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Unpacking Fun Food and Children's Leisure: Mothers Perspectives on Preparing Lunchboxes

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose

Looking beyond concerns focusing solely on health and nutrition, this article unpacks how mothers seek to provide lunchtime food that is also a source of leisure and pleasure. In doing so, this article explores the relationship between lunchboxes, fun food and leisure.

Design/methodology/approach

Photo-elicitation interviews and a focus group were conducted with eleven mothers who regularly prepare lunchboxes for their children aged between nine and eleven years old.

Findings

1) Mothers intend the food they provide to act as a leisure experience and a break from the pressures of school. 2) Mothers understand that lunchboxes must fit with children's other activities taking place in their lunch-hour 3) Lunchboxes should support children's future leisure opportunities by providing nutrition and variety to support their growth and development. The discussion of lunchboxes also shows that fun food is not simply understood in opposition to healthy food. Mothers have a wider understanding of the transgressive nature of fun through food, which goes beyond the market offer and understanding of fun.

Research limitations/implications

As the study is based on a small sample of relatively affluent families in the UK, caution is needed in generalising the findings to wider groups. However,

the study offers qualitative insights and highlights the connections between leisure, fun food and lunchboxes that can be explored in further research.

Originality/value

This is the first paper to explore the interconnections between lunchboxes, fun food and leisure. It provides valuable insight into mothers' views about food prepared at home for consumption at school.

Keywords:

Leisure, fun food, mothers, children, schools, lunchboxes, UK

Article Classification:

Research paper

Introduction

Packed lunches consist of food that children bring to school and consume during their lunch break. Food is usually stored in a lunchbox, generally a plastic container, often decorated with famous cartoon characters, TV or sport celebrities, and music bands (Metcalf et al. 2008). As with other meals, the content of the lunch box reflects the gastronomic culture of the place and hence varies significantly from country to country. In the UK the content of a lunch box usually consists of a sandwich or another savoury and carbohydrate based items such as pasta or rice salad, a drink (often a fruit juice or water), a packet of crisps, a piece of fruit or a yogurt and a biscuit or another snack item (Morrison, 1996; Metcalf et al. 2008). Bringing a packed lunch instead of eating the food provided by the school ('school dinners') is only an option in certain countries. To our knowledge packed lunches are very common in Anglo-Saxon countries (Metcalf et al. 2008; Pike and Leahy 2012), Scandinavian countries (Karrebæk 2011) and some Asian countries including India (Donner 2006) and Japan (Allison, 1991). They do not exist or

are very uncommon in continental Europe wherein children can opt for a school meal or return home for lunch.

Packed lunches have recently been the source of fierce media and political debate in England following the publication of the School Food Plan in July 2013 (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013). With 54% of children in primary schools in England currently consuming a packed lunch (Nelson et al., 2012), it has been argued that 'only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards that currently apply to school food' (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013:7). This has led to calls from Head Teachers for packed lunches to be banned (BBC News, 12.09.13) followed by an announcement in September 2013 that free school meals will be made available to all children in the early years of their primary school education (BBC News, 17.09.13). The debate about lunchboxes is located within wider concern about children's diets, since there is considerable attention to the way children are fed, the rising level of obesity in children in the UK and concern to reduce the NHS expenditures for treating obesity related diseases (e.g. see the Guardian 18/03/2013).

Looking beyond concerns focusing solely on health and nutrition, this article unpacks how mothers also seek to provide lunchtime food that is a source of leisure and pleasure. Focussing on the perspective of parents in England who regularly prepare lunchboxes for their children, we provide an analysis of the connection between lunchboxes, fun food and leisure. Although food is recognised as a key component in many leisure activities, the relationship between leisure and lunchboxes has been unexplored to date. We consider

how and where parents' narratives concerning children's lunchboxes invoke notions of leisure.

Leisure has been defined as:

“uncoerced activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both), use their abilities and resources to succeed at this” (Stebbins, 2007, p.4).

However, this raises certain difficulties when applied to young people, because much of their time is under the direction of adults. In seeking to understand children's leisure, we recognise a multi-faceted definition of leisure which connects it with other activities:

'[L]eisure is not precisely bounded. It is more akin to learning than schooling. The beginning and end of a school day may be punctuated with a bell. By contrast, learning is ubiquitous, like work and play. Any sharp definition which clearly separated leisure from the rest of life would distort its own subject-matter' (Roberts, 1983:4405).

This definition facilitates our exploration into moments where parents seek to create a leisure experience for their children in an otherwise educational context. The role of this paper is not to assess whether lunchboxes meet any particular nutritional guidelines that have been laid down. Nonetheless, it is notable that lunchboxes form part of a contentious debate about feeding children. As will be demonstrated in the following section, this is reflected in the academic literature.

Children's lunchboxes: unpacking the notion of feeding with care

Feeding children has been conceptualised as a central element of mothering (DeVault 1991; Kaplan 2001; Cook 2005). Mothers have been described as the main caregivers, whose activity extends beyond the practice of cooking, investing a restless process of planning and re-planning, negotiating preferences and accommodating preferences and desires of all family members (De Vault 1991; Miller 1998). As De Vault and others (Kaplan 2001; Moiso et al. 2004) highlight, food provides the primary and intimate vehicle for the creation and perpetuation of love and care amongst family members. Love is not understood as 'an element of romanticism' but rather as a 'simply devotional duty' (Miller 1998:117) which usually takes the form of wives and mothers' anxiety to satisfy their loved ones' desires. From breakfast to dinner, from packed lunches to snacks, food is a mundane gift through which mothers make visible their gendered role of feeding the family by providing food that satisfy their loved ones (DeVault 1991; Lupton 1996; Miller 1998).

In the UK mothers' agency in providing food satisfying their children has been recently questioned as women are often accused of lacking an understanding of how to feed their children 'properly' avoiding 'unhealthy' food (Pike and Leahy 2012). This accusation is also visible in the academic debate with some studies showing virtuous parents feeding their children only with food considered healthy and nutritious (Horne et al. 2008; Bathgate and Begley 2011), while others denounce the rising of overindulgent parenting visible through lunch boxes full of unhealthy and branded food (Roper and La Niece,

2009). Although these studies offer insights into mothers' dilemma of feeding their children in the school setting, they do not take into consideration how the content of lunchboxes, as well as of any other meals, "is balanced, culturally rather than nutritionally" (Metcalf et al. 2008:405). Few studies tried to unpack the cultural complexity of preparing lunchboxes, showing how providing a meal considered nutritious is not the only consideration undertaken by mothers. For example, Allison's work (1991) looking at the obentos (Japanese lunchboxes) shows how preparing food considered by teachers aesthetically appealing and nutritious is a way to display "good mothering". Mothers are judged on the way they adhere to school norms and conventions by preparing "appropriate" food for her children. Other studies have showed how the process of judging healthy lunchboxes has very little to do with nutritional standards but more with cultural norms (Metcalf et al. 2008; Karrebæk, 2012). Metcalf et al. (2008) show how children lunchboxes reproduce the structure of British packed lunches consumed by adults combining healthy and unhealthy elements with the additions of some fun (branded) food. Karrebæk (2012) shows how Danish severe regulations of consuming healthy lunch boxes at school hide Danish cultural dominance over ethnic minorities. Indeed she shows how health is ideologically constructed reinforcing the marginalisation of ethnic minorities that do not conform to the Danish's ideas of a legitimate and appropriate (healthy) lunchbox (Karrebæk, 2012).

Although these studies show some of the complex processes of preparing lunchboxes, they do not clearly unpack mothers' caring dilemma of proving a

culturally balanced meal with appealing and nutritious food. Given that this study seeks to understand mothers' negotiation process of providing food that it is at the same time a source of nutrition and leisure, works on fun food and health food will be analysed in the next section.

Mothers' feeding dichotomies

Studies looking at mothers' experiences of feeding their children highlight how discourses of care and convenience dominate their practices. Healthy and convenient foods are often described in opposition symbolising resistance or surrender to the market penetration of every aspects of domestic life (Moisio et al. 2004). Healthy food is described not simply in nutritional terms, but rather as food "from scratch" without any (or minimal) intervention from the market (Bugge and Almås, 2006). Such food also symbolises "good mothering", such as mothers self-sacrifice in spending time, effort and labour in preparing "good" food for their children (Cappellini and Parsons 2012). On the contrary convenient food is mainly associated with mass produced food, ready to be consumed without any (or with a minimal) intervention by mothers (Bugge and Almås, 2006; Elliott 2007, 2008). As Warde (1997 highlights convenient food is represented in the media in opposition to care, since this food does not require any maternal self-sacrifice for its consumption.

Convenient food is often associated with fun food (Cook 2005, Elliott 2007, 2008). Fun food is not classified in nutritional terms, but rather in its "appeal of fun and play" (Elliott 2008: 269). It is a type of food not targeting adults, since

names, unusual shapes, bright colours, icons and gimmicks are addressed to children only. Adults, usually the final purchasers of the products, are targeted as parents and hence visually reassured by claims on the nutritious properties of the food. Despite these claims almost the totality of these products is “of poor nutritional quality” (Elliot 2007: 370). The category of fun food is constantly growing. If previously typical examples of fun food were only snacks, chocolate bars, crisps, and cereals today there are also yogurt, fruit juices, cheese and ready meals (Elliott 2007, 2008). Regardless of the heterogeneous category of fun food, *proprietary* and *transgressive* are two dimensions common to all food products targeting children (Cook 2005). Proprietary refers to the fact that this food belongs to the children’s world since it refers to cartoon characters or famous games, or proposes miniaturised versions of adult objects in bright colours. The incentive of play with food is a cultural and social transgression, since food becomes something else, it is re-categorised as a toy used for entertainment more than its nutritious purposes (Cook 2005; Elliott 2007, 2008; Mathiot, 2010). Incorporated into a world of cartoons, fairy tales, TV heroes and music bands this food belongs to the transgressive world of children only, where adults cannot easily access and fully understand all the narratives used by the market to promote such a food (De Iulio 2010; de la Ville et al. 2010). The transgressive nature of fun food makes it particularly appealing for children and renders problematic parents’ attempts to reduce or forbid its consumption (Cook 2005). Feeding children with convenient and fun food is often morally condemned as a sign of “lazy”, overindulgent and “unknowledgeable” parenting, and frequently denounced as direct cause of children obesity

(Guber and Berry 1993; Whitman 1994). Interviews with parents have found that those with higher education backgrounds are more likely to oppose fun foods whereas parents with less education may praise or tolerate them (Den Hoed and Elliot, 2013).

This paper argues that seeing fun food only as a market's offer of convenient food in the form of ready meals and unhealthy snacks is very reductive and does not take into consideration how, how often, when, where and with whom children consume food considered fun. Also seeing fun food only as convenient and unhealthy food does not take into consideration parents' involvement in making food a leisure experience for their children. Taking inspiration from Metcalfe et al.'s (2008) idea that lunch boxes are balanced culturally more than nutritionally, this paper seeks to analyse parents' understandings, feelings and practices of providing food that children can enjoy.

Methodology

This paper emerges from an interpretivist research adopting a multi-methods approach. It draws on photo-elicitation interviews and a focus group discussion with eleven mothers recruited from a primary school in Surrey, England. Our initial aim was to recruit parents (both mothers and fathers) from a diverse socio-cultural background, with children aged between nine and eleven years old, since children at this stage have well established food preferences and can negotiate their choices with adults (Marshall et al. 2007). As such we did not set out to apply a gender or social class lens to the study.

However we encountered a series of difficulties in recruiting male participants and working class participants. As a result, the focus of this paper is eleven white middle class mothers most with a household income greater than £50,000. Having a small sample is a common practice in interpretivist consumer research aiming at providing 'a more in depth analysis of the life stories expressed by a relatively small number of participants' (Thompson, 1996: 392). However, as the study is based on a small sample of relatively affluent families in the UK, caution is needed in generalising the findings to wider groups.

Fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2013. Parents were recruited via an e-mail sent out to all parents with children aged 9-11 at one school. The methodological design involved two semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. The first interview provided an introduction to the family, how food was managed within the household, responsibility for preparing lunchboxes, how their content was decided, and guidance given from the school and other sources. Mothers were then given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of lunchboxes prepared during one week. The second interview (taking place approximately three weeks after the first) asked mothers to discuss the photographs taken and provided an opportunity to follow up questions emerging from the first interview. Finally, a focus group discussion enabled mothers to discuss their ideas, feelings and understandings of preparing lunchboxes in a group setting. Interviews and focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically following the general guidelines of interpretive research (Silverman 2006;

Spiggle 1994). The analysis emerged from a process of interpretation moving back and forth between data and the literature and between individual and team interpretation (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). The notion of providing leisure and enjoyment for children through lunchboxes emerged strongly in our findings which are presented below.

The decision to provide a packed lunch

At most schools in England, parents with children in our target range (9-11) currently have a choice whether children should be given school dinners or take a packed lunch prepared at home. Key emerging factors influencing the parents in our study to provide a packed lunch included child's preference, children's intolerance to various foods, knowing the child would eat the contents of the packed lunch, the ability to achieve value for money by preparing a lunchbox and (for some parents) the perception of inferior quality of the food at the current school. Interestingly, one participant said her son had asked her to provide lunchboxes as he felt school dinners took too long to queue up for and eat and he wanted to go and play football in the playground. This paper now goes on to explore three main ways in which lunchboxes were found to connect with leisure 1) lunchboxes as a leisure experience in themselves 2) fitting with existing leisure activities and 3) Supporting future health and leisure.

'We do try to make it a pleasant part of the day': Lunchboxes as a leisure experience

Lunchboxes could themselves be considered a leisure experience because they constituted a break in the school day and were intended as ‘something to look forward to’ and a connection with home. Parents sought to make lunchboxes pleasurable by asking children what they would like in them and listening to reasonable requests. In addition, parents explained that lunchboxes should provide as much variety as possible.

Hannah: *I think it should look attractive to the kids. So, it should look fresh and nice and quite colourful.*

Hannah invoked the notion of summer picnics when describing her children’s packed lunches suggesting a holiday feel and likening lunchboxes to a gift, said that she herself would like to receive a packed lunch. Ingredients such as freshly baked rolls (as in the lunchbox below) were included not only provide nutrition but also enjoyment and relaxation through the stimulation of senses including touch, sight and smell. The inclusion of small snack items was also seen as fitting with a picnic feel. In the case of the lunchbox below, it was emphasised that these snack items (such as cereal bars) were all approved within the school regulations.

[Image A here]

Further linking to leisure, some lunchboxes had an element of play in their physical presentation. As Andrea described:

Recently [daughter] came home and said, "So-and-so has her sandwiches cut into shapes, can I have shapes"? So she finds the shape-cutters in the Play-Doh or whatever, so she had a butterfly and a dolphin, or something different.

This links to the notion of 'fun food' discussed previously. As Elliott highlights:

Regular food is not shaped into stars or castles; it is not wildly coloured and does not magically change hue or shape. Children's fare, in contrast, is fun; by definition, it is edible entertainment, to be consumed for reasons that have little to do with sustenance or nutrition (Elliott 2008: 266)

Of equal importance concerning lunchboxes as a leisure experience is the physical appearance of the box itself which often had characters/ figures on it (related to TV or video games characters, football teams). Sometimes the purchase of lunchboxes had an important place in the family annual routines; for example they were chosen as Christmas presents, or at the start of the school year. This highlights the way in which lunchboxes are social and cultural artefacts as well as nutritional ones. The exterior of lunchboxes were found to be highly gendered with girls having pink boxes, princess themes, and boys having blue or black boxes and football or action figure themes.

While parents overall emphasised health, variety and nutrition in the construction of lunchboxes, the notion of 'giving a treat' was an important part

of the lunchbox configuration. 'A treat' could be seen as connected with the idea of leisure as it meant a break from the more functional, healthy eating regime required by school and government healthy eating guidelines. Thea explained why she thinks it is important to put treats in her children's lunchboxes:

Because I think it encourages them to eat the rest of their meal. They've been at school all day, and they look forward to seeing what's in there. Kate likes fruit jelly. Sometimes I buy pots of fruit jelly. They're all the sugar free ones that have just got peaches, or mango, or something in, so I don't see that as a bad thing. It's quite nice. (Laughter)

The emphasis here on sugar-free jelly could be seen as revealing a defensiveness concerning the way in packed lunches are often viewed as unhealthy or lacking sufficient nutrition within media discussions dominated by head teachers and celebrity chefs (BBC News 12.09.13). While Thea emphasised that her 'treats' were sugar free, other mothers did admit to including items that could bring them into conflict with school guidelines that said that no solid chocolate, nuts and fizzy drinks should be included. For example, Megan said that while she generally conformed to school rules for what should not be included in lunchboxes, after Christmas, when she had lots of sweets to be used up in the house, she went through a stage of putting a Quality Street chocolate in the bottom of her daughter's lunchbox each day as a 'treat'. However, she received feedback from the school that this was not acceptable:

She came back one day. She said she was told, "You cannot have any more," or not any more, "You should not have had that one," that was it. So about a week later I wrapped one up and put 'Shush' on the outside.

In this example the 'treat' created a link to the holidays and a sense of complicity between mother and daughter. This shows a clear example of having fun through food; where the context of the consumption is as important as the food item itself. The maternal disguising of 'bad' or 'banned' food creates a joke and shared 'secret' between mother and daughter, bringing them closer in contrast to school regulations which could be viewed as impersonal and inflexible in its inability to provide allowances for leftover food after holidays and celebrations. Connection with home was also revealed by other respondents in their description of including non-food items. For example, one mother described putting post-it notes saying "I love you" in her children's lunchboxes.

Fitting with Existing Leisure and Lunchtime Activities

As well as constituting a leisure experience in themselves, the interviews revealed an acute awareness that lunchboxes must also fit in with other activities taking place in the child's lunch hour such as playing with friends and lunchtime clubs. For this reason, mothers avoided including foods that are difficult to open or take too long to consume. For example, Jane said that her daughter does quite a few lunchtime clubs so may only have 15-20

minutes to eat her lunch. She therefore tended to include softer food such as pasta:

I think she enjoys the pasta because it's quite easy to eat. Whereas if I gave her a great big baguette [then] that requires a lot of chewing. She loves baguettes; she will eat those at the weekend. So I think I go for things that are quite quick and easy [...] I wouldn't send her a great big chunky baguette, it would just take her too long to eat.

Other mothers such as Tania reported getting requests from children to adjust the contents due to lack of time: *'Sometimes they'll say to me, "Oh, mummy, just put three things in there, because I haven't got time.'*" Here a division emerges between food seen as appropriate to be consumed at home and food to be eaten at school, which hinges on children's participation in other lunchtime activities.

On the other hand, as well as being quick and easy to eat, lunchboxes needed to provide the calories and nutrition needed for physical and mental energy. Megan reported that her daughter does some form of sport every day and that she worries whether she is hungry:

Tuesdays and Thursdays for example, she will come out of school having done some form of PE during the day, and then she will go and play tennis for an hour and a half. So really, I am trying to give her energy to get her through till 7.15, when she is going to get her dinner, or that night.

Lunchboxes therefore needed to provide enough energy for children to engage in other activities without taking too much time away from them. This Megan's recognition of her daughter's need for energy both over a long period and for periods of intense physical activity can also be viewed as justification for including more snacks items which may not always be regarded as 'healthy' within purely nutritional analyses.

Supporting Future Health and Leisure

Finally, and the least tangible but nonetheless important connection with leisure, is that lunchboxes should support children's future leisure opportunities by providing nutrition and variety to support their growth and development. Mothers reported awareness of media campaigns over obesity and tuned their contents to support their children's development. For example, Hannah was concerned about her son's weight and therefore adjusted the contents of her son's lunchbox:

With [son] we're quite conscious about his weight. Now he's the same size as my husband was when he was his age. So, it's probably just puppy fat. But for his I'm really trying to make it as healthy as possible and bearing in mind that he's 11 and he is really active. So, it has to be filling but it has to be- so, for instance [son] has wraps and not bread to try and cut down on the kind of bread intake. He doesn't have any butter or sauces or anything in his stuff. So, he wouldn't have mayonnaise for instance or anything like that. Luckily he does really like things like salad and all these other things. So,

anything that goes in his box is generally more healthy and is lower fat than they ought to be.

[Image B here]

In this way, mothers' activities with children's lunchboxes could help discourage future problems (such as obesity) which could impact upon their leisure practices. The types of leisure invoked or envisaged here were generally physical and sports-related pursuits rather than casual leisure such as watching television.

Discussion

This study shows how lunchboxes are balanced culturally more than nutritionally (Metcalf *et al.*, 2008:405) in various ways. It shows how opting for a packed lunch rather than the school meal is a way mothers used to control the quality and quantity of food eaten by the children. Despite being a meal consumed outside home, parents can still provide "home" food to their children and hence have a full control over their diet. Our data suggests that providing packed lunches is not simply a way to avoid the denounced poor quality of the school meals, but also a way to give to the children some food that they will enjoy. This echoes the existing literature (De Vault 1991, Moisio *et al.* 2004) highlighting how food is often framed as a maternal gift displaying devotion in providing food satisfying children's desires and explicit requests. Our findings extend this notion of food as a gift, since they show that the

context of its consumption makes the lunchbox a daily maternal gift against the challenging school activities. In fact parents described packed lunch as break from the school demanding (and often boring) activities. As such packed lunches are seen by parents as an opportunity of interrupting the routine of the school day with a leisured break.

In deciding the content of the lunchbox parents have various considerations to face including adhering to school food regulations, listening to children's demands, and giving a nutritious meal that the child will eat and enjoy. This is a complex decision making process wherein providing healthy or fun food is not the only consideration that parents face. For example, time seems to be a key element in considering the number of items to include in the lunch box and in selecting food that can be easily eaten. Given that lunch is consumed in a relative short time between various school activities, parents feel the pressure to provide a lunch that children will be able to eat, eat quickly and enjoy.

In deconstructing the relation between health and leisure, our findings contradict the existing literature on fun food (Warde 1999; Cook 2005; Elliott 2008) by showing that fun food is not simply understood in opposition to healthy food. While parents do include convenient food in order to provide a "treat" for their children and a reward for having eaten the more healthy part of the lunch, they also have a wider understanding of the transgressive nature of fun through food, which goes beyond the market offer and understanding of fun. For example, our findings show how the transgressive element of fun is

achieved by mother and child alliance against the school regulation. Transgressing the school rules on the content of the lunch box makes the eating experience a leisured and exciting one. Indeed it becomes a sort of game, wherein the food items (a treat) is not as important as the context of its consumption (during the school lunch wherein such item is forbidden). Therefore it is the context of consumption that makes this food a fun food, more than the market's presentation of this food as a child's fun food.

Also the transgressive element of fun food is achieved by participants' crafted re-elaboration of mundane food into a child's food. The case of the mother changing the shape of a sandwich epitomises this process of mother helping her child to transform adult food into a children's fun food through a change in shape. The market with its offer of convenient and ready to consume fun food seems to be excluded by this process wherein mother and child are re-appropriating mass produced food for adult (bread for sandwich) in a child's fun product. Mothers use the play element to encourage their children to eat food considered healthy. In this process fun and healthy food are not a dichotomy (see Cook 2005; Elliott 2008) but they are rather in part of the same process of mother and child transformation of adult food into child's food. This finding indeed brings a new light over the relation between consumption and care, showing how they are not a dichotomy, but indeed they are part of the same process of feeding the children providing them food that it is at the same time fun and healthy.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has implications for further academic research, for marketers and for school food policies. In showing how parents and children can co-create a leisure food experience without consuming food classified as fun by the market, this study opens new perspectives in understanding the concept of fun food. Given the limited numbers of participants, further studies are required to fully understand the process of co-creating fun food involving parents and children together and children alone, in domestic and non-domestic contexts of consumption. In revealing how consumers' classifications of fun food do not always coincide with the ones created and perpetuated by the market – as healthy and fun food are not always in a dichotomic relation- this study provides a crucial insight for social marketing campaigns promoting children's healthy eating. Our findings could be implemented in campaigns communicating the transgressive and transformative elements of healthy food in order to appeal to children and to parents. Finally this study has implications for school food policies, since it shows how mothers are often excluded from the process of establishing the food items to be included or excluded from their children lunchboxes. As parents develop their own strategies against schools regulations, more inclusive and less policing guidelines could improve mothers' experience of preparing lunchboxes for their children, as well as children's leisure time during their lunch break.

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