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Family out-of-home eating in times of economic stress; an exploration of parental behaviour and attitudes

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The sustained economic contraction since 2008 across both the UK and Ireland may impact on health as many studies report increased obesity rates in times of economic stress⁽¹⁾. Out-of-home eating may have a role to play as foods eaten out-of-home tend to be associated with higher energy and fat intakes⁽²⁾. The aim of this work is to explore recession-related factors influencing parental behaviour and attitudes while eating out-of-home.

Twenty-four focus groups (7–8 parents, 60–90 mins/group) were conducted across the island of Ireland during the summer of 2011. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to ensure parents recruited represented a range of demographic (North, South; rural, urban) and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as age of parent and child (5–12 years). Group sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach.

Results indicated that economic stress was driving a change in parental behaviour and attitudes while eating out-of-home. Parents reported changing the eating-out location in favour of reducing the number of eating-out occasions (Table 1). Fast food outlets, takeaways, meal deals and ‘early birds’/lunches had become more popular eating-out venues. In addition parents discussed strategies to cut costs to maintain eating-out frequency including, only ordering water or diluting juice, stopping on the way home for dessert, or carrying food home to avoid inevitable additional costs such as desserts and alcoholic/soft drinks. Eating out was considered a ‘treat’ and thus it was very important to parents that they received ‘value for money’ and avoided food wastage when using their limited resources (Table 1). Parents discussed strategies to ensure their child received a meal that they ‘would eat’ and would ‘fill them up’ to avoid the additional cost of re-feeding the child once home.

Table 1. Recession-related themes, sub-themes and quotes from focus groups investigating parental behaviour and attitudes while eating-out of the home.

Factors influencing change of eating-out location to lower cost establishments	
i) Deals and special offers available	<i>‘Sort of shop around for offers more, you know, the buy one get one free. Or vouchers or go for the early bird’</i>
ii) Perceived comparability of cost to eating in the home	<i>‘A lot of the time they’re doing so many specials nowadays that you’re thinking why on earth will I cook? Because its cheaper to go out’</i>
iii) Reduced parental stress if child does not eat	<i>‘So you’d be delighted that you didnt spend money at an expensive place, that you went to McDonalds!’</i>
Strategies to avoid food wastage and ensure value for money when eating-out	
i) Child makes food choice or is guided to an option	<i>‘At least you know they will eat, if they ask for it, they eat it’ ‘I know what they will eat, so you give them a choice of 2 or 3’</i>
ii) Child encouraged to ‘clean their plate’	<i>‘But you can have an ice cream afterwards, if you finish your plate.’ because you dont have to feed them again’</i>
iii) Exercising children prior to the meal to increase appetite	<i>‘If you go to the beach and have a swim and they’re out of the water... and they’re starving, then you bring them to some place’</i>
iv) Avoid drinks before food arrives	<i>‘Try and get them not to have fizzy drinks before the food comes out because it fills them’</i>
v) Caution that healthy option may not be accepted or fill child up.	<i>‘We could try and influence them and get the good wholesome meal, they just won’t eat it, they will have 2 or 3 spoons and waste the meal.’</i>
vi) Portion size and value for money linked	<i>‘You like a decent portion. Value for money’ ‘You could see more of the white plate – I was devastated!’</i>

These findings show that, irrespective of socioeconomic status or location, parental behaviour and attitudes while eating-out-of-home are changing as a result of the recession and that priorities of ‘value for money’ and ‘reducing food wastage’ overshadow nutritional considerations. This work highlights a challenge for health professionals to ensure that nutrition communications resonate with consumers in times of economic stress.

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1. Scheier LM. (2005) *J Am Diet Assoc* 105, 883–886.
2. Lachat C, Nago E, Verstraeten R et al. (2011) *Obes Rev*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467–789X.2011.00953.x.