PHAIR
Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations

PsychOpen GOLD

Empirical: Single or Multiple Studies

Early Attempts to Stop Eating Meat: Prevalence, Predictors and Outcomes Among UK Youth

Luke McGuire [1], Fatma Sabet [1], Luciana Torquati [1], Natalia Lawrence [1]

[1] *Department of Psychology, University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom.*

Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations, 2026, Vol. 5, Article e20587, https://doi.org/10.5964/phair.20587

Received: 2025-10-29 • **Accepted:** 2026-01-30 • **Published (VoR):** 2026-03-26

Handling Editor: Chris Hopwood, University of Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland

Corresponding Author: Luke McGuire, Department of Psychology, University of Exeter, Washington Singer Building, EX4 4QG, Exeter, United Kingdom. E-mail: l.mcguire@exeter.ac.uk

Supplementary Materials: Data, Materials [see Index of Supplementary Materials]

Abstract

Efforts to reduce meat consumption amongst adults have had mixed success. Recent research has pointed to children as one group who may have more morally inclusive attitudes towards non-human animals, yet less is known regarding their efforts to abstain from meat consumption. Using a retrospective survey with a sample of emerging adults in the UK (pre-screen study n = 1063, M age = 22.5, main study n = 461, M Age = 22.2), this study documents that approximately half of participants reported having thought about stopping eating meat while they were growing up (i.e., before they finished secondary school). In turn, half of these participants did stop for a period ranging from days to permanent abstinence. Parental support was a strong predictor of being able to stop eating meat. Most participants started eating meat again, largely for reasons of taste and convenience. Together these findings point to youth as a leveraging point for greater uptake of plant-based food options, although current pragmatic and structural barriers limit youth efforts to do so.

Keywords

plant-based diets, veg*n, youth, development

Non-Technical Summary

Background

There have been consistent calls from international bodies encouraging the uptake of plant-based diets. Unfortunately, efforts to change the minds of adults on this topic have had limited success so far—adults appear strongly invested in eating meat because they see it as natural, normal, necessary, and nice. Interestingly, recent research has started to show that children in several nations agree that animal lives are similar in value to human lives and evaluate eating meat as less morally 'okay' than adults do. This seems to offer promise that childhood might be a time when people are more open to the idea of stopping eating meat.

Why was this study done?

Based on these findings that children seem to care more about animal lives than adults do, this study aimed to understand the degree to which young people might consider vegan or vegetarian diets during childhood. The study also aimed to understand what motivated these decisions, what factors predicted being likely to stop eating meat—and what percentage of people went back to eating meat.

What did the researchers do and find?

First, we surveyed approximately 1000 young people (18–26-years-old) in the UK and asked them whether they had ever thought about stopping eating meat when they were growing up (i.e., when they were still at school). We found that approximately 50% of this group reported they had thought about stopping eating meat. A second survey was sent to this group, aiming to understand more about their motivations and success in stopping eating meat. We found that participants first thought about stopping eating meat around 11-years-old and were mostly motivated by health or environment reasons. Participants who thought about this earlier reported that they found the idea of what meat was disgusting. Those who did stop eating meat (~50%) mostly did so due to the support of their parents. Most of these participants returned to eating meat, mostly because it was convenient and tasty.

What do these findings mean?

These findings show that not only do children show more concern for animals (as other work has shown) but that many young adults report that when they were children and teenagers they wanted to—and in some cases did—stop eating meat. This finding has a lot of promise for efforts to encourage sustainable diets, showing that childhood and adolescence are key windows where with practical support, along with tasty and convenient options, young people may be likely to eat more sustainable and plant-forward diets.

There is a growing scientific consensus that the current rate of meat consumption has had and will continue to have severe consequences for human health (Papier et al., 2023), planetary health (Clark et al., 2020), and for the lives of billions of animals killed every year for human consumption (Orzechowski, 2024). Radical steps are required to

encourage the uptake of predominantly plant-based diets, yet we know that this is easier said than done. For example, in the UK, only 7% of individuals report eating a vegan or vegetarian (hereon; veg*n) diet (YouGov, 2024). Psychological evidence has demonstrated that convincing adults to change their diet is particularly challenging. Meat is highly normalized in many human cultures (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018), valued for its taste, and seen as a biological necessity (Piazza et al., 2015). Interventions aimed at changing the minds of adults have mixed and short-term success. Where does this leave us? Recent surveys in the UK suggest that young adults are more likely to self-report a veg*n diet, e.g., 17% of 18–24 year olds compared to 8% of 50–64 year olds (YouGov, 2024). Additionally, recent research indicates children may think differently about the moral acceptability of eating other animals. Despite this, we know little about attitudes towards eating meat and the prevalence of plant-based diets in youth. Here, we conducted a retrospective survey with emerging adults in the UK with the aim of understanding more about efforts to reduce meat consumption during childhood and adolescence.

Recent work has documented that young people (at least in some cultural contexts), compared to adults, think differently about the moral worth of other animals and the acceptability of eating meat. For example, children in the US, Spain, and Poland have been shown to value animal and human lives equally in moral dilemma tasks (Caviola et al., 2025; Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2025; Wilks et al., 2021). Children in the US and UK also rely less on characteristics like intelligence or edibility to determine who is worthy of moral concern (Caviola et al., 2025; Henseler Kozachenko & Piazza, 2021). In general terms, children appear to be less *speciesist* (Singer, 1975; i.e., they rely less on species membership as a heuristic for making judgments about the moral value of an individual). Compared to adults, children in the UK state that it is less morally acceptable to eat animals (McGuire et al., 2023) and justify this with reference to animal welfare concerns (McGuire et al., 2025). One theoretical model (Piazza et al., 2023) has argued that children's less positive evaluations of meat-eating (even amongst children who *do* eat meat) can be explained by their relative lack of knowledge regarding how meat is produced (Hahn et al., 2021). Taken together, this may point to childhood as a developmental window where concern for animal lives and relative lack of meat-related conflict could facilitate greater interest in plant-based diets.

Most of the existing research examining young people's efforts to stop eating meat has focused on health issues (e.g., Robinson-O'Brien et al., 2009). Some limited research has examined predictors of adolescent veg*n diets. For example, adolescent vegetarians are motivated by animal rights, taste, and disgust (Kubberød et al., 2002), as well as health and environmental reasons (Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998). More recent qualitative evidence with emerging adults has documented that 18–24 year olds in the UK see challenges in taking up a veg*n diet, including health risks, stereotyping about veg*ns, familial norms and peer influence, as well as a lack of control over their own diet (McInnes et al., 2023). Likewise, a qualitative study with adolescents suggested that these

participants were simply not interested in veg*n diets, in part due to taste (Havermans et al., 2021). This existing literature raises two important points. First, the evidence base is mixed. Some research suggests lack of interest in veg*n diets amongst adolescents, while others show a motivated group of young veg*ns driven by animal and environmental concerns. Second and relatedly, these existing studies are almost all limited by small sample sizes, and several were conducted when veg*n diets were even less common. Together, this points to the importance of a well powered investigation of young people's thoughts about stopping eating meat.

The Present Study

To contribute to this emerging area, we conducted a study with a sample (matched to census levels of gender and ethnicity) of emerging adults (18–26 years old) in the UK, retrospectively asking them to report on whether they ever thought about stopping eating meat when they were growing up, as well as examining predictors of a. stopping eating meat, and b. starting eating meat again after a period of abstinence. We consider this work exploratory and therefore formulate the following research questions. First (RQ1), what percentage of emerging adults in the UK report that they thought about stopping eating meat when they were growing up? Second (RQ2), how many of this 'thinking about' group did stop and when? Third (RQ3), what factors were related to stopping eating meat? Fourth (RQ4), what percentage of the 'stopping' group started eating meat again and why? Together these questions aim to reveal the retrospective prevalence of interest in stopping eating meat amongst a sample of young people in the UK—as well as to point to some of the pragmatic, structural and socialization factors which might shape the likelihood of stopping eating meat, and indeed of starting again.

Method

Open Science

The current project was not pre-registered and should therefore be considered exploratory. The full research materials, data, and analysis can be found on ResearchBox (see McGuire, 2025). The project received ethical approval from the University of Exeter Department of Psychology Ethics Committee.

Participants

Pre-Screener

An initial sample of 1063 (*M* Age = 22.5, *SD* = 2.05, minimum age = 18, maximum age = 26) participants were recruited from Prolific Academic (using the 'representative sample' function based on gender and ethnicity) in early 2025. The sample included 575

participants who identified as female, and 488 who identified as male. One participant reported that they would 'rather not say' their gender. This participant was excluded from analysis given that we examined the role of gender. A sensitivity analysis based on a linear model with 1063 participants, 1 covariate, an alpha level of 0.05 and power of 0.8 indicated a minimum detectable effect of $f^2 = 0.007$ or $R^2 = 0.007$.

Main Study

Participants who responded that they had thought about stopping eating meat before they finished secondary school in the pre-screener study were invited to participate in the main study. An initial sample of 542 participants completed the survey. Participants were then filtered for having grown up in the UK, and we again asked whether they had thought about stopping eating meat when they were growing up. This left a final sample of 461 participants (*M* Age = 22.2, *SD* = 2.20, minimum age = 18, maximum age = 26). Of these participants, 123 identified as male, 325 as female, 10 as 'other' (including gender non-binary) and 3 responded that they would 'rather not say'. Again, given that our analyses include gender as a factor, and the small cell size in the 'other' group, we excluded the 13 participants who did not identify as male or female. The ethnicity of the sample was as follows: Bengali British $n = 6$, Black British $n = 35$, Chinese British $n = 13$, Indian or Indian British $n = 28$, Mixed Race/Dual Heritage $n = 26$, Other $n = 26$, Pakistani British $n = 15$, White British $n = 299$. Participants reported their current diet as follows: omnivorous $n = 241$, flexitarian $n = 104$, pescatarian $n = 25$, vegetarian $n = 46$, vegan $n = 23$, other $n = 9$. A sensitivity analysis based on a linear model with 461 participants, 7 covariates, an alpha level of 0.05 and power of 0.8 indicated a minimum detectable effect of $f^2 = 0.03$ or $R^2 = 0.03$.

Following recent guidance (Liem, 2025) we utilised screening questions to attempt to detect bots completing the survey. We had planned to scrutinise any participant who incorrectly answered 2 of the 3 bot check questions, but in all cases, participants correctly answered these questions.

Procedure and Measures

Pre-Screener

The pre-screen survey was advertised to participants on Prolific Academic, who received £0.16 to complete a one-minute survey. The survey asked three questions. First: "When you were growing up (i.e., either before you went to school, or when you were at primary or secondary school) did you ever think about stopping eating meat (e.g., beef, pork, chicken, fish)?" (*Yes* / *No*). Second: "When you were growing up did you ever stop eating meat?" (*Yes* / *No*). If participants responded 'yes' to question two, they saw the final question: "How long did you stop eating meat for?" (*Days*, *Weeks*, *Months*, *Years*, *Permanently*). Participants reported their current diet and additional demographics were provided through Prolific.

Main Study

Participants received £1.80 for completing a 12-minute survey. The survey included the following measures.

Retrospective Experiences — Participants responded to questions regarding thinking about meat during childhood and adolescence. These included "how old were you when you first thought about stopping eating meat?", "what first made you think about stopping eating meat?" (open-ended), "were you able to stop eating meat when you wanted to?" (*Yes* / *No*).

Participants who reported that they did stop eating meat were asked: "how old were you when you stopped eating meat?" They were also asked "after you gave up eating meat when you were young, did you later begin eating meat again?" (*Yes* / *No*) and "what caused you to begin eating meat again?" (open-ended).

Retrospective Socializing Agent Support — Participants reported the degree to which their parents, peers, and school supported their wanting to stop eating meat (e.g., "my parents/family were supportive of me wanting to stop eating meat when I was young" 1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree*). Participants who reported that they had started eating meat again were asked the same questions regarding support for this (e.g., "my parents/family were supportive of me wanting to start eating meat again" 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Retrospective Meat Disgust — Participants responded to three items: 1. "As a child I didn't want to eat certain meats because I disliked the taste, smell, or texture", 2. "As a child, I didn't want to eat certain meats because I disliked the idea of what it was or where it had come from" and 3. "As a child I didn't want to eat certain meats because I found aspects of it (such as blood or veins) disgusting" on a visual analogue scale from '*strongly disagree*' (0) to '*strongly agree*' (100). These questions aimed to measure disgust (Q2, based on ideation; Rozin & Fallon, 1987) and disgust/distaste (Q1 and 3, detecting aversive sensory properties such as bad taste). Consistent with the idea that ideational disgust differs conceptually from sensory disgust/distaste, these three items did not create a reliable scale together ($\alpha = 0.66$). Instead, in our analyses we included a composite 'Sensory Disgust' score (mean of disgust/distaste items 1 & 3; $\alpha = 0.71$) as well as item 2 as a predictor of 'Ideational Disgust'.

Retrospective Vegetarian Motives Inventory (VEMI; Hopwood et al., 2020) — Participants were asked to "please rate the importance of each of the following reasons in your decision to eat less meat or animal products when you were growing up" (1 = *not important* to 7 = *very important*). The 16 items included health motivations ($\alpha = 0.93$; e.g. "I want(ed) to be healthy"), environment motivations ($\alpha = 0.95$; e.g., "plant-based diets are

better for the environment) and animal welfare motivations (α = 0.96; e.g., "animal rights are important to me").

Current Speciesism (Caviola et al., 2019) — Participants responded to the 6-item Speciesism scale (α = 0.80; e.g., "Morally, animals always count for less than humans", 1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree*).

Current Short Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto et al., 2014) — Participants responded to the 4-item SSDO scale (α = 0.76; e.g., "we should not push for equality of societal groups, 1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree*).

Current Meat Liking — Participants were asked to evaluate six images of meat items (bacon, frankfurter, grilled chicken, roast chicken, steak, roast beef) on a visual analogue scale from 0 (*disgusting*) to 100 (*delicious*). A mean average score was taken to indicate current meat liking (α = 0.81).

Finally, as part of a separate project, participants completed questions related to the COM-B model, which are not reported on in the current study.

Data Analysis Plan

We conducted a series of binary logistic models (for *yes*/*no* questions) and general linear models. The model for age of first thinking about stopping included gender, ideational disgust, sensory disgust, and retrospective vegetarian motives. The model for stopping eating meat and age of stopping included gender, socializing agent support, ideational disgust, sensory disgust, and retrospective vegetarian motives. The model for starting to eat meat again included gender, ideational disgust, sensory disgust, and retrospective vegetarian motives. Current levels of Speciesism, SDO and meat liking were included in all models as control variables. This decision was made as these items are not retrospective and therefore it does not make theoretical sense that present day speciesism, for example, would have predicted the age at which someone first thought about stopping eating meat. Speciesism and SDO have both been shown to relate to attitudes regarding other animals and therefore we saw it as important to parse out their influence on our results. To account for the complexity of these models, we also include a table of bivariate associations between our predictors and outcomes in supplemental table S6. All analyses were conducted in Jamovi (v 2.7.2, The jamovi project).

Open-ended responses were coded using a bottom-up approach. Two independent coders read the responses and developed a coding framework. Following this, an initial 10% of responses were coded independently. The two coders then met to discuss discrepancies in the coding before the primary coder coded the remaining responses. For each question, categories that were used by at least 10% of the sample were included in the final analysis.

For the 'first thought' (see Table 1) reasoning question categories included: '*animal rights, welfare & concern*' (29%), '*media*' (14%), '*social influence*' (25%), '*experiences with animals*' (10%) and '*disgust and distaste*' (12%). For the 'start eating meat' (see Table 2) reasoning question categories included: '*taste preferences*' (32%), '*health*' (31%), '*social influence*' (25%) and '*convenience*' (24%). Multinomial logistic regression was conducted to model the association between reasoning category use, age, motivations, and gender.

Table 1

Reasoning Categories for "What First Made You Think About Stopping Eating Meat?" Open-Ended Question

Category	Definition	Example(s)
Health	References to health, nutrition, or health-related issues related to diet	"Health concerns due to high intake of meat" "For skin issues"
Animal Rights, Welfare, and Concern	References to concerns about animal welfare, animal rights, or a general love for animals	"I liked animals too much" "I felt guilty for eating animals"
Media	References to experiences with tv, documentary, film, social media	"I was watching the Simpsons and Lisa was a vegetarian" "I was watching Game Changers on Netflix"
Social Influence	References to the influence of family or peers	"My friends became vegetarian" "My mother was vegetarian"
Education & School	References to experiences with teachers or through direct education at school/college	"A lesson in school" "My teacher told us about meat production"
Experiences with Animals	References to explicit experiences with an animal, or with meat production. Also includes references to meat epiphany moments.	"I saw pigs hung in the back of a lorry"
Disgust & Distaste	References to sensory processing, distaste, disgust, and the idea of eating animals being unpleasant	"Dislike of texture" "I realised I was eating an animal"
Environmental Concern	References to care for the natural environment and connection between meat and climate change	"I stopped eating meat completely due to environmental reasons"
Moral Considerations & Emotions	References to broad moral concerns, personal philosophies, or guilt	"It felt wrong to be eating them"

Category	Definition	Example(s)
Meat Production	References to the ambiguity of meat production	"Not entirely sure how [meat] is sourced"

Table 2

Reasoning Categories for "Why Did You Start Eating Meat Again?" Open-Ended Question

Category	Definition	Example(s)
Taste Preferences	References to changing tastes, cravings for meat, or overcoming aversions	"Missed the taste of meat" "I liked the meals better"
Health	References to health, nutrition, or health-related issues related to diet	"I was always tired and struggled to get enough protein" "I found I was low in protein and iron"
Social Influence	References to the influence of family or peers	"Had to as my family would incorporate meat in our meals" "I felt left out not eating same meals as my family"
Convenience	References to eating meat being more convenient, practical or cost-effective (or plant-based diets not being convenient)	"It was hard for me to get some things financially" "Ease due to meals being already cooked for me"
Moral Considerations	References to changing one's mind regarding arguments against meat-eating, or feeling that a plant-based diet is not impactful	"Feeling like one person's actions are not enough"

Results

Pre-Screener Results

How Many People Thought About Stopping? How Many Did Stop?

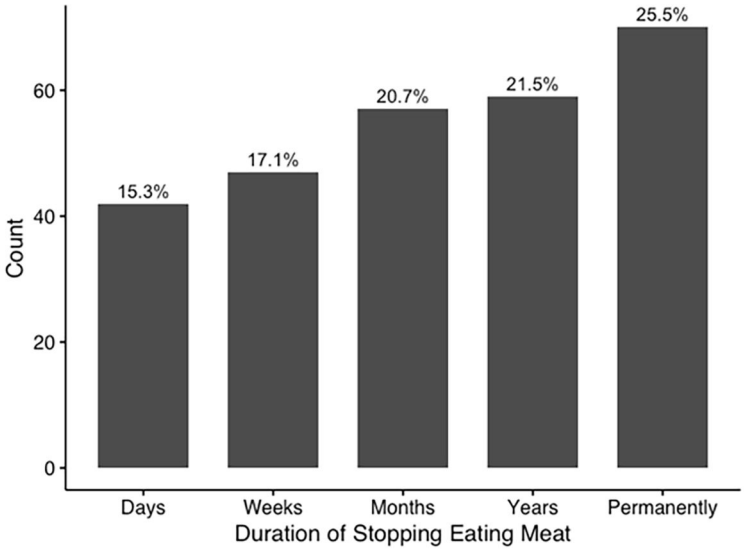
In our pre-screener data, 516 participants reported that they had thought about stopping eating meat while growing up (48.5%) as compared to 547 who had never thought about stopping eating meat (51.5%). Of those who had thought about it, 258 went on to stop eating meat (50.4%) while 254 did not (49.6%).

How Long Did They Stop For?

Amongst the participants who had stopped eating meat (see Figure 1), 37 reported they stopped for days (14.3%), 43 for weeks (16.7%), 54 for months (20.9%), 56 for years (21.7%) and 68 permanently (26.4%).

Figure 1

Duration of Participants' Self-Reported Initial Period of Abstaining From Meat



Does Gender Relate to Thinking About Stopping or Stopping Eating Meat?

Overall, the model explained approximately 10% of the variance in participants' responses to whether they had thought about stopping eating meat (R^2 = 0.10, $X^2(1)$ = 84.0, p < .001) and 6% of the variance in whether they did stop eating meat (R^2 = 0.057, $X^2(1)$ = 42.2, p < .001). Male participants were both less likely to have thought about stopping eating meat (B = 1.15, SE = 0.13, Z = 8.97, p < .001, OR = 3.17) and less likely to have stopped eating meat (B = 0.95, SE = 0.15, Z = 6.30, p < .001, OR = 2.58).

Main Study Results

How Old Were Participants When They First Thought About Stopping Eating Meat?

Descriptive statistics and regression tables for this and all following models can be found in supplemental tables S1–S5. Overall, the model explained approximately 9% of the variance in participants' responses to when they had first thought about stopping eating

meat (R^2 = 0.09, $F(9, 393)$ = 5.56, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.11). On average participants first thought about stopping eating meat at 11.48-years-old (SD = 3.27, minimum age = 4-years-old, maximum age = 21-years-old). Greater retrospective ideational disgust was related to an earlier first age of thinking about stopping (B = -0.02, SE = 0.007, $LLCI$ = -0.03, $ULCI$ = -0.001, $t(393)$ = -2.18, p = 0.03). VEMI health concerns (B = 0.21, SE = 0.11, $LLCI$ = 0.001, $ULCI$ = 0.41, $t(393)$ = 1.97, p = 0.05) and VEMI environmental concerns (B = 0.42, SE = 0.11, $LLCI$ = 0.22, $ULCI$ = 0.63, $t(394)$ = 4.02, p < .001) were related to a later first age of thinking about stopping.

What Were Participants' First Thoughts About Stopping Eating Meat?

Overall, the model explained approximately 4% of the variance in participants' reasoning about their first thoughts (R^2 = 0.04, $X^2(44)$ = 113.51, p < .001). We used *animal welfare* as the reference category since this is the main moral justification for not eating animals and to test what factors increase the likelihood of using other social conventional or personal categories. All references to likelihood refer to the likelihood of using a reasoning category *relative to* the *animal welfare* category. Likelihood ratio tests revealed a significant interaction between reasoning category use and whether the participant went on to stop eating meat ($X^2(8)$ = 19.49, p = 0.01). Participants who went on to stop eating meat were more likely to reason about experiences with animals or a meat epiphany, social influence, and disgust and distaste. See Table 3 for full model coefficients.

There was also a significant interaction between reasoning category use and VEMI animal welfare motivations ($X^2(8)$ = 33.31, p < .001). Participants with higher VEMI animal welfare motivations were more likely to refer to animal welfare than all other categories.

Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations
2026, Vol. 5, Article e20587
https://doi.org/10.5964/phair.20587

Table 3

Reasoning Category Use as a Function of Whether Participant Stopped Eating Meat

Category	Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	*p*	Odds Ratio	LLCI	ULCI
Experience with Animals	Use (1 = Used Category, 0 = Didn't Use Category) * Stopped Eating Meat (1 = Stopped – 0 = Didn't Stop)	3.87	1.28	0.94	.003	47.71	3.86	590.02
Media	Use (1 = Used Category, 0 = Didn't Use Category) * Stopped Eating Meat (1 = Stopped – 0 = Didn't Stop)	1.54	1.34	1.15	.25	4.64	0.34	63.87
Social Influence	Use (1 = Used Category, 0 = Didn't Use Category) * Stopped Eating Meat (1 = Stopped – 0 = Didn't Stop)	3.93	1.12	3.51	.03	50.78	5.66	455.39
Disgust & Distaste	Use (1 = Used Category, 0 = Didn't Use Category) * Stopped Eating Meat (1 = Stopped – 0 = Didn't Stop)	3.24	1.22	2.66	.008	25.62	2.34	280.78

Note. Animal Welfare is used as the reference category for all coefficients presented in Table 3.

What Was Related to Participants Being Able to Stop Eating Meat When They Wanted to?

Overall, the model explained approximately 22% of the variance in participants' responses to whether they were able to stop eating meat (R^2 = 0.22, F(12, 390) = 10.22, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.24). Amongst the main study sample, 58.5% reported stopping eating meat, compared to 41.5% who did not. Parental support was the strongest predictor of whether participants reported that they were able to stop eating meat (B = 0.10, SE = 0.01, $LLCI$ = 0.07, $ULCI$ = 0.12, t(390) = 7.10, p < .001). School support also played a role (B = 0.05, SE = 0.02, $LLCI$ = 0.009, $ULCI$ = 0.09, t(390) = 2.43, p = .02) along with VEMI environmental motivations (B = 0.03, SE = 0.02, $LLCI$ = 0.004, $ULCI$ = 0.06, t(390) = 2.22, p = .03).

What Age Did They First Stop?

Overall, the model explained approximately 16% of the variance in the age at which participants first stopped eating meat (R^2 = 0.16, F(12, 211) = 4.43, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.20). The average age of stopping eating meat was 13.34 years old (SD = 3.78, minimum age = 5 years old, maximum age = 23 years old). Parental support (B = -0.40, SE = 0.15, $LLCI$ = -0.71, $ULCI$ = -0.10, t(211) = -2.61, p = .01) and school support (B = -0.43, SE = 0.20, $LLCI$ = -0.82, $ULCI$ = -0.04, t(211) = -2.19, p = .03) were related to an earlier age of stopping eating meat. VEMI environmental motivation (B = 0.50, SE = 0.16, $LLCI$ = 0.19, $ULCI$ = 0.82, t(211) = 3.13, p = .002) and peer support (B = 0.55, SE = 0.21, $LLCI$ = 0.13, $ULCI$ = 0.97, t(211) = 2.61, p = .01) were related to a later age of stopping eating meat.

Did They Start Eating Meat Again?

Overall, the model explained approximately 48% of the variance in whether participants continued to abstain from eating meat (X^2(7) = 23.1, p = .002, R^2 = 0.20). Of participants who did stop eating meat, 162 (89.5%) reported that, at some point, they did eat meat again, compared to 19 (10.5%) who reported they did not. Above the effect of current meat liking (B = -0.09, SE = 0.01, Z = -8.20, p < .001, OR = 0.91) participants who reported initial VEMI health motives were less likely to continue to abstain from meat (B = -0.27, SE = 0.12, Z = -2.23, p = 0.03, OR = 0.76), as were those who reported that they experienced greater sensory disgust during childhood (B = -0.02, SE = 0.007, Z = -2.32, p = .02, OR = 0.98). Additional comparisons between the permanent stopping group and the eating again group in all key predictors can be found in supplemental table S7.

Why Did They Start Eating Meat Again?

The model of participants' reasons for starting to eat meat again only explained 2% of the variance in these reasons (R^2 = 0.02, X^2 (30) = 31.53, p = .39). Participants' original motivations, age of stopping, and gender were not related to the reasons they reported eating meat again. Across participants, references to health concerns, social influence, convenience, and taste were equally prevalent reasons for starting to eat meat again.

How Supportive Were Key Socializing Agents Before and After Participants Stopped Eating Meat?

Finally, for participants who had stopped and then started eating meat again, we assessed whether there was a difference in level of support for stopping eating meat and support for starting again from key socializing agents. Regarding parents ($t(161) = -14.55$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -2.50, Cohen's $d = -1.14$), peers ($t(161) = -6.52$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -0.95, Cohen's $d = -0.51$), and schools ($t(161) = -5.93$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -0.78, Cohen's $d = -0.47$), participants reported that support was greater when starting eating meat again as compared to when they initially stopped eating meat.

Discussion

Amongst emerging adults in the UK, approximately half our participants had thought about stopping eating meat when they were growing up. These first thoughts occurred around 11-years-old. Of this group, half did stop eating meat, ranging from a period of days to permanent abstinence. Individuals who stopped (around 13 years old) were aided by their parents and reported experiences with animals or a meat epiphany moment, as well as social influence and aversion to meat origins in motivating their decision. Most people returned to eating meat due to health concerns, social influence, taste, or convenience. When returning to meat-eating, participants received greater support from their parents, peers, and school than they did when they initially stopped eating meat. Taken together, this suggests that youth may be a period of increased receptivity to reducing meat consumption, but that there are key structural and pragmatic barriers to uptake of these diets that ought to be considered in intervention development.

Our results suggest that there may be two pathways to early thinking about meat reduction. First, greater ideational disgust towards meat is related to a younger age of first thinking about the issue. Some researchers have speculated that the connection between meat disgust and meat avoidance may be an evolved pathogen avoidance response that emerges in childhood (Becker & Lawrence, 2025). More sensory forms of disgust/distaste do not seem to play an important role but further research is required to clarify this and the related role of food neophobia. While the effects of retrospective disgust were present above and beyond a measure of current meat liking (measured on a 'disgusting' to 'delicious' scale), future work is required to assess whether different forms of disgust are recalled differently based on current diet. For example, it may be that veg*ns, disgusted by meat in the present, recall a stronger sense of childhood disgust. While analyses show no differences in retrospective ideational disgust between permanent abstainers and those who ate meat again, there was a difference in retrospective sensory disgust for these two groups. Given some differences in the strength of the disgust effect in multivariate and bivariate analyses (see supplemental materials) future longitudinal work with younger participants is required to tease apart the contribution of disgust from

differences in introspection. Additionally, our models did not predict large amounts of variance in understanding the age of thinking about or stopping eating meat, suggesting that further variables are likely at play and ought to be considered (e.g., experiences with media or veg*n peers early in life).

Those who did stop eating meat also reported related meat epiphany moments, where they came to understand the origins of their food; "*When I realised that what I was eating was an animal that had been killed to produce the meat*". Such findings are consistent with developmental models of meat-related conflict, which argue for the role of food-systems knowledge in dietary choices (Piazza et al., 2023). Extending this model's propositions, we also observed a group who thought about their food choices later in childhood or adolescence, primarily motivated by environmental or health concerns. This finding fits with research that has documented concern for sustainability amongst youth (Balundė et al., 2020). Making a personal commitment to a veg*n diet may be one way youth feel able to meaningfully contribute to this global crisis. Together these different motivational profiles open the way for future work where person-centred and longitudinal approaches could be used to understand who is more likely to be an 'early' versus 'late' meat-abstainer.

Parental support was the strongest predictor of individuals being able to stop eating meat when they wanted to. Parents are in most cases the gatekeepers to their children's diet and have an important role in communicating about meat consumption (Bray et al., 2016). In the related context of pro-environmental behaviours, parents are also pivotal in supporting their children's efforts to engage in such activities (Collado et al., 2019). Importantly, parents of those who did start eating meat again were more supportive of this return to meat eating than they were of the initial attempt to stop. Parental support is therefore crucial to efforts to stop eating meat—but the status quo appears to be that parents are more supportive of the societal dietary norm of meat eating.

These findings tentatively suggest that one impactful way for advocates to invest funds may be in engaging parents (while recognising concerns about cost) in ways to adapt their homes to be inclusive to plant-based curious children—even if parents do not wish to change their own diet. Emerging research has considered the dynamics of dietary change within romantic relationships and families (Gregson & Piazza, 2025), with the current findings suggesting future work on parent-child dyads to be a valuable direction. The average age at which participants first thought about stopping occurred during the transition from primary to secondary education. This additionally highlights the role that schools can play in enabling such decisions for children, particularly via plant-based school meals and food education (Sabet & Böhm, 2025).

Our findings indicate that most children and adolescents take up eating meat again, largely because eating meat is convenient (making family life more straightforward) and tasty. These findings centre taste and convenience as areas for advocacy. Making plant-based eating more convenient may align with the previous suggestion of engaging

and educating omnivorous parents to at least accommodate their plant-based curious children. Practical efforts to provide opportunities and capabilities will be important avenues for future research. Interestingly, an initial environmental motivation to stop eating meat was a predictor of starting to eat meat again. While not in the majority, there were some references to a feeling of moral demotivation in the sample—"*I felt like I wasn't changing anything apart from easing my guilty conscience*". This points towards the necessity of demonstrating that individual efforts make some contribution towards reducing animal suffering and environmental degradation even while systematic barriers persist. Our models predicting *who* was more likely to start eating meat again did not explain much variance in this outcome. Future work is needed to probe additional structural factors. For example, peer groups and social life become increasingly important in adolescence and it is likely our single item regarding peer support did not capture the full scope of this factor.

Despite these interesting early findings, this work of course faces caveats. The use of retrospective questions means that we must urge caution in drawing strong conclusions from the work. Longitudinal research and person-centred methods tracking dietary intentions and motivations across childhood and adolescence will be crucial to understand when and why particular groups are motivated to take up veg*n diets. This work is culturally bound within the UK and we urge further caution in extrapolating beyond this context. While there may be cultural similarities for youth growing up in nations where meat production is more hidden, it is quite possible that experiences of conflict or epiphany emerge along different developmental trajectories (or not at all) depending on the transparency of meat production. Future work tracking interest in these diets by nation will be an important next step. In addition, while we utilised Prolific's 'representative sampling' function, Prolific's own database of users is likely not perfectly representative of the UK population. Therefore, additional nationally representative sampling is required to draw stronger conclusions regarding population level statistics. Finally, it is important to consider the possibility of cohort effects, as attitudes about animal consumption are dynamic and changing with time. Additional work to track how different cohorts of youth view this issue will be essential.

In a sample of emerging adults in the UK, approximately half the participants reported that they had at least thought about stopping eating meat during childhood or adolescence, with a quarter of the sample stopping for a period of days, weeks, months, or years. While we urge caution given the retrospective nature of these results, this is initial evidence that childhood is not only a period where individuals are less speciesist in their moral judgments, but also a time when they consider morally relevant behavioural decisions. To capitalise upon this, buy-in from parents and schools is essential, along with a pragmatic focus on convenience and taste.

Funding: The authors were in part supported by an internal University of Exeter grant from the Child and Young Persons Wellbeing research network.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Use of AI Tools: No AI tools were used in carrying out this research or writing the report.

Data Availability: For this article, data is freely available (see McGuire, 2025).

Supplementary Materials

For this article, the following Supplementary Materials are available (see McGuire, 2025):

- Descriptive statistics of study variables
- Full regression model tables
- Bivariate correlations between study variables
- Descriptive statistics and t-tests comparing participants who did and did not start eating meat again

Index of Supplementary Materials

McGuire, L. (2025). *ResearchBox #4529 - 'Vegn Pipeline'* [Materials, data, analysis]. ResearchBox. https://researchbox.org/4529

References

Balundė, A., Perlaviciute, G., & Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, I. (2020). Sustainability in youth: Environmental considerations in adolescence and their relationship to pro-environmental behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, Article 582920. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.582920

Becker, E., & Lawrence, N. S. (2025). Disgust and distaste – Differential mechanisms for the rejection of plant- and animal-source foods. *Appetite, 212*, Article 108033. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2025.108033

Bray, H. J., Zambrano, S. C., Chur-Hansen, A., & Ankeny, R. A. (2016). Not appropriate dinner table conversation? Talking to children about meat production. *Appetite, 100*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.01.029

Caviola, L., Everett, J. A. C., & Faber, N. S. (2019). The moral standing of animals: Towards a psychology of speciesism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 116*, 1011–1029. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000182

Caviola, L., Wilks, M., Suárez Yera, C., Allen, C., Kahane, G., McGuire, L., Faber, N. S., Rojas Tejada, A. J., Sánchez Castelló, M., Ordóñez Carrasco, J. L., & Bloom, P. (2025). Becoming speciesist: How children and adults differ in valuing animals by species and cognitive capacity. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672251373108

Chiles, R. M., & Fitzgerald, A. J. (2018). Why is meat so important in Western history and culture? A genealogical critique of biophysical and political-economic explanations. *Agriculture and Human Values, 35*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-017-9787-7

Clark, M. A., Domingo, N. G. G., Colgan, K., Thakrar, S. K., Tilman, D., Lynch, J., Azevedo, I. L., & Hill, J. D. (2020). Global food system emissions could preclude achieving the 1.5° and 2°C climate change targets. *Science, 370*(6517), 705–708. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aba7357

Collado, S., Staats, H., & Sancho, P. (2019). Normative influences on adolescents' self-reported pro-environmental behaviors: The role of parents and friends. *Environment and Behavior, 51*(3), 288–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916517744591

Gregson, R., & Piazza, J. (2025). Navigating family dynamics in the transition to a plant-forward diet: The role of social support. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 165*(5), 731–751. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2025.2467989

Hahn, E. R., Gillogly, M., & Bradford, B. E. (2021). Children are unsuspecting meat eaters: An opportunity to address climate change. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 78*, Article 101705. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101705

Havermans, R. C., Rutten, G., & Bartelet, D. (2021). Adolescent's willingness to adopt a more plant-based diet: A theory-based interview study. *Frontiers in Nutrition, 8*, Article 688131. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2021.688131

Henseler Kozachenko, H., & Piazza, J. (2021). How children and adults value different animal lives. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 210*, Article 105204. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2021.105204

Hopwood, C. J., Bleidorn, W., Schwaba, T., & Chen, S. (2020). Health, environmental, and animal rights motives for vegetarian eating. *PLoS One, 15*(4), Article e0230609. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230609

Kubberød, E., Ueland, Ø., Tronstad, Å., & Risvik, E. (2002). Attitudes towards meat and meat-eating among adolescents in Norway: A qualitative study. *Appetite, 38*(1), 53–62. https://doi.org/10.1006/appe.2002.0458

Liem, D. G. (2025). The future of online or web-based research. Have you been BOTTED? *Appetite, 213*, Article 108058. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2025.108058

McGuire, L., Bagus, T., Carter, A., Fry, E., & Faber, N. S. (2025). Reasoning to justify eating animals varies with age. *Child Development, 96*(3), 953–965. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.14217

McGuire, L., Palmer, S. B., & Faber, N. S. (2023). The development of speciesism: Age-related differences in the moral view of animals. *Social Psychological & Personality Science, 14*(2), 228–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506221086182

McInnes, C., Carstairs, S. A., & Cecil, J. E. (2023). A qualitative study of young peoples' thoughts and attitudes to follow a more plant-based diet. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, Article 1196142. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1196142

Orzechowski, K. (2024, May 15). *Global animal slaughter statistics & charts*. Faunalytics. https://faunalytics.org/global-animal-slaughter-statistics-and-charts/

Papier, K., Knuppel, A., Syam, N., Jebb, S. A., & Key, T. J. (2023). Meat consumption and risk of ischemic heart disease: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition, 63*(3), 426–437. https://doi.org/10.1080/10408398.2021.1949575

Paruzel-Czachura, M., Maier, M., Warmuz, R., Wilks, M., & Caviola, L. (2025). Children value animals more than adults do: A conceptual replication and extension. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 51*(8), 1444–1455. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231219391

Piazza, J., Ruby, M. B., Loughnan, S., Luong, M., Kulik, J., Watkins, H. M., & Seigerman, M. (2015). Rationalizing meat consumption. The 4Ns. *Appetite, 91*, 114–128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2015.04.011

Piazza, J., Simpson, V., & McGuire, L. (2023). Why children moralise harm to animals but not meat. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 27*(8), 685–688. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2023.05.004

Pratto, F., Çidam, A., Stewart, A. L., Zeineddine, F. B., Aranda, M., Aiello, A., Chryssochoou, X., Cichocka, A., Cohrs, J. C., Durrheim, K., Eicher, V., Foels, R., Górska, P., Lee, I.-C., Licata, L., Liu, J. H., Li, L., Meyer, I., Morselli, D., … Henkel, K. E. (2014). *Short Social Dominance Orientation Scale* [Data set]. https://doi.org/10.1037/t31530-000

Robinson-O'Brien, R., Perry, C. L., Wall, M. M., Story, M., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2009). Adolescent and young adult vegetarianism: Better dietary intake and weight outcomes but increased risk of disordered eating behaviors. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association, 109*(4), 648–655. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2008.12.014

Rozin, P., & Fallon, A. E. (1987). A perspective on disgust. *Psychological Review, 94*(1), 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.94.1.23

Sabet, F., & Böhm, S. (2025). Towards sustainable school food: An experiential planetary health framework integrating meals and food education. *British Educational Research Journal, 51*(2), 826–847. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4100

Singer, P. (1975). *Animal liberation: A new ethics for our treatment of animals*. New York Review.

Wilks, M., Caviola, L., Kahane, G., & Bloom, P. (2021). Children prioritize humans over animals less than adults do. *Psychological Science, 32*(1), 27–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620960398

Worsley, A., & Skrzypiec, G. (1998). Teenage vegetarianism: Prevalence, social and cognitive contexts. *Appetite, 30*(2), 151–170. https://doi.org/10.1006/appe.1997.0118

YouGov. (2024). *Dietary choices of Brits (e.g. vegetarian, flexitarian, meat-eater etc)?* https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/trackers/dietery-choices-of-brits-eg-vegeterian-flexitarian-meat-eater-etc

Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations (PHAIR) is the official journal of the Society for the Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations.

PsychOpen GOLD is a publishing service provided by the Leibniz Institute for Psychology (ZPID), Germany.