



# **“Drink as I do”**

**The influence of parents’ drink choices on children**

**by**

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## **“Drink as I do”: The influence of parents’ drink choices on children**

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This report looks at how influential parents drink choices are on their children’s hydration habits through analysis of scientific research and the results of a survey of parents and their children conducted by the Natural Hydration Council.

Parents are the main gatekeepers to the foods and drinks that are kept at home, as well as being children’s chief role models.<sup>1</sup> Being busy, concerned about costs and under pressure perhaps with fussy children or exposure to “pester power” can all be challenges when it comes to encouraging our children to adopt a healthy diet.<sup>2</sup> However, one of the influential factors contributing to what our children consume could actually be coming from us, the parents.

Children ‘parrot’ what we do and our behaviours, from an early age. To encourage healthy dietary habits we need to express pleasure in what we eat and drink, placing particular emphasis on doing this for healthier foods and drinks, while toning this down for less healthy things.

We also have to do this more than once – a process known as “repeated exposures” (offering the same food /drink continually) and ideally begin as early as weaning. For example, one study showed that six to eight exposures were needed before children began to enjoy and accept root vegetables!<sup>3</sup>

### **Copy cats**

Results from the recent survey commissioned by the Natural Hydration Council of 1,000 parents from across the UK and one of their children, aged 4–8 years old, shows the significant influence that parents are having on what their children drink.<sup>4</sup>

Children living with parents who drink fizzy drinks often were almost three times more likely to drink fizzy drinks themselves than other 4-8 year olds. The study shows 12% of all 4-8 year olds had a fizzy drink on any given day, but this rises to 35% in households where a parent often drinks fizzy drinks.

Where parents drank fruit juice often, children were more than twice as likely (115%) to also drink fruit juice daily. This shows how the parent’s habits could cause children to fall out of line with latest healthy eating recommendations. Public Health England’s new Eatwell guide, for example, now advises that intakes of fruit juice and/or smoothies should be limited to a total of 150ml a day as they are a source of free sugars.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst more than six in ten (63%) of the children surveyed drank plain water on any given day, the parental influence was still able to impact their overall consumption, with a rise to 87% in households where parents drink plain water often. This demonstrates the potential for parents to positively influence healthy hydration habits too.

The table below summarises the findings of this new research:

**Table 1 demonstrates what 4-8 year olds are drinking on any given day and shows the increase of them drinking a drink if their parents drink a certain type of drink often.**

Drink	All 4-8 year olds %	4-8 year olds for whom both parent and partner drink that type "often" (A) %	All other 4-8 year olds (B) %	Increase Group A v Group B %
Plain water	72	87	63	38%
Milk	55	67	54	24%
Squash	50	71	46	54%
Fruit juice	41	73	34	115%
Fizzy drinks	14	35	12	192%
Smoothies	10	44	7	529%
Flavoured water	10	41	8	412%
Tea/Coffee	9	11	7	57%
Sports drinks*	2.5	22	2	1000%

*\*Note, small sample size so should be treated indicatively*

Other research has also shown clear trends between what parents and their children drink. A US study of 95 low-income parents and their children aged 9-17 years found that the mean daily energy intake from beverages for the parents was 451 kcal with their children closely following suit with a mean daily energy intake of 457 kcal.<sup>6</sup> These findings highlight that the habit of drinking sugar sweetened beverages seems to be one that is picked up easily by children.

Parents may not be aware that they have such a direct influence on what their child wants to drink. Choosing plain water is one of the healthiest ways to hydrate for both parents and their children, so simple actions such as starting your day with a glass of water or ensuring it is on the table at all mealtimes could be a positive way to encourage this habit in your household.

**Top tips to make drinking plain water more fun for adults (!) and children:**

- Mix up the way you offer it – in different tumblers, drinking or sports bottles, fun ice shapes or a coloured/curly straw.
- Add a slice of cucumber, orange or kiwi, a strawberry or a hint of mint.
- Mention the temperature – would you like a nice ‘cold’ drink of water?

**Mum’s the word**

The report also revealed that parents believe it’s mum (65%) who has the most influence on their child’s drinking choices with friends the second biggest influence (11%) and dad

coming third with only one in ten saying they are the main influence on their children's drinking choices.

Interestingly, the way in which parents controlled a child's food intake can also affect their later behaviours. For example, a study consisting of 228 mother-child pairs found that those who used more 'covert' control had children with better quality diets than those using overt control.<sup>7</sup> Covert control is defined as 'controlling a child's food intake in a way that cannot be detected by the child' whilst overt control is 'controlling a child's food intake in a way that can be detected by the child'.<sup>8</sup>

Covert control is an interesting approach that can be used for beverages too. Rather than the word control, it is actually nudging children in the right direction. Prompts work well, such as "would you like a drink of nice, cold water?" or if the child keeps asking for fizzy drinks, parents may say "those are for special treats not all the time – would you like a pink straw in your water?". When out and about, a parent may offer an added incentive to a healthy choice, saying; "if you pick water you can have a small healthy snack too".

#### **Other take home tips**

- Drink plain water in front of your children and show your child that you're choosing to drink water and be positive about it– you are also likely to feel better for it! Do this regularly.
- Offer plain water throughout the day. In the morning before school, after school and also check what access children have to water during school time. Some schools will allow bottles to be brought in from home.
- Drink plain water as an integral part of mealtimes, with a jug or bottle being placed in the centre of the table.
- Have fun with water! Drink out of different tumblers and bottles, use a straw, add slices of fruit, different shaped ice cubes or even ice cubes with a hint of crushed herbs such as mint.
- Parents can also play a key role in helping to educate children about the beverage choices they make and how this may affect their health.
- Inform extended family members and other people who look after your child (children) you like them to drink plain water – and not give them too many other beverage treats!

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<sup>1</sup> Savage J.S et al. (2007) Parental Influence on Eating Behavior: Conception to Adolescence. *J Law Med Ethics*. 2007; 35(1): 22–34. Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2531152/>

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<sup>2</sup> Neppier M.J et al. (2016) Parents' barriers and strategies to promote healthy eating among school-age children. *Appetite*. 2016 Aug 1;103:157-64. Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27090341>

<sup>3</sup> Ahern S.M et al. (2016) The root of the problem: increasing root vegetable intake in preschool children by repeated exposure and flavour learning. *Appetite* 2016 Sept 1;80; 154–160. Available at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666314001810>

<sup>4</sup> The analysis was carried out by PCP market research. PCP Market Research conducted quantitative research online among 1000 parents and one of their children across the UK. The children were aged between 4 and 8 years old and 516 sons were interviewed and 484 daughters. 643 mothers and 357 fathers were interviewed — 859 of them lived in England, 65 in Scotland, 27 in Northern Ireland and 49 in Wales. This research was conducted between 13 – 22nd June 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Public Health England (2016) The Eatwell Guide. Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/528200/Eatwell\\_guide\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/528200/Eatwell_guide_booklet.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Pinard C.A et al. (2011) Beverage intake in low-income parent–child dyads. *Eating Behaviours* 2011 Dec 12;4; 313–316. Available at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1471015311000730>

<sup>7</sup> Jarman M et al. (2015) How do mothers manage their preschool children's eating habits and does this change as children grow older? A longitudinal analysis. *Appetite* 2015 1 Dec 95;466–474. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26271222>

<sup>8</sup> Ogden J et al. (2006) Expanding the concept of parental control: A role for overt and covert control in children's snacking behaviour? *Appetite* 2006 1 Jul 47;1;100-106. Available at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666306003795>