

Unhealthy Foods and Energy Drinks - A Snapshot Survey of Children and Young People in Wales

Children's Commissioner for Wales

September 2024



**Comisiynydd
Plant Cymru**
Children's
Commissioner
for Wales

Introduction

During September 2024 we asked children and young people for their thoughts on certain foods and energy drinks. This relates to [proposals from Welsh Government](#) designed to make our food environments healthier.

The survey was part of an ongoing series of topical questions we ask children and young people monthly to hear their views on a variety of issues, called Monthly Matters. It was shared directly with all schools signed up to our children's rights schemes for primary and secondary schools, as well as community groups.

As part of the survey pack, children and young people were shown a video introducing the topic, and they were asked to consider some questions, like if they think where sugary, salty or fatty foods are being displayed in shops make a difference to whether they'd buy them or not, and whether they think energy drinks should be sold to children under the age of 16. We suggested in our session outline that, following this video, children and young people should have a few minutes to discuss their views with each other before answering the survey. Schools and groups had two options for completing the survey; children and young people could either do it independently, or a teacher or group leader could complete the survey on behalf of the group by answering a different set of questions to give an overview of the discussion.

610 children and young people answered the survey individually. A further 1,234 children took part in groups, with teachers and youth workers submitting a summary of their views. A broad range of ages took part, from children under the age of 7 up to 18-year-olds. We received responses from 14 local authority areas.

Questions were developed by the Commissioner's experienced staff team based on themes that had emerged from previous engagement exercises with children, young people, and professionals.

Questions for children and young people

When you go to a shop do you normally go by yourself or with an adult?

With an adult (374) - 66%

By myself (147) - 26%

I'm not sure (94) - 16%

The Welsh Government want shops to stop putting food like sweets, chocolates and crisps in certain places where lots of people will see them, like by the front door of the shop and by the till/checkout.

Do you think where sugary, salty, or fatty food is displayed makes a difference to whether you buy them or not?

Yes (177) - 31%

Sometimes (167) - 29%

No (134) - 23%

I don't know (94) - 16%

**Children who chose 'yes' were asked an additional question:
Please tell us why**

The most common answers fell under the following themes:

- If it's placed by the till, it makes you want to buy them
- It doesn't make a difference
- It depends what parents say

Do deals like buy one get one free make you want to buy foods like sweets, chocolates, and crisps?

Yes (219) - 39%
Sometimes (188) - 33%
No (114) - 20%
I don't know (47) - 8%

**Children who chose 'yes' were asked an additional question:
Please tell us why**

The most common answers fell under the following themes:

- Getting more for less money
- Saving money
- Getting something for free

The Welsh Government wants to stop restaurants and cafes from giving free refills of sugar-sweetened (fizzy) drinks. What do you think about this?

I think it's a bad idea (227) - 42%
I think it's a good idea (169) - 31%
I don't know (145) - 27%

**Children were then asked an additional question:
Please tell us why**

The most common answers fell under the following themes:

- Health benefits of banning free refills
- Save money
- They like refills and fizzy drinks

Do children or young people your age drink energy drinks, like prime energy, monster, or red bull?

Yes - some of them drink those drinks (246) - 43%

Yes - lots of them drink those drinks (130) - 23%

No (122) - 21%

I don't know (71) - 13%

Do you think energy drinks should be sold to children under 16?

No (355) - 62%

Yes (116) - 20%

I don't know (100) - 18%

Children were then asked an additional question:

Please tell us why

The most common answers fell under the following themes:

- Can cause health issues
- Too much sugar and caffeine in them
- Should be sold to children over 16 / children under 16 are too young

Questions for Teachers

Where teachers responded on behalf of a group, their answers reflected the answers given by children directly. Teachers were also able to give their own perspective and experiences in the following questions:

Teachers were also asked a question asking them to give their own professional opinion on the issue:

As a teacher/youth worker, do you think energy drinks cause any issues in your school/youth club?

The most common answers fell under the following themes:

- Worries about the impact of energy drinks on children's mood, behaviour, and concentration
- Not being concerned about the issue
- Referencing the popularity of specific products, e.g. Prime

Conclusion

- Most children (60%) told us that where sugary, salty, or fatty food is displayed at least sometimes makes a difference to whether they buy them or not. Many children and young people mentioned placement by the tills or at the front of shops, and that unhealthy foods 'caught their eye' in shops. Around a quarter said it did not make a difference to them. Some of these children said that they didn't feel they were influenced and that they went to the shop to buy only what they need.
- 72% told us that buy-one-get-one-free deals on foods like sweets, chocolates and crisps at least sometimes make them more likely to buy those products. Some mentioned feeling like they had missed out on free food if they didn't buy them, or being influenced by pictures of the food. Others, though, felt that it did not make a difference to them personally.

- Most children (42%) disagreed with the proposal to stop restaurants and cafes from giving free refills of sugar-sweetened (fizzy) drinks. 31% think the proposal is a good idea. Those who opposed the idea stated individual choice, the cost of living, and also that free refills are often what makes a restaurant or café appealing. Those who agree with the proposals mentioned that sugary drinks are unhealthy, and that they should be drunk in moderation. They also mentioned the need for there to be alternatives, such as free refills of healthier alternatives. Interestingly, the most common response to the free text related to this question was to recognise the positive health impacts that banning refills would have.
- 62% of children and young people responding to our survey felt energy drinks should not be sold to under 16s, while teachers and youth workers who responded painted a mixed picture of the impacts of energy drink consumption – with some saying it affects the mood and behaviour of children and young people on a daily basis, and others saying it is rarely an issue, or that energy drinks have already been restricted locally.
- Two-thirds of children said that at least some children their age drank energy drinks. 23% said lots of their peers drank energy drinks.
- These findings will be shared with Welsh Government, and with Senedd Members to assist scrutiny of the Welsh Government’s proposals on healthy food environments and energy drinks. You can find out more about these proposals [here](#).