



An Impact Evaluation Report on the 'Healthy Little Eaters' nutrition education cooking programme in Children's Centres in Brent

Context

The London Borough of Brent is one of the most deprived boroughs in London and has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in England. Obesity unjustly affects children in more deprived areas, who are more than twice as likely to be obese. Once established, obesity is notoriously difficult to treat, so **prevention and early intervention** are paramount. Tackling childhood obesity continues to be a priority for Brent Council and Brent CCG.

In Brent, 27% reception and 40% year 6 children are overweight or obese compared with 22% reception and 35% year 6 in England.

Early Years settings play a critical role by establishing a safe and supportive environment that promotes healthy behaviors (including healthy eating). Nutrition & Dietetics Brent (London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust) successfully bid for funding over a period of 8 years (2008 – 2016) to provide '**Healthy Little Eaters**': a nutrition education and cooking programme for children from 1-5 years & parents in Children Centres.

It aimed to improve nutritional health and wellbeing of children under five and their families. Each session focused on a different nutrition topic, cooking with children and parents (familiarising them with real foods) and - of course - eating!

Participant recruitment was carried out by Centre staff, with promotional material provided by our team.

Practice development

'Healthy Little Eaters' was set up in Children's Centres across Brent and aimed to improve health and wellbeing of children under 5 and their families and ultimately reduce the rates of obesity in Brent. It was delivered over 8 weeks, each session focusing on a different nutrition and eating topic including: reducing sugar and salt, foods for bone health, label reading, importance of fruit and vegetables, preventing iron deficiency, fussy eating and weaning.

The programme team included Dietitians and Nutrition Assistants, working closely with Centre staff to deliver the agreed syllabus.

Each 2-hour session included a nutrition topic, learning through facilitated discussion, preparing from a healthy recipe and eating the food together afterwards. The recipes were cooked with the children, encouraging participation and were low budget, healthy, quick and easy. The classes were

free of charge and open to families that visited each centre. Working in partnership, Brent's Oral Health Promotion Team attended a session to promote good oral health.

Programme objectives agreed with Brent Council were to increase:

- understanding of the Eat Well Guide
- portions of fruit and vegetables
- knowledge of healthy eating and physical activity for children
- understanding on ways to eat healthily on a budget
- understanding of food labelling, selecting healthier options, the benefits of cooking from scratch, food hygiene and safe preparation of food

Each 'Healthy Little Eaters' programme could accommodate up to 15 families per cohort. Although the standard syllabus was created and continuously reviewed by the team, there was room to individualize some aspects depending on the needs of centres (eg some did not have facilities to cook food and so cold recipes used instead).

Since the commencement of the 'Healthy Little Eaters' programme in 2008 the team have delivered more than 500 programmes across 15 Children's Centres in Brent, reaching approximately 1000 families.

Measuring impact

An evaluation questionnaire was undertaken during the final week. Across all centres the 'Healthy Little Eaters' intervention resulted in positive changes:

- 65% reported an increase in pieces of fruit consumed per day (0.9 pieces of fruit a day)
- 75% reported an increase in serves of vegetable consumed per day

(0.75 serves of veg/day)

- 67% reported a decrease in days families add salt to meals per week (1.46 decrease in days not adding salt)
- 47% reported a decrease in days a child refuses food or meals per week (0.61 decrease in days a child refuses)
- 63% reported an increase in the frequency the child is included in a food preparation in a typical week (increase by 1.38 days per week)
- 87% reported an increase in confidence when reading food labels

As a result, family mealtimes became more relaxed and happy. Parents reported to be more trusting of children with regard to their eating and felt confident in giving smaller portion sizes:

"I've learnt not to stress when he doesn't finish a meal. Before I used to think 'oh he hasn't eaten' I will give him more milk and then he wouldn't eat properly afterwards, so I have learnt not to force them." - Mother, Alperton Children's Centre

The cooking part of the programme demonstrated ways to include children in the preparation and thereby increasing exposure to children and ultimately increased food acceptance. The programme

was seen as an opportunity to turn cooking into a positive family experience through increased skills and confidence, a broadened cooking repertoire and less reliance on takeaways.

“You get out of the habit of buying ready made things – you can make from fresh. For instance if I was going to give them dahl I would have got it readymade from the fridge section”. Mother, Hope Children’s Centre

Learning Points

Overall, the results reflect the positive impact of ‘Healthy Little Eaters’ to equip participants with the knowledge, skills and confidence to cook; also to change cooking, eating and purchasing behaviours towards a healthier diet.

Learning / Considerations:

- 60% of families finished the full programme at week 8. This varied between centres – possibly due to advertising methods, presence or absence of weekly reminders and commitment of parents.
- Certificates at the end of the session were given with a sticker of their choice. However, no other incentives were used to promote completion of these cohorts. Incentives had been used in previous cohorts and shown to work well (eg children’s cooking aprons featuring our ‘Healthy Little Eaters’ logo). Wykeham Children’s Centre uses a £5 refundable deposit scheme and has shown to have good retention rates.
- Recruitment via word of mouth from staff and other parents appears to be the most successful method. If time permits it would be useful for the dietitian to visit centres and promote the session to staff and encourage recruitment. If no more than 5 parents are signed up the programme should be postponed.
- There is a need for simplified evaluation forms especially for those who do not have English as a first language.
- To overcome this barrier a focus group was conducted to capture more in depth data and enable those with a low level of English be able to express themselves without the need for literacy skills.
- Whilst we would continue to provide evaluation forms pre and post intervention to ensure equity we would consider conducting focus group or interviews / recording quotes to gather data from parents with low literacy and/or to explore outcomes.
- In the evaluation, parents reported a preference for 11-1pm sessions and our past experience is that poor attendance rates occurred when sessions started in the afternoon (perhaps to avoid school-run times in future).
- At the end of each session the dietitian or crèche worker led on a rhyming session. This was a great opportunity for families to bond and provided a sound closure to a session and is something we would continue to develop in future.
- Sessions held at Centres without hot cooking facilities were limited and overall the retention rates weren’t as high as others with hot cooking facilities. Parents reported to have enjoyed the food preparation and requested more recipes.

The early establishment of healthy nutrition practices should be seen as an integral component to any local and national strategies to prevent and manage childhood obesity. It is evident that 'Healthy Little Eaters' sessions had a positive impact on family's health behaviours and therefore the programme needs to become part of a key core component of the Children's Centre yearly programme. Commissioners should consider the constant roll out of these sessions at Children Centres in Brent to continue momentum, reduce staff turnover, maintain relations and to gain more traction from all stakeholders. 'Healthy Little Eaters' was a clinically effective programme and can be scaled up.