

Parental Perceptions of Retail Promotions on Food High in Fat, Salt and Sugar in Scotland Report

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Key findings

- **High Cost of Healthy Food** - Many parents find healthy food unaffordable, therefore a driver for seeking unhealthy, discounted options.
- **Impact of Price Promotions** - Price promotions, especially multibuy and temporary price reductions are mostly on unhealthy food, strongly influence impulse buying and build brand loyalty for some parents, often leading to the purchase of unhealthy foods and wasteful spending.
- **Location-Based Promotions** - Supermarket layouts, particularly the placement of promotions at checkouts and aisles also encourage impulse buying, with unhealthy foods dominating these spaces.
- **Implications for inequalities** - The perceived value of cost savings from promotions by most respondents and the unplanned and wasteful spends attributed to the promotional triggers suggest their disproportionate impact on low-income households and their already constrained budgets.
- **Policy Suggestions** - Most parents advocated for change to the retail environment, incentivising healthier choices through loyalty schemes, and implementing measures like restricting unhealthy promotions and offering healthier alternatives at lower prices.

Executive summary

This report presents findings from a qualitative research study exploring parental perceptions of price and location promotions on food and drink high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) in Scotland. Conducted in March 2025, the study sought to understand the views and experiences of parents regarding how promotions influence food purchasing behaviours in the retail store environment.

Promotions are known to strongly shape consumer behaviour. In response to growing concerns about children's diets in Scotland, this study adds insight into how promotions influence parental food choices.

Two focus group discussions with 18 parents of children aged 4-16 living in Scotland were conducted - one in person in Edinburgh and the other online with participants from across Scotland. Thematic analysis of the data helped to identify key patterns and relationships in parental experiences and views on HFSS promotions in retail settings.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed concerns that healthy food options are often too expensive, making it difficult to prioritise nutrition, especially when faced with children's strong preferences for branded unhealthy products.

Price promotions, particularly multibuy, temporary discounts, and seasonal offers, were widely acknowledged as influential but not genuine money savers, often leading to impulse and wasteful purchases of unhealthy food. While some parents made conscious efforts to resist such deals, even they felt the promotions were hard to ignore, especially when shopping on tight budgets.

Location-based promotions, especially those at aisle ends and checkouts, were identified as a key contributor to unplanned purchasing, with some parents noting how store layouts influence children and make shopping with them difficult. There was a strong perception that unhealthy foods are far more likely to be promoted at strategic locations than nutritious alternatives, both in terms of price and visibility.

Parents called for changes to the food retail environment, suggesting measures like restricting unhealthy promotions or rebalancing their availability with healthier offers. While a few stressed personal responsibility, most believed government intervention was necessary to support healthier family diets. There was a sense of urgency from some participants and a desire for immediate action in prioritising children's health.