

Children's nutrition at a crossroads: New global study reveals what parents really prioritise and where brands risk missing the mark

FrieslandCampina Ingredients, a global leader in proteins and prebiotics, has launched a new global report to bring clarity to the complex children's nutrition category. Based on qualitative data, the report uncovers shared priorities and regional nuances shaping purchase decisions in the 3–12 age group – a segment that often sits between early life and adult nutrition in strategic focus.

The findings identify four clear non-negotiables that are guiding parents' choices and that they increasingly expect brands to deliver. These include immune support as a baseline, gut microbiome support that underpins overall wellbeing, clarity around cognitive and emotional health claims, and multi-benefit solutions in child-friendly formats. The paper also explores how brands can better meet expectations in this maturing space by using more robust science, appealing formats and clear, outcome-led language that demonstrates tangible benefits for children.

A complex category

While much innovation continues to focus on infants and adults, the years between toddlers and teenagers represent a critical window for growth, learning and development. By understanding what parents of this age group prioritise, and how those priorities vary by region, brands have an opportunity to build greater relevance and trust.

"Parents are more informed, selective and vocal about their preferences than ever before. Yet the category is still finding its footing in meeting those expectations," says Kim Stadman, Sensory & Consumer Research Specialist at FrieslandCampina - Product & Taste Expertise Team. "The challenge with innovation isn't simply developing new ingredients but aligning science, language and format with real-world expectations. That's what this research set out to explore."

FrieslandCampina Ingredients' research shows that in the 3–12 category, products often fall short not because of lack of interest, but because language, claims and formats fail to reflect how parents actually think and make decisions. The report brings these insights together in four non-negotiables that highlight what matters most to parents in this segment:

Immunity: the new baseline

Everyday immunity support remains a top priority for parents worldwide, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape. As immunity becomes expected rather than differentiated, brands face increasing pressure to deliver credible, reassuring solutions that meet the universal needs of parents.



Brain health: supporting growing minds

Brain health is a top parental concern for 54% of parents globally. Yet terminology around cognitive health varies by region – from "brain development" to "learning ability" and "focus", adding another layer of complexity to the category and leaving parents demanding more clarity.

Gut health: a proxy for overall wellness

Gut health ranks among leading parental concerns, reflecting growing awareness of its broader role in wellbeing. However, technical language around functional ingredients like prebiotics can create confusion, underscoring the need for clearer communication.

Convenience: fitting into real life

Beyond health benefits, parents prioritise simplicity. Although format preferences vary by region, a consistent theme emerges: interest in compact, all-in-one solutions that reduce complexity and streamline daily nutrition.

"With such a clear opportunity in the 3-12 segment, innovation needs to be more intentional," says Nadia Ustinova, Global Innovation Marketing Manager, at FrieslandCampina Ingredients. "Instead of competing on complexity, there is value in delivering clarity – clear benefits, clear language and formats that fit seamlessly into family life. The brands that simplify, rather than overcomplicate, will be the ones that truly differentiate in this space."



THE INSIDE MATTERS

FrieslandCampina Ingredients is a leader in proteins and prebiotics, providing innovative, nutritious ingredients to address health and well-being challenges worldwide. Its drive is to get the right ingredients to customers - so they can create highly nutritious and specialised applications that help their consumers get the most out of life, always.

FrieslandCampina Ingredients operates globally across the Early Life Nutrition, Active, Performance, Medical and Cell Nutrition market segments. The company has regional sales offices in the Netherlands, the United States, Singapore, China and Brazil. It reported combined sales of €1.486 billion in 2025. For additional information, please visit: <https://www.frieslandcampinaingredients.com>

FrieslandCampina Ingredients is part of Royal FrieslandCampina N.V. The dairy company daily provides millions of consumers throughout the world with dairy products containing valuable nutrients from milk. The company is fully owned by Zuivelcoöperatie FrieslandCampina U.A., with 13,972 dairy farmers in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany as members. Its annual turnover amounted to €13.4 billion in 2025. FrieslandCampina has locations in 30 countries and exports to more than one hundred countries worldwide. Its head office is located in the Netherlands.