sandwich."

NEXT STEPS

If the topics raised in this report resonated with your family's mealtime battles and you'd like more support to help you manage your family's nutritional needs, visit:

www.hcf.com.au/healthyfamilies



