

# Talking about children's health in a cost of living crisis

## A messaging guide

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Alice Jennings, Senior Communications Strategist  
Tamsyn Hyatt, Director of Impact



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# What this guide is for

The cost of living crisis is top of mind – and top of news agendas nationwide. This guide sets out how to drive action on children’s health as we respond to, and move through, this crisis. It builds on our insights into [how to communicate about children’s health](#), recent work on [talking about child health during the pandemic](#), and our extensive research on how to talk about poverty.

## Recommendations in brief

**Focus on children's lack of access to healthy food, not the excess of unhealthy food.** When hunger is top of mind, we risk people assuming that ‘any food is good food’. Lack of access to healthy food is an easier way in to talking about the imbalance in the food environment.

**If you need to talk about hunger, talk about what it stops children from doing.** Talking about ‘hunger’ alone will rarely convey the level of seriousness we want. Instead talk about the toll hunger takes on children’s ability to concentrate, to take part at school, and to overcome challenges.

**Show groups of children with a diversity of body types in photos.** People have a narrow understanding of what a child who’s not getting enough food will look like. Showing this diversity can start to broaden people’s understanding.

**Use the ‘restricts and restrains’ metaphor to show how external factors lead to hunger.** This metaphor shows how the rising cost of living can limit families’ options and ability to thrive, in a way that is hard to minimise or blame on individuals. This makes it easier to call for government action in our solutions.

**Use teachers as effective messengers to talk about the impact of a lack of**

**healthy food.** Teachers are seen as credible witnesses to problems children have, and will have first-hand experience of the impact of hunger on children's ability to learn and focus.

**Start to cue the idea that hunger and obesity can coexist, and that this is harmful.** Many of us see hunger and obesity as two opposite ends of a spectrum. We must be deliberate about how we introduce the link between the two, and not assume people will understand it easily.

# Where people are starting from

## **'Parents and individuals are to blame for obesity'**

The overarching public mindset about obesity is that it's down to poor individual choices and a lack of willpower. In this way of thinking, parents (or young people themselves in the case of older children) are to blame for children's poor health. Worse still, they are costing the rest of us by taking up NHS resources. This mindset pushes environmental factors into the background, and takes us away from broader solutions, like expanding access to free school meals – making it harder to push for government action.

## **'There's no such thing as 'real' hunger in the UK today'**

The word 'hungry' alone refers to a wide spectrum of severity. Many will not see it as a crisis that children are hungry, reasoning that hunger is a commonplace, temporary feeling that we all experience from time to time. Many of us will likely think of 'real' hunger as existing solely in the past, or in

other countries. We have work to do to convey the true level of seriousness when we talk about children going hungry.

### **‘It’s about eating less and moving more’**

Many of us see children’s health and obesity in a ‘mechanical’ way – that the solution is simply about getting the right balance of consuming food and burning energy through exercise. This mindset stops us short of considering whether the food children are eating is healthy or not. It’s also particularly unhelpful when talking about obesity and hunger in the same piece of comms, and leads us to think of the two as opposites, rather than two things that can coexist in the same person at the same time.

### **‘Any food is good food’**

In the current context many will revert to a bare-bones focus on ‘basic needs’. With this mindset, it’s likely people will reason that what matters is having a full stomach – and that the quality and nutritional value of that food are a ‘want’, rather than a ‘need’. This is a crucial difference as government is widely seen as responsible for meeting needs – but not for things we consider ‘wants’.

### **‘Hunger, obesity and ill-health are all just features of modern life’**

Many in the public think child obesity is unfortunate, but inevitable and unfixable. This includes a stigmatising belief that some communities or groups of society will always live unhealthy lives and nothing can be done about it. It also makes it harder for people to see the structural causes of, and solutions to, childhood obesity.

# Six ways to talk about health and hunger

## Recommendation #1

### **Focus on children's lack of access to healthy food, not the excess of unhealthy food**

The lack of healthy food as a problem is much easier for people to understand, particularly when they're worried about the cost of living. Seeing, eg, the proliferation of multi-buy offers on unhealthy food as a problem is much more of a leap in the current climate, and some may reject this as a problem, reasoning that 'at least children will be fed'.

You can speak to these issues further into your communications, but talk first about how hard it is to find healthy food, and about solutions that increase the flow of healthy food. Wherever possible, bring in the idea that the problem is the lack of access to healthy food, rather than just families not having enough healthy food per se. This makes clear that it's not as simple as 'they should just buy more healthy food'.

#### **Instead of:**

“Our high streets and supermarkets are full of junk food. We need to end the buy-one-get-one-free offers that make it too easy to fill up on unhealthy food.”

#### **Try:**

“In too many towns around our country, there's barely a trickle of healthy options, making it much harder to put healthy food on the table.”

## Recommendation #2

### **If you need to talk about hunger, talk about what it stops children from doing**

While it might signal a crisis for those of us who work in this space, the word ‘hunger’ alone isn’t enough to communicate the seriousness of the problem to the general public. It will likely be more effective to talk about the impact of hunger on children – what it holds them back from doing, how it stops them from taking part at school or playing with their friends.

We can talk about how hunger risks children falling behind their peers at school, makes it harder to build vital relationships, and embeds inequality from an early age. Talking about hunger in this way leaves no space to minimise hunger as a temporary problem – or, worse still, as itself a solution to child obesity.

#### **Instead of:**

“Right now, children across the UK are going hungry, with as many as 70% of kids saying they’ve felt hungry at school at least once in the past week alone.”

#### **Try:**

“Right now, children across the UK are held back by hunger. Hungry kids can’t focus at school – and some will fall behind their peers, with long-lasting consequences.”

## Recommendation #3

### **Show groups of children with a diversity of body types in photos**

Many people have limited and inaccurate ideas of what a young person who’s going hungry looks like, and are likely to reject claims that a young person who fits their idea of ‘overweight’ is experiencing hunger. We risk people discounting our messages if our visuals jar too much with their expectations of what ‘hungry’ looks like. To counter this, show groups of children or young people where possible, with a diversity of body types.

We can more effectively combat stigma if we show groups of children doing things, not posed – this could be interacting with their environment, playing, learning, or having friendships, for example. Children’s wellbeing should be the focus of the image – not their body shape.

#### **Recommendation #4**

### **Use the ‘restricts and restrains’ metaphor to show how external factors lead to hunger**

With high prices and low incomes top of mind for many, we have a chance to highlight how these external forces lead to hunger. We can do this by talking about how things like the economy or low wages are ‘constraining families’ options’, ‘holding families down’, or keeping families ‘in the grip of hunger’

This language counters people’s tendency towards individualism, and focuses us instead on how families’ options are limited. It makes more space to talk about systemic solutions and what government can do solve this problem, rather than leaving people to focus on individual efforts like better budgeting, ‘meal hacks’ or cooking lessons.

We can invoke this metaphor by talking about families being ‘held back’/‘held down’, their options ‘restricted’ or ‘constrained’, and the need to ‘break free’ from economic constraints.

#### **Instead of:**

“With energy prices rising, many are having to choose between heating and eating, and many children are going hungry as a result.”

#### **Try:**

“Rising energy prices are affecting many of us, holding families back from accessing the healthy food children need to thrive.”

#### **Recommendation #5**

### **Use teachers as effective messengers to talk about the impact of a lack of healthy food**

Teachers are seen as credible authorities on children's health and school experiences. Many teachers will have stories of the impact hunger has had on their students, and can speak to how much harder it is to learn when children don't have the healthy food they need. They will also have a long view of children's progress at school, and can talk more about how hunger embeds inequality between students.

Remember to use recommended messengers in combination with the wider framing recommendations. Whilst messages coming from teachers are more likely to be effective, the right messenger is not a silver bullet – how they frame their message matters too.

#### **Recommendation #6**

### **Start to cue the idea that hunger and obesity can coexist, and that this is harmful**

When talking about hunger, we need to build people's understanding that hunger and obesity can exist in the same person at the same time. Crucially, we need to recognise that this will be a journey to take people on. Many will be instinctively sceptical that the two can coexist, or will reason that being (temporarily) hungry is a solution to obesity.

More comprehensive efforts are needed to explain to the public how obesity, hunger and inequality are connected. But right now we can start to cue this connection. We can start by affirming that access to food is a problem, and by baking in to the same message that the lack of specifically healthy food is as significant a problem.



**Instead of:****Try:**

“With the rising cost of living affecting us all, parents are struggling to put food on the table and feed their children, meaning too many kids are going hungry up and down the country.”

“It’s harder to put food on the table when you struggle to make ends meet. And with a lack of access to healthy options, it’s even harder to put healthy food on the table.”

## Quick wins

<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Lack of food	Lack of healthy food
There should be more healthy choices available	There should be more healthy options available
Families don’t have enough healthy food	Families can’t get enough healthy food
Children are going to bed hungry	Children are going hungry, holding them back at school
1 in 3 children have been hungry in the past week	It’s not acceptable that children are going hungry, hurting their ability to concentrate on their lessons

## About FrameWorks UK

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