**Home cooking for children ‘isn’t always better for them’**

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**Home-cooked meals designed for young children are often less healthy than shop-bought baby foods, Scots experts have claimed.**

New research has challenged the idea that meals prepared by hand are the best option after researchers found home-cooked meals often had higher fat, energy and salt content than pre-prepared meals.

The food prepared at home was substantially cheaper than ready-made meals at £0.33 per 100g compared to £0.68 per 100g, and had a broader range of ingredients.

A team from Aberdeen University compared the nutrient content, price and variety of 278 ready meals for children under five from shops such as Tesco, Aldi, and Boots, to 408 home-cooked meals made from recipes designed for young children.

Savoury meals prepared at home provided 26 per more energy and 44 per cent more protein and fat than commercial products, according to research published in the Archives of Disease in Childhood journal.

The shop-bought products also typically contained three types of vegetables per meal compared to two in food prepared at home.

The home-made meals were found to contain more nutrients overall but experts said parents should not rule out shop-bought meals as a convenient alternative.

Lead author Sharon Carstairs, of Aberdeen University, said: “It is difficult to draw firm conclusions but it should remind parents that these main meals are only one part of the whole diet.

“If you are having these really excessive levels of fat for main meals then that needs to be countered in other areas such as snacks and finger food.”

Obesity expert Professor Mike Lean said the study had not taken the amount of water in the meals into account, which could impact on the findings.

Prof Lean, chair of human nutrition at Glasgow University, said: “The amount of salt in the homemade meals is clearly too high and saturated fat is too high as well.

“People assume that because something is cooked at home then it is good for you, but this is clearly not the case.”

Professor Neena Modi, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said: “To ensure toddlers get the best start in life, it is important they eat a balanced diet.

“This study shows that not only are regulatory standards necessary for commercial products, but also that parents and carers are supported to be nutritionally aware.”