

# Childhood Obesity Sounding Board Public Involvement Network (PIN) August 2013

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## **Background**

On behalf of Public Health, the Engagement Team asked parents and children their views about healthy eating; physical exercise; and what was helpful to them locally. We talked to parents at four Children’s Centres and a Play Day, and got feedback from Asian women via Sunrise Centre in Banbury. Overall 73 women and 7 men took part – 23 were from Black and Minority Ethnic groups, and 12 were from families in the armed forces. We conducted an online survey of children and young people and received 100 replies, and engaged 13 children in discussion aged between 7 and 13 years from mixed minority ethnic backgrounds.

## Main Themes

### Healthy Eating:

- Generally there was a high level of awareness about the benefits of breast feeding
- Affordability featured strongly, with a perception that healthy food was more expensive and is more effort to prepare, and convenience food being fast and cheap
- Some people are lacking basic cooking skills and knowledge in nutrition
- Lack of time to cook healthy food and shop was an issue for working parents
- There is lack of information about portion sizes for young children
- Lack of availability of fresh food in disadvantaged areas
- Schools were thought to be very influential
- Make healthy eating messages 'cool' to change behaviours.

### Physical Activity:

- People want to be able to access local information about activities
- Lack of access to affordable indoor activities in winter
- More open access to clubs and activities to allow for budgeting
- Local parks were mentioned across the groups and well utilized
- Other physical activity e.g. dance should be available not just sport.

### Local support:

- Some people cited a lot of examples of groups and activities for children
- Some people were aware of groups and networks in their communities
- Children's Centres were seen as a strong source of support and advice
- Access to information and support was important for fathers too.

## Main Messages

### 1. Breastfeeding

Many women we interviewed breastfed their child, and a very small number just didn't want to do it and found bottle feeding more convenient. Obstacles included pain/baby unable to latch on. Some felt unsupported to manage bottle feeding. *"I feel guilty around not breastfeeding but there wasn't enough good support and information". "It's hard to get advice about bottle feeding if you are unable to breastfeed."*

- **Weaning:** Increased budgeting for food was a consideration. A positive aspect was bottle feeding means dads can be involved. Many women mentioned the Annabelle Carmen website for giving good ideas as a starting point for weaning. *"The amount of my food shopping has doubled since weaning started and lots of fruit and veg are expensive."*
- **Baby cafés:** Children's Centres hosted these and they were mentioned a lot, were much appreciated and seen as a good resource.

- **Children’s Centres:** Children’s Centres mentioned very often as a source of support and advice, either by offering Peer Training and support for breastfeeding, or trained staff to offer support.
- **Health visitors:** Some women said health visitors were helpful, but a high number of mothers we spoke to didn’t feel supported by their health visitor to breastfeed. Inconsistency of staff meant they couldn’t build a relationship with them and feel confident, and there was inconsistency of advice from different health visitors. Several women said they felt unsupported and were told to “just keep trying”. *“As a young parent I didn’t get any help from Health Visitors and I didn’t have the confidence to try it.”* *“The Health visitor just hands out leaflets.”*
- **Hospitals:** Although some women felt unsupported at hospital, many women said there was not enough support or encouragement and the maternity ward was rushed and midwives didn’t have enough time. *“I wanted to breastfeed but had no support in or out of hospital.”* *“When I was in hospital staff didn’t have the time to show me how to breastfeed”.*

## 2. Early Years

### 2.1 Healthy Eating

Many people were motivated to want to try to give their children a healthier diet, but barriers such as knowledge, cost and availability made it difficult for some. *“Most people know what’s healthy – it’s easier not to, and there are cost implications.”*

- **Knowledge**

People reported there is lack of information about portion sizes for children, and parental anxiety about children who are fussy eaters was common. *“I wouldn’t know about a healthy target weight if I didn’t have a childcare background.”* *“Media give the problems but not the solutions e.g. we need pictures of what they should be eating at certain ages.”* The Annabelle Carmen website was frequently mentioned which produces healthy convenience baby food ideas and cook books for toddler/baby food. HENRY courses run out of the Children’s Centres were frequently mentioned as *helpful* *“HENRY course was very informative in raising awareness about ingredients.”* The Children’s Centres were particularly helpful resources for information and support, and knowing the staff at the Children’s Centres is important, as it feels very comfortable to ask questions and seek advice.

Health Visitors are a good source of advice. Healthy Start Vouchers were useful and provide recipes and advice. There was general agreement that children eating healthily depends on what children see parents eat and what they get used to, and that pre-school parents have good level of control over what food their children eat.

- **Cost**  
There was a widespread perception that healthy food is more expensive than convenience food. People use frozen vegetables as fresh are too expensive.  
*“All my money goes on childcare and food.” “Fresh fruit is more expensive.”*
- **Availability**  
Lack of variety of fresh food in local shops, especially in deprived areas, leads to people shopping at stores that stock unhealthy food but will deliver a large shopping order. They said unhealthy food/junk food is always on promotion in supermarkets - not fresh or healthy food.

## 2.2 Physical Activity

Some parents of young children did not feel physical activity was an issue as their children are already really active and *“always on the go”*. Those parents who were already active tended to think family exercise was very important e.g. games, walks, swimming. Soft play centres were important especially in winter, and small community groups e.g. Twinkle Toes dance sessions in Barton. There often was not a shared knowledge of what was available in the local communities; some people did not use the community centres and therefore did not read the notice boards, or use the internet. *“Should have information up in Tesco’s or Boots rather than GP surgeries. Not everyone goes to the doctors - especially dads”*

Many said there is not enough information about activities for the under 4’s. Peer support groups were valued such as Slummy Mummies in Witney an informal support group doing affordable activities together. Also mentioned was an International group *that “is very friendly, more so than other groups, and the women are more open.”*

## 3. School Age

### 3.1 Healthy Eating

#### **Parent’s responses**

- **Convenience**  
Many people thought if parents are faddy eaters, then the children are more likely to be *“It’s so much easier to use convenience food.” “Some children graze all day on crisps and then don’t eat a healthy meal in the evening.”*
- **Cost**  
Many people said they believed healthy food costs more than junk food, and they couldn’t afford it *“Fresh fruit and vegetable are more expensive”*. *“Financially it’s very difficult to provide fresh veg and fruit, I do try but not so easy even though I know I should, and I try when I can, like apples sometimes.”*

- **Knowledge**

A family culture of home cooking was said to be very helpful as this knowledge and skills gave people the confidence to experiment to get children to eat healthily *“You have to be creative and make the food attractive or blend it (even roast dinners).”* Quite a few people said they lacked the basic cookery skills *“Not everyone knows how to cook healthy food from scratch.”* Others said *“We get mixed messages about what is good, like dairy: it used to be good, but now it’s fattening.”* More help with reading and understanding food labels, and information in different mediums and languages was mentioned by British Pakistani women. Some women who spoke English as a second language were not aware of information sent via schools; did not access the internet or know the nutritional values of their traditional food.

- **Schools**

Many parents agreed that peer pressure is a factor from their children’s’ friends at school. They thought schools are very influential and said:

- Fizzy drinks shouldn’t be allowed in schools
- When children get to secondary school the food rules are much more relaxed, they should do more
- “One treat” lunchbox policy was very helpful
- The Healthy Schools Initiative and Healthy Schools Team were good, and involved children
- Schools could run sports clubs for children and parents at weekends and evenings.

- **Control over choices**

When eating out *“Kids meals in (especially family) restaurants are fast food, like chicken nuggets and chips - could do with mashed veg or veg sticks as options”.*

For separated parents there is lack of knowledge/control about what the other parent is feeding the child.

- **Temptation**

*“There is too much food and choice”* in shops and the junk food is promoted more than the healthy food. Junk mail about fast food through the letter box makes it hard for parents to resist “pester power” and this is especially difficult for single parents.

### **Children and Young People’s responses:**

Children and young people said parents, grandparents and friends help them to eat healthily, and they eat unhealthy food as snacks when they are hungry. Most said their area could be improved by having healthy foods to choose from in the local shops. Some said the media does influence by advertising unhealthy food on TV and in magazines.

- **Choices**

The majority said they ate healthy food because it is good for them and they like the taste. They said they ate junk food because they like the taste and it is cheap and accessible. Nearly a half said they only have it sometimes as a treat.

- **Influences**

- Who**

- ❖ Examples of ill health linked to obesity in the family
    - ❖ Influence of parents, especially mothers either because they were dieting themselves, or they strongly promoted healthy diet
    - ❖ brothers and sisters influence what they eat because it is hard to stick to a diet when other people are eating something different like junk food
    - ❖ Schools
      - health days
      - learning about it in science lessons
      - food pyramid
      - tutorial information
    - ❖ Other adults – doctors/people at the gym. Only a few said youth clubs and other clubs for young people.
    - ❖ Friends

- What**

- ❖ Cost - A third of comments were about the cost of healthy food. *“Didcot Girls School make all the unhealthy nicer food more expensive, so I can only buy healthy food”*.

- How**

- ❖ Knowledge gained from someone at home or the school, and a third from the internet. They also cited personal development nurses at school, TV and health magazines, doctors, and people from the gym.
    - ❖ Availability depended on what food parents chose to buy
    - ❖ Taste - *“if they made it cheaper, and made it taste better and look more appealing”*. Even those who eat healthy meals said they eat unhealthy snacks when they are hungry.

- **Ideas (Children and Young People)**

Designing a game to teach about healthy eating; posting messages about healthy eating on social media; the after school club selling healthy food; school providing more vegetables and salads; cooking more often at home and school; make a healthy eating page with pictures on Facebook; have a fun day and give out free food like fruit. Some said have more opportunities to learn about healthy food and how easy it actually is to prep and cook.

### **3.2 Physical Activity**

#### **Parents Responses**

- **Resources**

Local parks and play areas were mentioned across the board and well utilized, as were swimming pools although some people thought the learner pools are too small for the population. Leisure centres clubs and cycling were popular.

- **Cost**  
People said Leisure Centres are seen as expensive, and they would prefer that clubs are open access, to allow drop in when they can afford it. Parents don't want to pay for terms, and do want more ad hoc sports and activities for kids to just turn up and play.  
*"Tasters in sports and activities would be good so you don't have to commit to a whole term and then decide they don't like it."*  
Swimming was very popular, and many people suggested free swimming lessons should be on offer. *"After school fitness clubs would be good."*
- **TV/screen time**  
An extremely common theme was that children don't want to leave the TV/electronic devices to go outdoors and play, and a lot of persuasion from parents is needed. Some parents' restricted time spent watching the screen, others found it a struggle.
- **Seasonality**  
Very many people said there is a lack of indoor free activities in winter to keep the children active as it is too cold and wet to be outdoors a lot. They would welcome the equivalent of summer play schemes in winter. Affordability of indoor activities was an issue for many, especially large families.
- **Alternatives to sport**  
Some children do not like doing sport, and sometimes finding any other sort of physical activity for them is difficult locally and costly.

### **Children and Young People Responses**

Approximately half said they spent between 30-60 minutes being active per day. About a quarter did less, and about a quarter did more. 22 people did not answer.

#### **Who Influences**

A social element to activity is important for motivation for many. *"If my friend goes out for a jog I will as well, but I wouldn't go out on my own."*

- ⤴ A major influence on the amount of physical activity was friends. Family including parents also had an influence, especially where the family did activities together.
- ⤴ Schools especially through sports clubs. *"Stricter PE teachers, more clubs."* Also walking to school.
- ⤴ National schemes such as Duke of Edinburgh Award

#### **What Influences**

- ⤴ Events - sports, fun, play and activity
- ⤴ Knowledge – what different sports and events are available, and alternatives to sport e.g. dancing
- ⤴ Facilities such as public parks, skate parks, leisure centres.
- ⤴ Cost of gym, swimming etc. can be prohibitive

## Where

Half said local activities and clubs helped and half said they didn't. People wanted to use facilities nearby.

- ⤴ Local clubs: school & after-school clubs, sports clubs and Brownies.
- ⤴ Informal community or friendship activities. *"Football with friends, dancing, acting and singing and swimming with mum sometimes."*

## How

- ⤴ Websites
- ⤴ Posters advertising events and giving advice
- ⤴ Social media: Only a third said the social networking sites affected exercise or healthy eating

## Ideas for improvements

- ⤴ Social networking- games e.g. for club penguin; videos including age appropriate workout routine; recipes e.g. for healthy snack; ads for fun days or free sports trials. Pop up ads e.g. showing how sitting at computer is unhealthy. *"Making it cool"*
- ⤴ Free taster classes.

## Media influence

Ten people found the Change 4 Life website helpful. Very few people said social media had any influence on them. Some parents remarked that the media affects young people's image of themselves as they see famous people very slim and want to be like them, and they are self-conscious about their bodies so they don't want to go swimming or do other activities.

## 4. Adults

This engagement exercise was in the context of how adults help and influence children to be healthier rather than focusing on adults themselves.

### 4.1 Healthy eating

#### • Lack of time

This featured strongly for working parents who say they don't have the time, and it's difficult for working parents to produce quick healthy food. Many working women said they are too tired after work and then driving the children to their clubs which after which there is no time to shop and cook.

#### • Knowledge

Frequent comments were made on the need for a central place to find the up-to-date information people need to support a healthy lifestyle.

#### • Ideas

People put forward suggestions they thought would help:

- Ideas of simple meals that take a short time to prepare or prepare in advance
- Kid's cookery club. Parents cooking with their children and inspiring them
- An award to pubs that serve healthy children's food
- Demonstration cooking and classes to help those who have never cooked



- Cooking classes in local areas for Asian and Western food
- Demonstrate to parents how to make food fun e.g. sandwich shapes
- Advice on planning menu's ahead of time and on shopping
- Advice on buying on offer and bulk freezing
- *"Don't talk at people"* – you need interactive sessions and to be able to try or experience stuff e.g. strawberries as a pudding or dessert

#### 4.2 Physical Activity

- People generally agreed that children were influenced by the level of enthusiasm for exercise and physical activity undertaken by their parents
- Active families encouraged their children to do a range of activities
- Many of the less well-off parents only mentioned walking as their activity and no other form of activity. It was suggested that lack of confidence to carry on an activity after an organised course, and being self-conscious were factors that prevented people sustaining activity
- The British Pakistani women said they did very little physical activity and the men in the family did more activities with the children.

- **Knowledge**

Information about local activities was not thought to be easy to find out about, some people knew of small activity clubs that only advertised by word of mouth. People said there was a need for some way in which communities could find out what was available locally.

- **Ideas**

Schools could run sports clubs for children and parents at weekends and evenings