

Nutrition and the School Environment

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During school years, children and young people develop life-long patterns of behaviour that can affect their ability to eat a healthy diet, maintain a healthy weight, and be more physically active. Schools, led by head teachers and chairs of governors, have an important role to play by providing opportunities for children and young people to be physically more active, develop healthy eating habits, and also by providing role models. A school's approach to assessing the environment and developing its policies will be more effective if the whole school community is involved, for example, by encouraging collaboration between head teachers, governors, school council members, pupils and parents. Involvement from pupils and their parents may produce more effective outcomes.'(Obesity: prevention and lifestyle weight management in children and young people.' NICE quality standards draft. July 2014).

The NICE statement highlights the crucial role of schools in promoting the health and fitness of children. It suggests that the best outcomes will be achieved by adopting a holistic approach, involving the family and may be set against figures from the National Child Measurement Programme (2011/12) showing 32.4% of girls and 35.4% of boys aged 10-11 to be overweight. Of that number, 17.1% of girls and 20.7% of boys were categorised as obese and the Programme in 2012/13 charts an upward trend, with one in three of the children measured in Year 6 presenting as overweight or obese.

'The National Diet and Nutrition Survey' (Results from Years 1-4 (combined) of the Rolling Programme 2008/9-2011/12: Executive Summary) cites poor diet as a significant factor in the childhood overweight epidemic. Whilst just 10% of boys and 7% of girls met the 'at least five a day' recommendation of fresh fruits and vegetables, and consumption of oily fish was well below an advocated one portion per week, the Survey reveals that intake of added sugars or NMES (non-milk extrinsic sugars) exceeded the daily recommended value for all children, peaking in the 4-10 and 11-18 age groups. Main sources of NMES are predictably; cakes, biscuits, breakfast cereals, fruit juices and sugary soft drinks.

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort to improve the quality of school food and worthwhile initiatives include:

1. The School Food Plan: Supported by the Secretary of State for Education and a range of organisations designed to help head teachers improve school food. A website offers case studies of proven success stories
2. Food for Life Partnership: Contains dedicated schools programmes with nearly 5,000 schools enrolled, using a 'whole settings' approach to renovating the food culture-making lunchtimes fun; enriching learning with practical activities such as food growing, farm visiting and cooking.
3. The School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme: Funded by the Department of Health and entitling every child aged 4-6 in fully state-funded schools to a piece of fruit or vegetable each day and equating to approximately 2.2m children in approximately 16,500 schools.
4. School milk: Subsidised by the European Union under the European Union under the European school milk scheme and funded by the Department of Health for children aged under five.
5. Revised standards for food served in schools, (available from September 2014 and in regulatory force in January 2015) giving clearer food-based standards with practical guidance for the creation of nutritionally balanced meals and cheaper, less burdensome operational costs, allowing for increased flexibility.
6. A free school lunch offered to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2 from September 2014; mandatory in all state-funded schools in England including academies and free schools (Children and Families Act 2014).

Welcome curricular changes to the teaching of food in schools from September 2014, will see cooking and nutrition becoming a compulsory addition to the Design and Technology specification (key stages 1-3 - up to age 14 years). Pupils will be taught how to cook applying principles of nutrition and healthy eating and syllabuses will include sections on seasonality sourcing and characteristics of a range of ingredients. However, tangible progress here is countermanded by the equal recommendation that current Home Economic (Food and nutrition), Catering and Design and Technology (Food) A level subjects will cease to be available from 2016.

The NICE quality standard ('Obesity: prevention and lifestyle weight management in children and young people': draft 2014) states:

'It is well recognised that children who are obese are likely to have obese parents. Many cases in which obesity runs in families may be due to environmental factors, such as poor eating habits learned in childhood, or due to relational and behavioural factors such as poor boundary setting. Therefore, family involvement in interventions is important to ensure improvements in outcomes are maintained.'

The Government-backed Change4Life Healthy Lifestyle Delivery Programmes are family-centred approaches within the community and are rolled out to families with children aged between 0-19 years via NHS Trusts. Attractive programmes range from messy play with foodie fun and games in children's centres for the under fives, PHSE programmes of physical activity, games, health massages and weekly challenges aimed at years 5 and 6, and programmes where parents/carers participate in games, healthy eating, cooking and physical activity with their children who have been referred via the National Child Measurement Programme. NICE recommends a similar strategy in education; urging head teachers and governors to assess the school environment in collaboration with parents and pupils so that there is a greater likelihood of achieving consensus around feasible policies to promote physical activity and a healthy weight and lifestyle. It is an aim as yet awaiting practical definition.

Oliver de Schutter, UN Special Reporter on The right to Food 9 Briefing Note 09-April 2014) makes a case for Government use of public procurement policy as a tool to 'set a positive trend and accelerate a transition towards sustainable food systems that respect the rights of vulnerable groups, including small-scale food producers.'

Ideally such schemes should:

1. Source preferentially from small-scale food producers and actively empower them to access tenders.
2. Guarantee living wages as well as fair and remunerative prices along the food supply chain.
3. Set specific requirements for adequate food diets.
4. Source locally and demand from their suppliers that they produce food according to sustainable methods and increase participation and accountability in the food system.

Schutter argues that 'the effectiveness of such public procurement policies and programmes would be maximised by fully integrating them under right to food national strategies and framework laws, and by co-ordinating them with our food security policies.'

The Government press release, announcing the introduction of new school food standards for England, makes reference to the Soil Association's Foods For Life Catering Mark, noting that any academy caterers hold this independent endorsement and are taking steps to improve the food they serve by using ingredients which are fresh, free from trans fats and undesirable additives, better for animal welfare and comply with national nutrition standards. The Government's new Plan for Procurement also welcomes the Mark as a well established best practice tool. However, there is no governance in this area and the evidence base around specific criteria for being awarded the Quality Mark is reliant upon the values of the organisation delivering.

There remains no mandatory scheme. Many initiatives nationwide have gone some way to change the school food culture with positive effect yet to date, nutrition and the school environment remains very much a 'work in progress'. There is a need for a coherent, evidence-based national strategy, drawing together examples of best practice and aligning the school setting with the family in the community so that strategies to promote a fit and healthy childhood are not circumscribed by the given hours of a school day.

Recommendations

1. Government to develop a cross-Departmental strategy, co-ordinated by a Minister for Children at Cabinet level with the power of audit.
2. A free, national, mandatory healthy schools programme including appropriate staff training to embed healthy eating, physical activity and body image education into the curriculum and to make sustainable changes to school food on a 'whole school' approach, with a possible starting point being The European Food Framework and its new subject specifications which outlines core skills for diet, active lifestyles and energy balance.
3. Parents and pupils to be encouraged to collaborate with head teachers and chairs of governors to ensure that a school's policies and ethos promote child fitness and wellbeing. Family Liaison Workers to be based in school to support parents in devising home activities that encourage children to be more active, eat more nutritious foods and spend less time in screen-based pursuits.
4. Extended schools and family learning to dovetail so that families and children can be educated together about food, nutrition, physical activity and health.
5. New 'cooking programmes' within the school curriculum to combine nutritional education with elements from successful home economics syllabuses, rather than concentrating solely upon recipes.

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