

Marketing of infant milk in the UK: What do parents see and believe?



Introduction

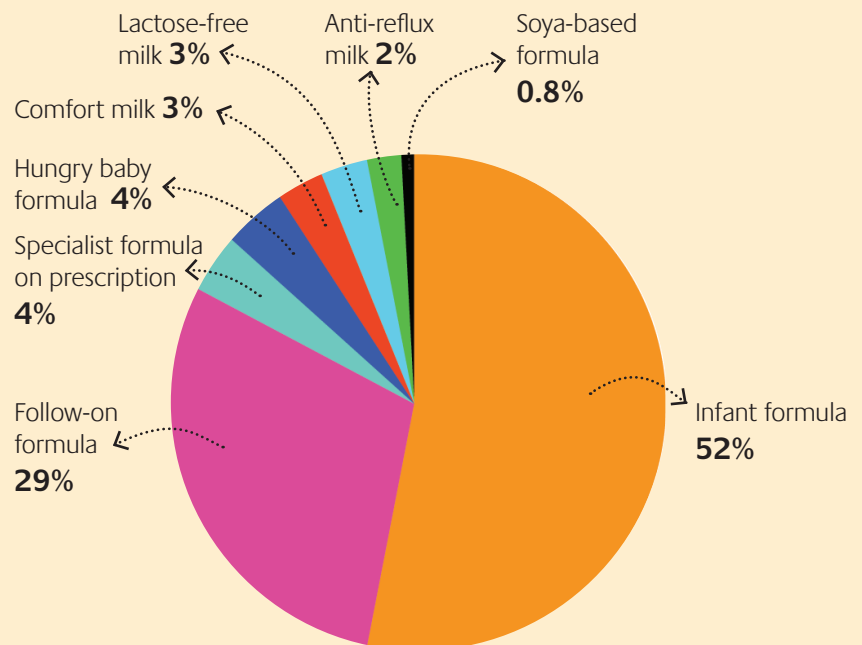
Swansea University conducted research with 1,307 families with babies aged 0-12 months to find out more about how they feed their babies, where they see adverts for infant milks, what they pick up from the adverts, and how this might impact on their feeding journey. The questionnaires were filled in online between October and December 2019 by a self-selected group of families recruited through social media. While this was not a nationally representative sample, it does tell us something about what families see and believe when it comes to the marketing of infant milks. You can read the full report at www.firststepsnutrition.org/statements-and-reports

How did families in the sample feed their babies?

At the time the families filled in the questionnaire, 45% of the sample had used some infant formula for their baby. A higher proportion of mums in this sample were breastfeeding exclusively compared to the national average, with about 55% of mums only giving breastmilk, 29% mixed feeding and 16% formula feeding only.

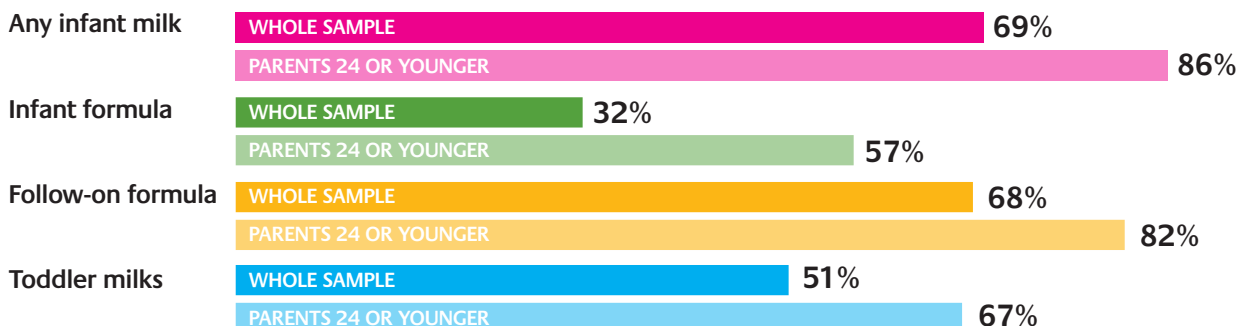
Worryingly, 18% of families with a baby less than 6 months of age who were giving some formula to their baby were using follow-on formula.

What type of formula was used by the families in the sample who formula-fed their baby?



What advertising and promotion of infant milks are families aware of?

How many of the sample had seen advertising for infant milks either 'often' or 'very often', and what types of infant milk did they think they had seen advertised?



Almost a third of all the families in the sample thought they had seen infant formula advertising, increasing to more than half of all younger mums, even though advertising of infant formula to the public is illegal in the UK.

Where had the families seen advertising for infant milks?

- 93% of families in the sample had seen advertising for infant milks on television.
- 82% had seen advertising in pregnancy and baby magazines.
- More than 70% had seen advertising on Facebook, in shops, on billboards and bus-stops, and in online shops.
- More than 50% had been sent advertising via email, and saw advertising via search engine results for baby products and at baby shows.
- Between 40% and 50% of families had seen advertising via health professionals, via Instagram and in the post.
- Between 30% and 40% of families had seen advertising in a healthcare setting and in a children's centre or nursery, and had heard it on the radio.
- Between 20% and 30% of families had seen advertising on Twitter, in the cinema and in magazines not related to pregnancy or babies.

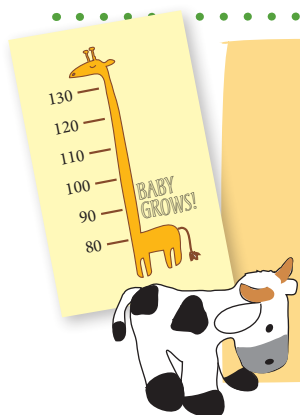
Which specific messages did participants recognise from formula adverts?

Participants were asked which of the following messages they recognised from the marketing of infant formula.

Statements	Participants recognising the message
Being the 'most advanced formula yet'	94%
Developed by scientists	92%
Being 'closer than ever to breastmilk'	90%
Helping development	88%
For hungry babies	87%
Comfort milk for easier digestion	83%
For preventing reflux or spitting up milk	81%
Containing vitamin D	80%
Containing iron	79%
Having added special ingredients	73%
Boosting the immune system	71%
Including prebiotics to help babies fight infections	56%
Preventing allergies	39%
Partially hydrolysed (protein broken into small pieces)	37%
Including human milk oligosaccharides	33%

How many families received marketing materials from infant formula companies?

Almost all (88%) participants recalled having received some sort of direct marketing of materials such as money-off vouchers, branded toys, height charts, fridge magnets, or photo mounts. When asked, only 36% of participants could remember giving permission to receive this, even though regulations state that any such marketing material must be via opt-in permission.

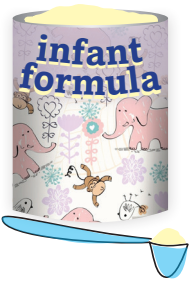


What positive perceptions of the content and properties of infant milks did the participants believe?

	Families who do not use formula	Families who use formula
All formula milks have very similar ingredients in them.	83%	90%
Some formula milks help hungry babies feel fuller.	38%	57%
Some formula milks will help your baby sleep.	18%	41%
More expensive formula milks have better ingredients in them.	12%	40%
Some formula milks are better than others as they have more ingredients.	12%	39%

Those using infant formula were much more likely to agree that infant formula had specific benefits and properties. In addition, around a fifth of families (23%) who used formula had clear beliefs that their brand of infant milk offered specific benefits to their baby.

Did families make up their powdered infant milks correctly?



Families were also asked how they prepared their powdered infant milk. About half the sample reported using the correct method. Just under half (45%) of families in the sample used a formula preparation machine.

- 33% said they made feeds fresh each time, following the instructions on the tin.
- 10% said they made multiple feeds at a time, following the instructions on the tin, and kept some in the fridge to warm later.
- 7% used boiled water, but did not add the water to the powder when it was still hot.

“This one has more ingredients than others.”

“I got told it was the most similar tasting to breast milk because it's sweet.”

“It is gentle on their tummies.”

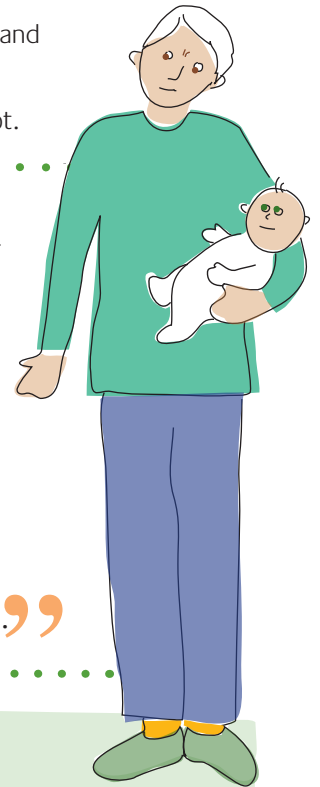
“Best for their brain development.”

“I liked the fact it helps them sleep.”

“This one is meant to be the closest to breastmilk.”

“It is advertised as being developed very scientifically.”

“It's well known that this is the most advanced.”



Conclusion

Recognition of infant milk adverts and promotions is common amongst mothers – both among those who are using infant milks, and those who are exclusively breastfeeding. Often these adverts are mistaken for promotion of infant formula, particularly by younger mothers, and this is likely to come from product cross-promotion and brand recognition.

Three-quarters of participants found the adverts emotive, and those who used infant milks were more likely to perceive adverts positively – for example, as clear, scientific and helpful – than mothers who did not use infant milks. Younger mothers also rated the adverts more positively than older mothers.

Themes from the marketing impacted upon behaviour and drove purchasing decisions, including the selection of higher-cost formulas due to a belief that it is superior. Mothers chose milks based on added ingredients, perceived impact on sleep, development or behaviour, and perception that certain milks were more scientifically advanced and closer to breastmilk.

Given that these perceptions are in part driving purchasing decisions, there is an urgent need to ensure that parents receive accurate information about infant milks, free from industry bias, and that the UK law regulates the marketing of follow-on formula and cross-branded milks for older children.

Reference

Brown A, Jones SW, Evans E (2020). *Marketing of infant milk in the UK: what do parents see and believe? A report for First Steps Nutrition Trust*. London: First Steps Nutrition Trust.

To read the full report go to

www.firststepsnutrition.org/statements-and-reports

Published by First Steps Nutrition Trust, 2020.

Edited by Wordworks. Design by Sally Geeve