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Tesco to hand out free fruit to shoppers' children

The supermarket is extending the healthy eating initiative to 800 stores after a test in Scotland last year.

Tesco is promising to take some of the pain out of the weekly grocery shop for parents by offering free fruit for children to munch on.

The UK's biggest supermarket tested the initiative in Scotland last year and will now offer a selection of apples, citrus fruit and bananas for parents to pick up at the start of their shopping trip in 800 UK stores. The retailer is facing fierce competition from fast-growing discounters Aldi and Lidl, and is looking for ways to win over shoppers.

The idea came from one of its checkout assistants, Maria Simpson, who works in a Lincolnshire store. She suggested that handing out free fruit to children would provide a healthy alternative to sweets – often a last resort for harassed parents.

Two years ago Tesco became the first major retailer to remove sweets and chocolates from its checkouts and in 2015 it announced all the children's lunchbox-sized soft drinks it sells would have no added sugar. It expects to give away 1m pieces of fruit each month as part of the new healthy eating push.

"We are Britain's biggest greengrocer, so we want to make it easier for parents to get their children eating more healthily," said Tesco's UK chief, Matt Davies. "As a dad, I know it can be tricky getting children to eat their fruit and vegetables, so we're hoping this initiative will help create healthy eating habits that will stay with children as they grow up."

The British Heart Foundation has welcomed the idea. Its chief executive, Simon Gillespie, said: "It's a positive step towards improving children's health throughout the UK and helps parents ensure their children get their five portions of fruit and vegetables every day."

Tesco group chief executive Dave Lewis, a former Unilever executive, is trying to rehabilitate the company. He has encouraged staff to improve the service for shoppers under the slogan "every little help makes a big difference" with initiatives such as distributing unsold food to charities and tackling food waste.

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