

Healthy Eating Research Project (CIB Project) – Final Report by BFA

1. Introduction

Bangladesh Football Association (UK) was commissioned by HealthWatch Tower Hamlets to conduct a short piece of research with children 6-11 year olds to find out their existing knowledge around healthy eating; their eating habits and what type of food and the amount they eat after school and before bedtime; their reasons for eating chicken and chips and their parents attitudes to food.

The project worked with 30 children that regularly attend our football academy. We used a series of football exercises/activities to gather the information. We also conducted surveys with 15 parents to find out their views and attitudes towards food.

2. Research Aim

- a) To explore the existing baseline knowledge children between 5-11 year olds have about healthy eating and living? e.g. knowledge acquired from schools, etc.
- b) To explore children's eating habit after school and up to bedtime
- c) To explore the types of food and amount of food children eat between after school and bedtime
- d) To explore the reasons for eating chicken and chips after school or after training/matches
- e) To explore parents attitudes to healthy eating and their reasons for offering chicken and chips after school or after training/matches to their children

3. Methodology

The project worked with 30 children and 15 parents that regularly attend our football academy. We did a series of activities during the training sessions to find out children's knowledge and understanding about healthy eating and living. The following methods were used to get feedback from children and their parents:

- a) **Warm Up** - To find out what children already knew about healthy eating and living we asked children to do a stretch while warming up and answer "What is healthy?" Children took turn and did a stretch and said something related to healthy eating.
- b) **Drink Run** – After a running drill we asked children to choose drinks from 3 different boxes, one contained water, one contained fizzy drinks and one contained juices. Once they choose a particular drink we asked them to give reason why they choose that drink.
- c) **Dribble to Healthy Eating** – Children were asked to dribble with a ball and go to a station when called out healthy / unhealthy. Each station had different types of food and this told us what knowledge they already had.
- d) **Penalty Shoot Out** – Children took turn to take penalties. Afterwards they were asked if they ate chicken and chips after school. Every time they scored they had to give a reason why they ate chicken and chips. The aim was to get at least 2-3 answers from each child as to why they eat chicken and chips.
- e) **Food Chart** - We gave children a Food Chart to record what they eat between 3:15 and 9pm in the night, for a week. This was to help us find out what they were eating after school, how much and the frequency.

- f) **Focus Group** - After collecting the weekly Food Chart and doing the above exercises we choose a group of 8-10 children and asked them why they “really” eat chicken and chips, why they eat high amounts of food after school, what they drink a lot at home, what their parents offer them, are their parents encouraging them eat all the time. This was to get in-depth information about the reasons for their eating habit.
- g) **Survey with Parents** - We did a short survey with parents whose children participated in the project to find out their attitudes to food and healthy eating (and any barriers to healthy eating), ask questions around their child’s food chart (recorded eating habits), why they buy chicken and chips, what their child consumes during the evening.

4. Results

- a) **Warm Up** – It was clear from this exercise that children of primary school age were very knowledgeable about what is healthy food and have good understanding of the benefits of it. Children knew fruits and vegetables were good for them, it gave them stamina and strength. It was part of 5-a-day and made them healthy. They mentioned apples, bananas, oranges, broccoli, carrots, etc. They said water was good for you and to have less sugar. They knew calcium was good for strong bones and it came from milk. They knew exercise was good for you and to do lots of it. We can assume they had learned all this in school. The only striking thing was that many of them mentioned energy drink as making them strong, which is a new trend with young people.
- b) **Drink Run** – It was clear from this exercise that vast majority of children knew water was good for them and it was their first choice of drink during this exercise. They knew water was healthy, it was good for them, kept you hydrated, there was no calories and had no sugar. Juice was second choice because it was healthy and nutritious for body. Fizzy drink was last choice and was not healthy. However, some chose it because they like drinking coke, they drink it every Tuesday or once a week.
- c) **Dribble to Healthy Eating** – Again when doing this exercise, it was clear children knew what was healthy and what was unhealthy. We placed different types of food i.e. potatoes, pasta, apples, chicken and chips, chocolate, doughnuts, soup, sandwiches, cabbage, etc on different stations and children went to a station when we shouted out healthy or unhealthy. The vast majority knew the food that was healthy and went to things like potatoes, pasta, etc. They knew what was unhealthy like chicken & chips, chocolate, etc.
- d) **Penalty Shoot Out** – Around 73% said they ate chicken and chips. They ate it as lunch/dinner and as iftar meal. Reason for eating; special occasions, as a treat, when achieving a goal and sometime no food at home. Children said they ate it because it was tasty, delicious, nice to eat and tastes good. Around 27% said they did not eat chicken and chips. At this stage many of the children realised the answers we were looking for from the research and maybe that’s why they said they did not eat it.
- e) **Food Chart** – The food chart revealed that around 20% of children when coming from school (3:30pm) they had a little snack i.e. a fruit or packet of crisp/chocolate bar and then had their main meal around 7:30-8:30pm. In between that time they did not eat anything else, apart from drinking water/juice and the occasional snacks.

The second group around 40% they ate a meal after coming from school (3:30pm) i.e. rice and curry, spaghetti, sandwich with snacks. They also ate snacks between 4:30pm till their meal time around 7:30-8:30pm. They ate chocolate/crisps/banana/chocolate bread, etc. At around 7:30-8:30pm they had their dinner which was like rice and curry, chicken & chips, Chicken and mash potatoes, etc. Both these groups had set timetable for snacks and meals.

The final group around 40% they had a final meal around 7:30-8:30pm, where children ate a variety of food such as pizza, chicken and chips, tortilla wraps, rice and curry, pasta, etc. However, their eating pattern was random after school and the timing and the food different each day. Some had full meals like rice and curry or tuna with salad around 3:30-4:30pm. They then had lots of different things in between like samosas, crisps, toast, banana, cookies, apple pies, etc.

The conclusion we derived from the food chart is that 20% of children have controlled food intake and have a variety of food at meal times. They are not overeating and they have a small snack after school and then their main meal. The next 40% they have a controlled food intake but maybe overeating as they are having a meal straight after school and then one later in the night. They are also having snacks as well although there is a routine. The final 40% their eating is less controlled and random and again maybe overeating as the snacks are adding up the calories and the sugar intake. They are sometime eating 2 meals plus lots of snacks.

- f) **Focus Group** – The focus group revealed children eat chicken and chips because it tasted good, they like chicken and chips, they have grown up eating it, their family eats it, their brothers and sisters eat it as well. They said parents buy it for them when they are hungry at lunch time or after school and as dinner. Sometime parents buy it because there's nothing to eat at lunch time or dinner time. For some children it's a treat for being good, or if they do well in school, etc. Sometime it's a special treat at the weekend. The children were too young to go and buy chicken and chips on their own.

Children said they are usually hungry after school and so eat whatever is given to them. They also like to snack on crisps and chocolates. Children said they drank a mix of juices and fizzy drinks at home. Coke and other fizzy drinks were a treat.

Majority of children said their parents do ask "What do you want to eat after school?" Their parents do make sure they finish their main meals and do ask in between if they are hungry. Some parents are relaxed about what their children eat while others are strict and children have to finish their meal.

- g) **Survey with Parents** – The survey revealed 40% of parents gave their children food straight after school. This was 5 days a week to 2-3 times a week and included drinks and biscuits. The rest 60% did not give any food.

Around 25% said they gave food on the way home from school and it was chicken and chips, 2-3 days and 1 day a week. Their reason for giving it was it was filling and children liked it/wanted it.

When asked if they gave food after going home from school 100% said yes. They gave food like sandwiches, crisp, fruit, toast, biscuit, curry & rice, spaghetti, pasta, etc. It was 2-3 days a week and for some it was 5 days a week.

For 75% this was not their main meal and the reason for giving it was because it was convenient, it kept hunger away until main meal, children liked it / wanted it and they ate it as part of their normal routine. Around 25% said it was their main meal and they gave snacks later on like toast, packet of crisp, fruit or chocolate bar.

Around 75% gave a main meal around 7pm-8pm and it was 5 days a week. The food included sandwich, toast, rice and curry, noodles, pizza, cooked meals (pasta, spaghetti, etc) and fried meals like chicken nuggets.

To summarise 40% of parents gave food when picking up their children and further 25% gave food when going home from school. The vast majority (75%) gave food at home after school to keep hunger away until main meal and only 25% gave food as main meal. Again

the vast majority (75%) are giving food around 7-8pm as main meal and only 25% giving as snacks.

Majority of parents attitude to food was that it was important to them, they understood the need for moderation and to provide a balanced diet. They encouraged their children to eat healthy. They did not have a set meal and encouraged eating different things. Children were encouraged to finish their meal depending on how they were feeling and what they ate during the day. Around 10% said they made sure their children finished their meal, they offered them food even if they had not requested it and there is a possibility they are offering too much food as well. Majority said they did not offer snacks in between meals and they do not think they are offering too much food either.

A more general discussion around food, many said it was very difficult to provide a balanced diet for many reasons. Children are hungry when they come from school and there are very few choices for parents to buy food apart from snacks (crisp and chocolates) and chicken and chips. Despite their best effort to avoid chicken and chips but it is convenient, filling, cheap and children wanted it. There are very few healthy food outlets and it is very expensive to buy a sandwich or go in a cafe to order wholesome food like jacket potato, etc. Chicken and chips is so much cheaper and the smell and other children eating it makes it difficult for children to have anything else.

Again their eating habit at home and the food chart, parents pointed out that, children were hungry so when they go home they have something to eat like sandwich and then some snacks and their main meal. It's difficult to stop children eating as there is food and they are used to eating it.

5. Findings

a) Baseline Knowledge about Healthy Eating – We are confident in our finding that primary school children are well knowledgeable, educated and have the understanding of what food and drink is healthy for them and what is bad for them. They know fruit and vegetables good for them and chicken and chips is not healthy for them. They are aware water is good for them and it has no calories and juices are good for them. They know fizzy drinks are bad for them and it has lots of sugar in it. The question is how many of them follow their understanding when buying food when out shopping. Do they opt for a sandwich or McDonalds or do they order water/juice with their meal instead of coke. This is an area where research needs to be done and some kind of education needs to follow where children should be encouraged to implement what they learn. If children are encouraged to follow what they learn then they can influence their parents.

b) Eating Habit After School – The food chart and the parents survey were very similar. The food chart revealed around 20% of children had small snacks after school and a main meal around 7-8pm. The rest 80% had snacks, a mini meal and later a main meal. Those who had a main meal around 4:30pm had snacks upto bedtime.

From speaking to the parents we found that around 40% of parents gave food straight after school and another 25% on the way home. However the vast majority 75% gave food at home as snacks but included a meal sometime to keep the hunger away until the main meal at 7-8pm. The other 25% gave food as main meal and later snacks before bedtime. We feel the snacks and mini meals before the main meal is a contributing factor to increase in obesity in primary school children. Parents are also creating the lifetime habit which children will later find difficult to break out of.

c) Type of Food and Amount Children Eat – The food children eat at meal times are healthy and wholesome and not much junk or fried food. Occasionally there is chicken and chips on the menu but on the whole children are eating cooked food such as spaghetti, pasta, chicken and mash potato, rick and curry, tuna salad, etc. However, the concern is the

snacks they are consuming which includes crisps, biscuits, chocolate, chicken and chips, pizza, etc. They are also eating fruits and sandwiches as healthy option as well. We could not measure the amount children were eating and generally because it was a healthy eating research project parents and children did not want to be seen as unhealthy or overeating. However, we feel the snacks and sometime a small meal is contributing to the increase in obesity of children in the borough.

- d) **Reasons for Eating Chicken and Chips** – From children's point of view it tasted good, and parents gave it as lunch or dinner and as treats. From parents point of view children wanted it/liked it, it was convenient, cheap, filling, and as a family they ate it as well when they did not cook. It was difficult to find alternatives and there were very few other food outlets and alternative food was expensive especially for families who wanted a quick meal.
- e) **Parents Attitudes to Food** – Generally well educated and placed importance to it. They wanted to give a balanced diet to their children. Around 10% felt they maybe encouraging overeating in their children and they make sure their children finish their meal. The other 90% said they were more relaxed but made sure their children did eat but did not encourage overeating. They said children were hungry after school and it was task to find them healthy food to keep their hunger at bay until meal time. This was a challenge for them.

6. Recommendations

- a) **Continue Healthy Eating Education** - To continue the level of healthy eating education in schools and of parents as both groups are very knowledgeable about healthy eating and food. However, there needs to be more focus on whether children are implementing their learning when making decisions about food when they are out and about i.e. when they go shopping do they end up in McDonalds or a healthy cafe/food outlet. Do they order juice or order Coke? We feel the education needs to focus on the implementation and encourage children to eat healthy and they will influence their parents. If they refuse to eat chicken and chips then parents will provide alternatives.
- b) **Educate Parents on Overeating/Snacks** - To educate parents on the danger of children snacking, eating a mini meal before the main meal and generally eating too much. We feel many parents not aware of the danger and feel their children are hungry give them a crisp or some biscuits without realising the calories and sugar in them. Some are giving sandwiches or curry & rice and later a full meal again. We feel this habit they are getting their children into will be an issue as they get older and can be a factor to increase in obesity amongst school children in Tower Hamlets. Like educating the children, parents too need to be educated on overeating.
- c) **Research on Exercise and Active Living** – This research did not focus on how much exercise children were doing after school. This is a fundamental question because children can be hungry and need to eat. But are they moving around, playing sport, going to the park, riding a bike, etc after school to burn the calories they intake. There needs to be a separate research in how much exercise children are doing after school. Our concern will be apart from our session the majority of children in Tower Hamlets are not active after school which is a contributing factor to childhood obesity in the borough.
- d) **More Healthy Food Outlets in the Borough** – We would recommend that it was made difficult to attain planning permission to open new fast food outlets, especially chicken and chips shops, especially around primary and secondary schools. We would also recommend that tax relief and other incentives are given to cafes and shops selling healthy food at lower price for children and families. Businesses participate in the scheme and get incentives to do so and parents know these outlets will sell quality healthy food they can afford instead of chicken and chips. Also, start a scheme where existing Chicken shops

participate and introduce healthy food like sandwiches, wraps, deli food, more juices, etc and they are given incentives to buy equipments and are able to sell it at lower price. They should be given incentive to participate in the scheme.

- e) **After School Food Pack** – We would recommend the introduction of after school including fruits, snacks and light healthy food so children are not given unhealthy snacks on the way home or when they go home. This should keep their hunger away until their meal time. This may not be feasible in reality but a suggestion to avoid parents entrenching into their children's life bad habits.

7. Conclusion

We feel both children and parents are well educated in healthy eating but the task at hand is implementing it after school and in their daily life. Alternative food to chicken and chips is very expensive especially for a family with 3-4 children. The local authority needs to look at how many planning permission it grants to fast food outlets and needs to encourage cafes and other food outlets to thrive by giving tax and other incentives. The alternative food outlets need to lower their prices and this can only be done through local authority incentives. We also feel schools can support the cause by providing after school food package so children do not go hungry and snack on unhealthy crisps/biscuits and chocolates. Finally, we feel there needs to more focus on exercise and active living because we feel many children go home after school and are not doing enough exercise.