



Healthwatch Balanced Eating Survey

March 2017

1. Introduction

Between July and November 2016, Healthwatch Bexley surveyed 272 children in Key Stage 2, Year 3-6, about their eating habits, exercise levels and their perception of healthy eating.

Obesity in Bexley is identified as a key public health concern and a priority of the Health and Wellbeing board. In Bexley, the levels of overweight and obesity, both for children and adults, are significantly higher than national and regional levels, with 66.1% of the adult population in Bexley overweight or obese compared to 63.8% nationally and 57.3% regionally (Bexley JSNA, 2014). For children in Reception Year and Year 6, the statistics demonstrate that 26.8% of children in Reception are overweight or obese compared to 22.2% nationally and for Year 6 this increases to 39.7% in Bexley compared with 33.3% for England average. Whilst there has been a downward trend in obesity levels for children in Reception and Year 6 nationally over recent years, the levels in Bexley has continued to rise (Bexley JSNA, 2014).

Facilitating access to healthy foods, green spaces and leisure activities is key to promoting healthy lifestyle choices. Maintaining a balanced diet coupled with plenty of physical activity is crucial to maintain a healthy weight and tackle obesity. Being overweight and obese can put children at an increased risk of health problems, including high cholesterol, high blood pressure, pre-diabetes, bone and joint problems and breathing difficulties. It can affect a child's well-being and lead to low self-esteem and absence from school (GethealthyLondon, 2017).

The Great Weight Debate is a borough wide initiative, which aim to shine a light on and tackle the obesity crisis in Bexley, by bringing together commissioners, residents, community groups, General Practices (GPs) and food businesses in the borough. The information obtained through this survey may be used to inform the current obesity strategy in Bexley.

2. Methods

The survey was split into three parts:

- Balanced eating and physical activity questionnaire (12 questions)
- School dinner/lunch box sheets
- Hunger and energy levels questionnaire

The balanced eating and physical activity questionnaire centred on types of food and the frequency in which these are consumed. This included fruit and vegetable consumption, what type of snacks they eat and how often they eat fast food. The questionnaire also asked how children travel to school and how much physical activity they take part in every day. The survey was administered during the lesson and each question was explained before proceeding to the next.

The second task asked the children to draw what their regular lunch looks like and what a healthy lunch may look like, if at all different. Two sheets were distributed depending on if the children had a packed lunch or school dinner that day.

The children also filled in a questionnaire to monitor their hunger levels and energy levels at three points during the day: upon arrival, after lunch and before home time. This part of the survey was suggested by a teacher, who felt that some children frequently came in to school reaching for the fruit bowl. It was also noted that some children were lacking in energy in the afternoon period.

The whole of Key stage 2 (n=226) took part from one primary school in addition to 49 children in Year 5 from another primary school in Bexley, bringing the total number of respondents to 272.

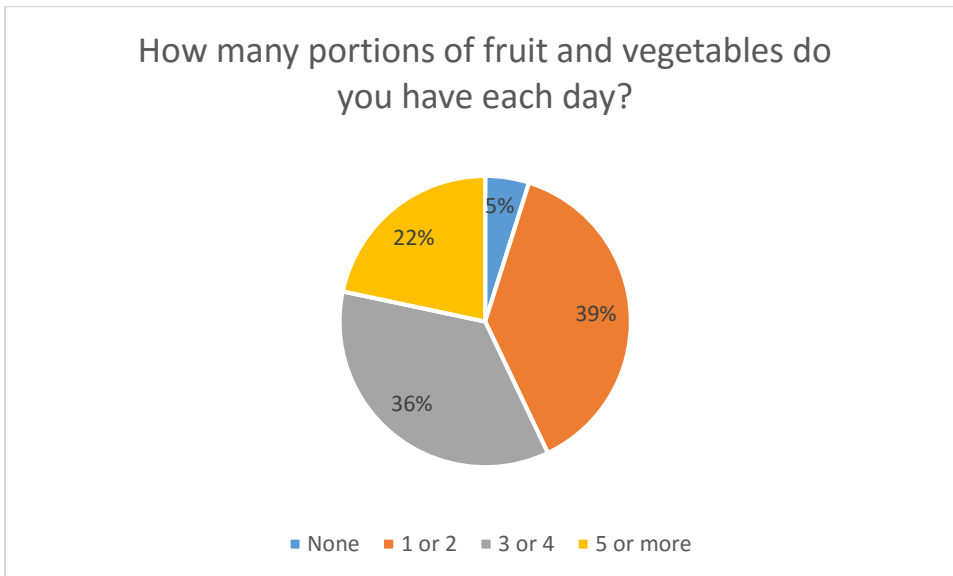
3. Summary of Key Findings

- Less than a quarter of children eat 5 or more fruit and vegetables each day
- Less than half of children are physically active more than 60 minutes per day
- 58% of children walk to school as their most common form of travel
- Almost half of the children, 46%, have sugary cereals for breakfast
- A little more than one third of children, 39%, eat treats such as chocolate, crisps, biscuits, cereal bars or ice cream every day.
- One in two children have a mobile phone, this increases to 4 out of 5 children for Year 6.
- Over half of children arrive at school feeling peckish
- 32 children arrive at school feeling hungry and this equals a whole primary school class
- 8 out of 10 children report having moderate to high energy levels upon arrival at school

4. Results of the survey

Q1. How many portions of fruit and vegetables do you have each day?

National guidelines states that children should consume at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Fruit and vegetables are a good source of vitamins and minerals and contribute to a healthy and balanced diet (National Health Service, NHS, 2016). The survey demonstrates that over three quarters of the children do not achieve recommended guidelines.



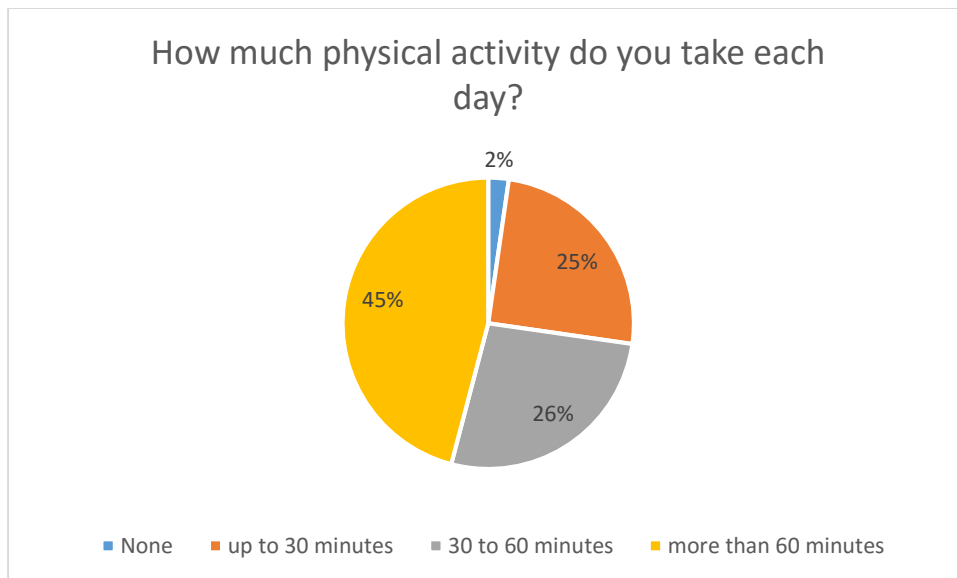
Eating fruit and vegetables every day helps children and teenagers grow and develop, boosts their vitality and can reduce the risk of many chronic diseases - such as heart disease, high blood pressure, some forms of cancer and risk of becoming overweight or obese.

Q2. How much physical activity do you take each day?

Current guidelines (NHS Choices) states that those aged 5-18 years old should take “at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day” that should also range from “[moderate activity](#),” to “[vigorous activity](#),”.



The survey demonstrate that 45 % of children do more than 60 minutes of exercise each day.



Activity is needed to strengthen bones and muscles, for good educational attainment, to reduce sickness absence and can be a factor in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour (Government, 2017). Being active is central to mental health and feelings of general wellbeing as activity increases feelings of wellbeing, mental alertness and energy.

The benefits of being active for at least 60 minutes a day include:

- Improving cardiovascular health
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Improving bone health
- Improving self-confidence
- Developing new social skills

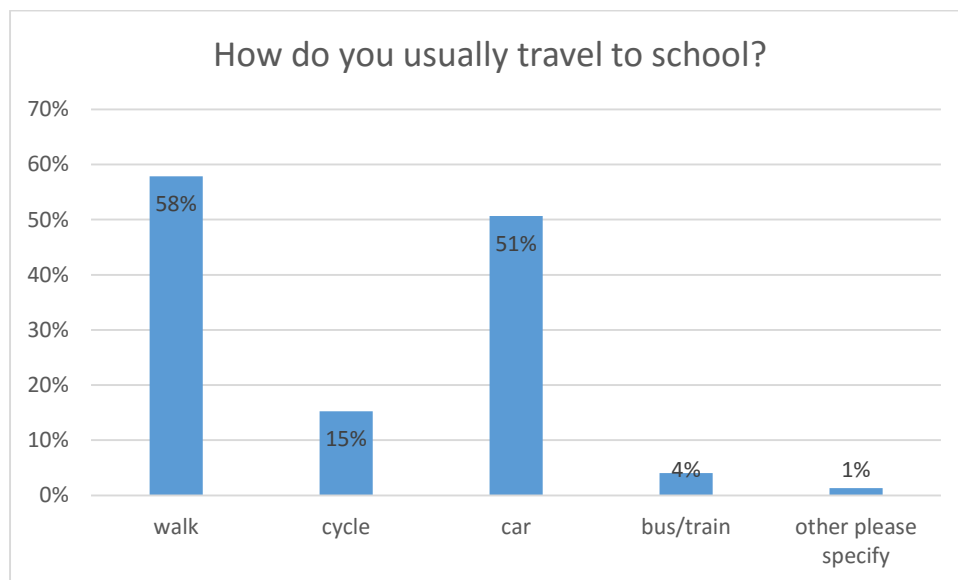
Physical activity has also been associated with psychological benefits in young people by improving their control over symptoms of anxiety and depression. Similarly, participation in physical activity can assist in the social development of young people by providing opportunities for self-expression, building self-confidence, social interaction and integration. It has also been suggested that physically active young people more readily adopt other healthy behaviours (e.g. avoidance of tobacco, alcohol and drug use) and demonstrate higher academic performance at school (WHO, 2017).

Q3. How do you usually travel to school?

The survey demonstrates that 58% of children walk to school, this is higher than the latest national average of 47% (Haringeygovuk, 2017) and in recent years there has been a decline nationally in children walking to school.

The World Health Organisation states that “Active travel to school, such as walking and cycling, has been identified as an important source of physical activity in children”. Walking to and from school helps children achieve the recommended government target of 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Furthermore, physically active children are more alert, ready to learn, do better in tests and may achieve better grades than children who are driven to school (Livingstreetsorguk, 2017).

The survey demonstrates that walking is the most common way of travelling to school, followed by car travel.



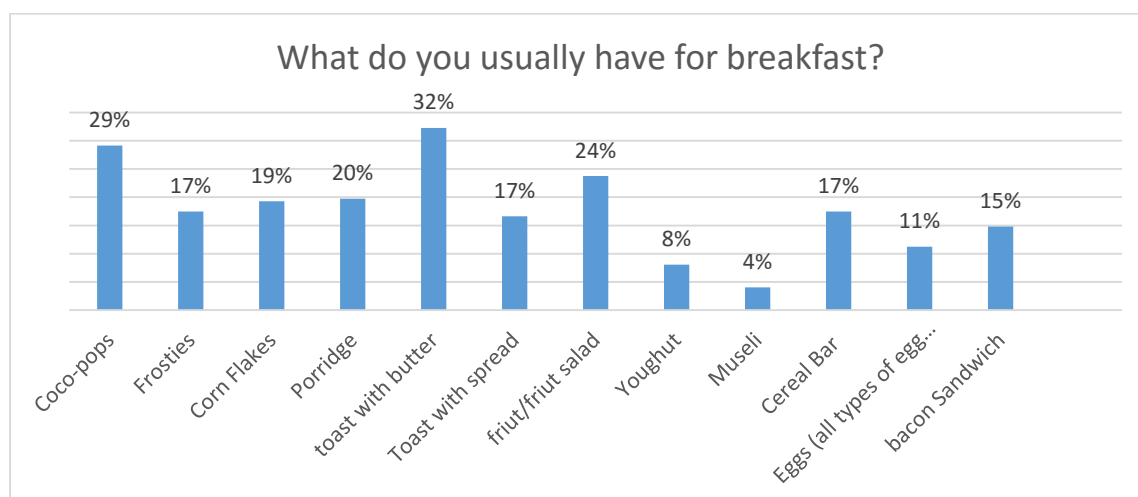
Q4. What do you usually have for breakfast?

Breakfast is generally considered one of the most important meals of the day. This is even more significant for children as they are growing and learning, being active and developing. Change4Life recommends opting for low sugar and salt, high fibre, breakfast cereals, as these will contribute to a healthy diet and energy levels



The survey demonstrates that Toast with butter, Coco-pops and Fruit/fruit salad, are the most popular breakfast options. Approximately 35% of children also stated they eat Weetabix, Indian breakfast, pancakes and Special K for breakfast, in addition to the list provided.

None of the children stated that they skipped breakfast, skipping breakfast can increase the risk of being unfit and inactive. Children are also more likely to be obese as they may snack during the day and late at night



Q5. How often do you add salt to your food?

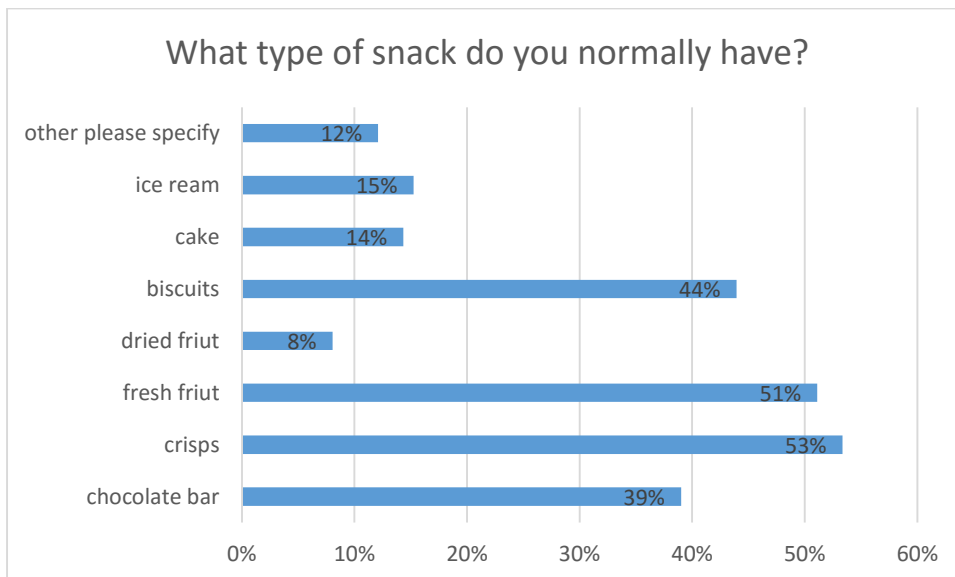
The ‘Eatwell guidelines’ state that “eating too much salt can raise your blood pressure, which increases your risk of developing heart disease or stroke” (Public Health England, 2016). The survey demonstrate that 30% never add salt to their food and 66% of children sometimes do.

Q6/Q11. What type of snack do you normally have? How often do you eat treats such as sweets, chocolate, crisps, cakes, ice creams or cereal bars?

Eating a healthy snack in between meal times is important to keep energy levels, brain functioning, concentration up, also to keep your blood sugar levels steady. Crisps, biscuits, chocolate and cereal bars are often high in saturated fats, salt and sugar. Change4life (2016) recommends choosing healthier alternatives, such as baked crisps, plain nuts and unsalted rice cakes aswell as seeds, hummus and eggs, whilst increasing the intake of fruit and vegetables.



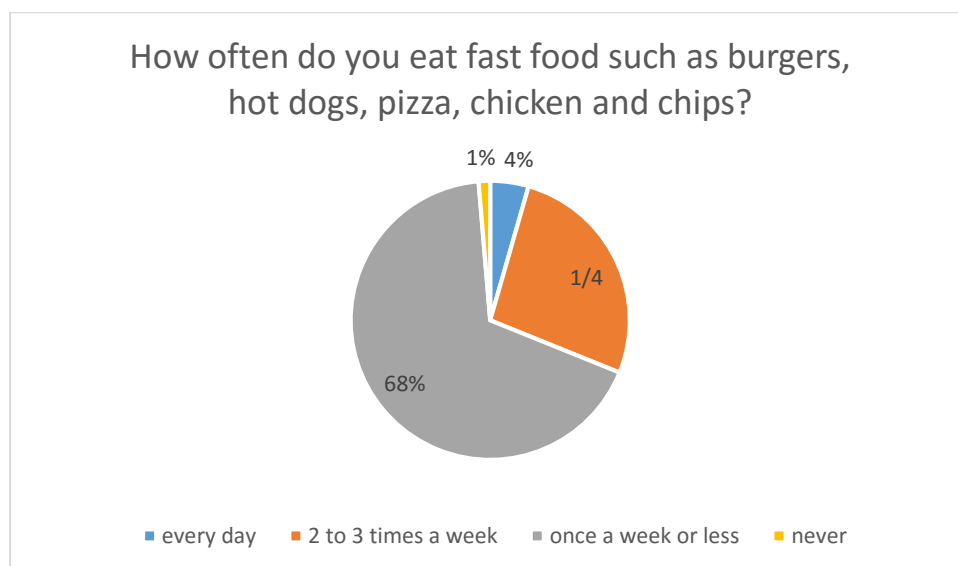
The survey demonstrate that the most popular snack is crisps followed by fresh fruit, biscuits and chocolate bars.



Eating too much sugar, saturated fats and salt may contribute to weight gain and may lead to obesity, which is linked to a range of serious health complications including Type 2 diabetes. Public Health England recommends that children aged 7-10 should not consume more than 24g of added sugars per day, which equals 6 sugar cubes. For example, one blueberry muffin may contain as many as 5 sugar cubes.

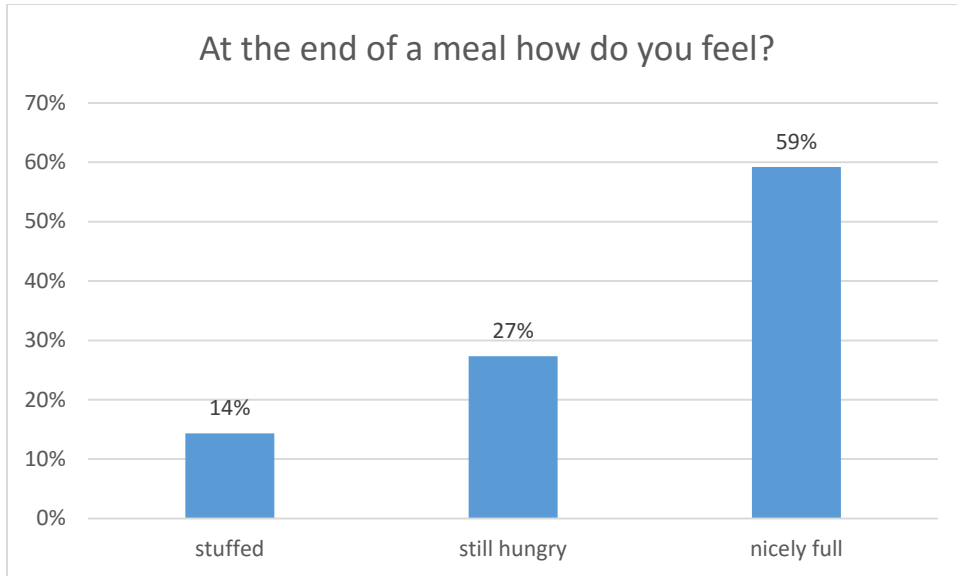
Q7. How often do you eat fast food such as burgers, hot dogs, pizza, chicken and chips?

Fast food are usually high in salt, saturated fats and often sugar too, which may have an adverse effect on health. Saturated fat and salt are linked with heart disease, raised blood pressure and weight gain. The Eatwell guide recommends that people limit the intake of these foods as an occasional treat (PHE, 2016). The survey demonstrate that the majority of children eat fast food once a week or less, with 1 in 4 children eating fast food two to three times per week.



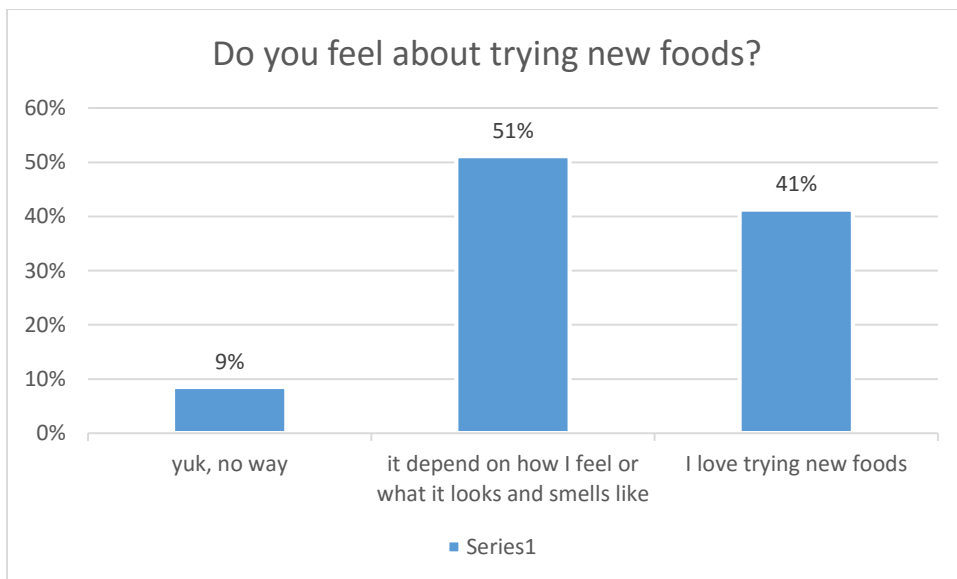
Q8. At the end of a meal how do you feel?

Nearly a third of children 27% stated they were still hungry after a meal. Satiety is the feeling of fullness after eating that suppresses the urge to eat for a period of time after a meal. Feelings of fullness can play an important role in controlling how much we eat. If we feel really full or ‘satiated’ after a meal then we are likely to go much longer before we feel hungry and may eat less at the next meal. But, if we do not feel very full then we are likely to get hungry again more quickly and may be tempted to snack or eat more at the next meal. Understanding feelings of fullness can help to control how much we eat (Nutritionorguk, 2017). Foods high in protein and fibre will promote a longer feeling of fullness and satisfaction for longer.



Q9. How do you feel about trying new foods?

The majority of children said they are happy to try new foods but that moods, smell and what the food looked like influenced their decision. This suggests that parent should actively try and introduce new food items to their children to encourage a balanced and varied diet.

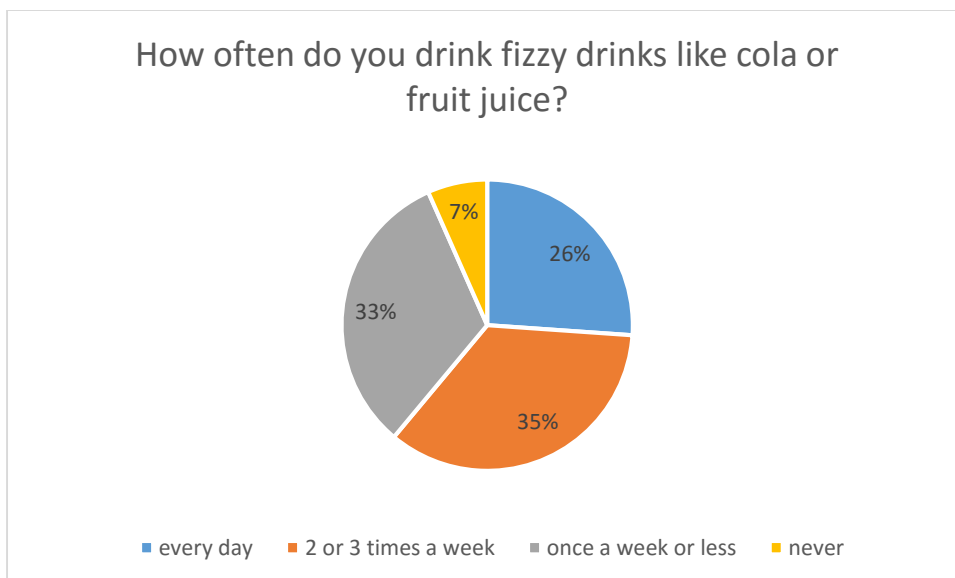


Q10. How often do you drink fizzy drinks like cola or fruit juice?

Fizzy drinks, fruit juices and smoothies are one of the main contributors to excess sugary consumption in children. One 500ml bottle of cola can contain up to 10.5 sugar cubes which is 0.5 over the sugar limit daily allowance.



The Eatwell guide recommends limiting the intake of these to 150ml per day and opting for water instead, the recommended water intake being 6-8 glasses per day to avoid dehydration (PHE, 2016). The survey demonstrate that 26% of children consume fizzy drinks or fruit juice every day, whilst 33% consume it less than once per week. Sugary drinks should also be avoided as they have little nutritional value and the sugar can also erode the teeth.

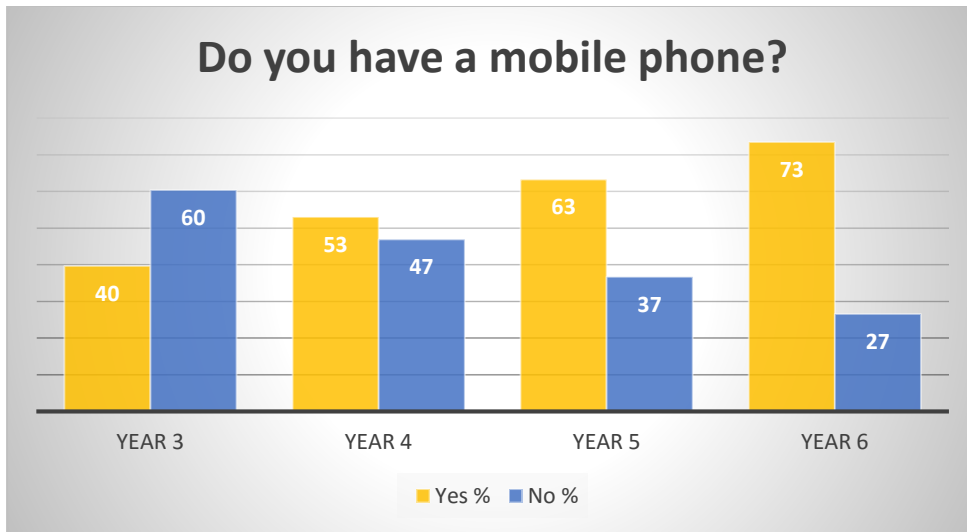


Q12. How many glasses of water do you drink each day?

Over half of children stated they drank between 6-8 glasses of water per day which is the recommended daily allowance. Water is essential to keep the body hydrated as every cell in the body needs water to function properly, remove waste products, control body temperature and to maintain a healthy body (Nutritionorg.uk, 2017).

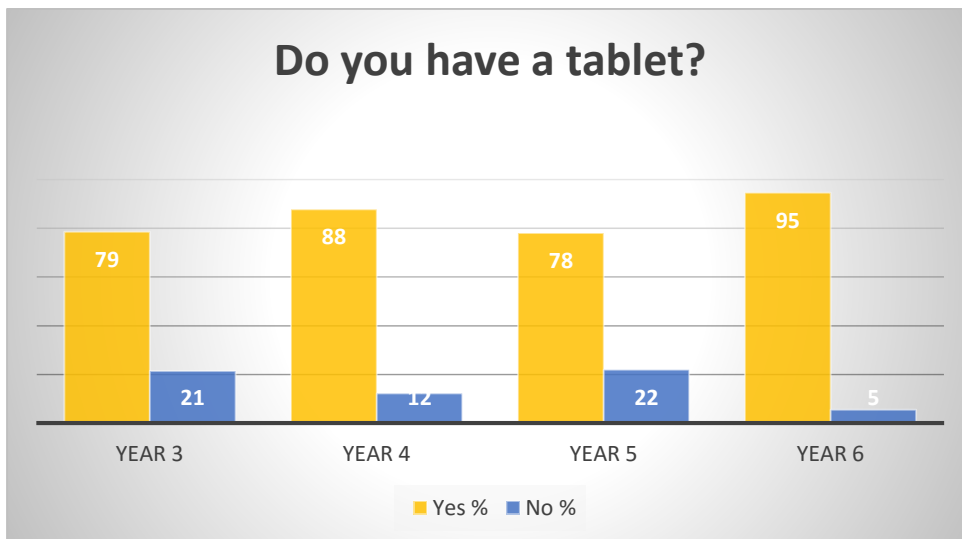
Q13a. Do you have a mobile phone?

Our survey demonstrate that one in two children in Key Stage 2 have a mobile phone. This varies per year group and the split is illustrated in the Graph.



Q13b. Do you have a tablet?

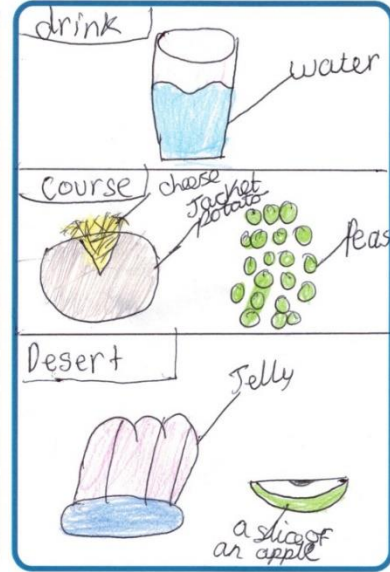
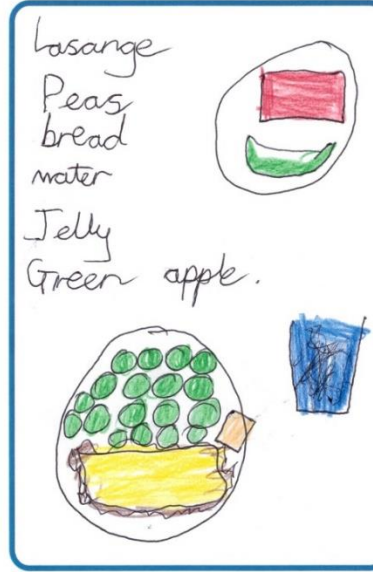
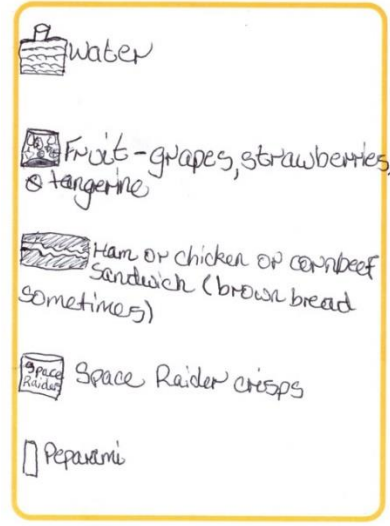
Our survey demonstrates that 83% of the children in Key Stage 2 have a Tablet (Ipad etc) that is 5 out of 6 children.



It is thought that overuse of technology can lead to addiction, sleep problems and lack of involvement in family life, which are all detrimental to well-being. Furthermore, it is important for parents/guardians to set clear boundaries for children to aid them with the knowledge to keep them safe from issues such as cyber-bullying, the sending/receiving of inappropriate information, social networking with adults/young people who may exploit them and also the danger of giving away personal information (Youngmindsorguk, 2017).

School dinner/lunch box sheets

The children were asked to draw or list what they usually have in their lunch box or what they had for school dinner on that day. They were subsequently asked to produce a list or drawing of what a balanced lunch might look like, bearing in mind it may be the same as their regular lunch. Below are some examples of the drawings.



Following analysis of the drawings, we found that fruit was mentioned 109 times in the children's regular lunchboxes and 36 times in regular school lunches. Interestingly, it was mentioned 210 times in what they thought a healthy lunch should look like, almost 2 times more often, yet, 94 times in their idea of a healthy school lunch, 3 times more often. This demonstrates that children have a good understanding that fruit should be incorporated in their lunch. The most popular fruits were apples, grapes, bananas and oranges.

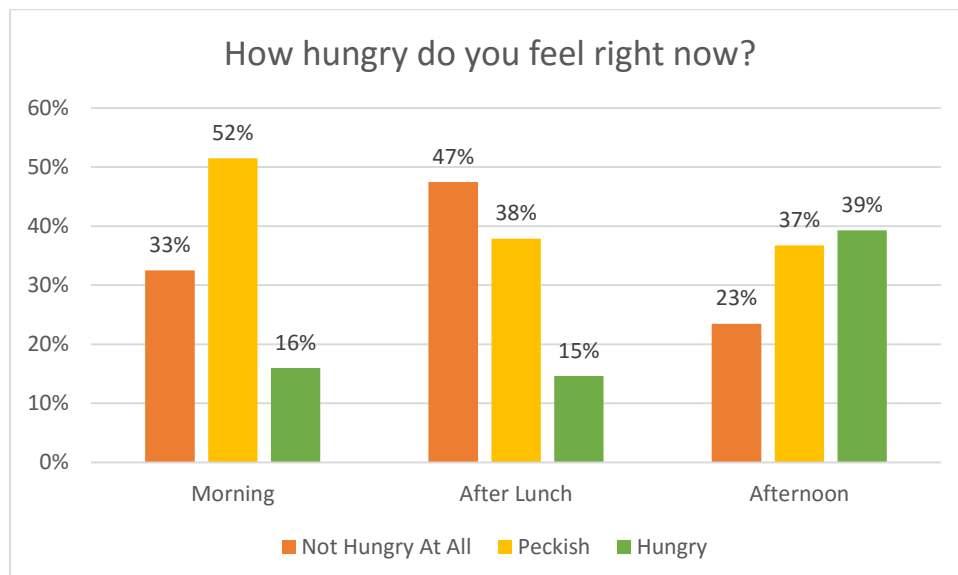
Vegetables were mentioned 37 times in children’s regular lunch boxes and 91 times in their idea of a healthy lunch box, almost 3 times more often. Children mentioned vegetables 77 times in their regular school lunches and 141 times in their idea of a healthy school lunch, almost 2 times more often. Most popular being carrots, cucumber, peas and sweetcorn.

This demonstrates that children have an awareness that fruit and vegetables are an important part of their diet.

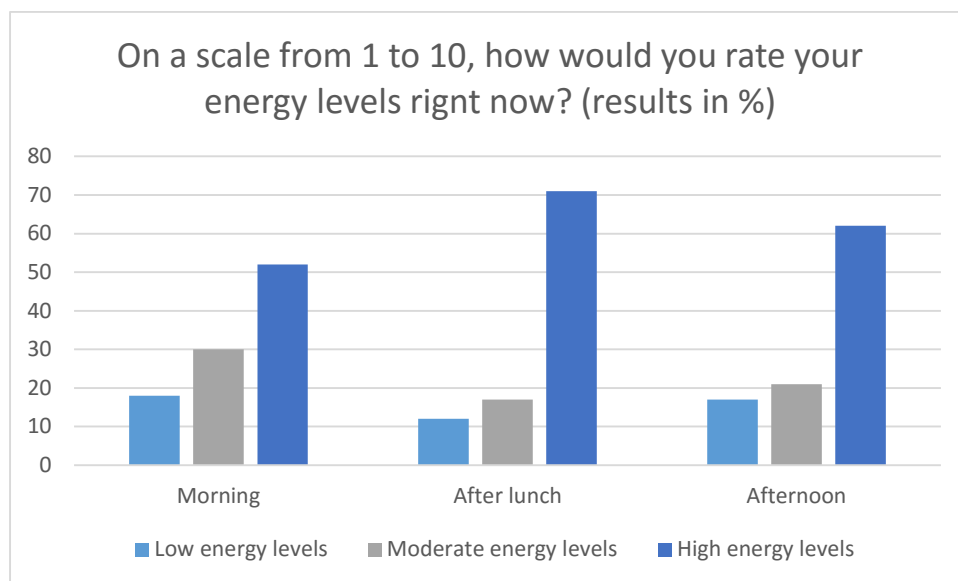
Results of Hunger and Energy levels questionnaire

Hunger is a barrier to learning as it affects concentration, energy levels, attentiveness and emotional wellbeing. Research demonstrate that children who eat a healthy breakfast achieve higher academic results than children who do not (Littlecott et al, 2015). The study demonstrated that children who ate breakfast were twice as likely to do well in tests, whereas the consumption of unhealthy breakfast items including sweets and crisps do not have any positive effect on achievements.

The survey demonstrate that more than half of the children, 52%, arrive at school feeling peckish, with just under half, 47%, feeling peckish following lunch. However, 32 children amongst Key Stage 2 reported feeling hungry on arrival at school and this equates to one whole primary school class feeling hungry at the start of their school day. One child wrote “Very hungry” at the side of the questionnaire for the Afternoon rating.



The results of the energy levels rating demonstrate that 8 out of 10 children have moderate to high energy levels when they arrive at school in the morning and this increases slightly following lunch to almost 9 in 10. The survey demonstrated a clear link between low energy level and hunger levels amongst the children.



CONCLUSION:

Interestingly, it seems clear that the children have an understanding of what constitutes a healthy lunch and the 5 a day message. The importance of fruit and vegetables was highlighted when children were asked what they thought constitutes a balanced lunch, showing the knowledge is being inputted yet only a fifth of children are eating the recommended daily allowance. Healthy options are essential for energy, growth and to keep illness at bay.

However, less than half of the children meet the recommended guidelines of 60 minutes of physical activity per day. This, coupled with the fact that 1-4 children are eating fast food 2-3 times a week; just under half eating sugary cereals; nearly a third consuming fizzy drinks/fruit juices every day and over a third eat treats every day, is likely to be a contributor to an increase in overweight and obesity.

Some of the food choices available to the children may be considered detrimental to healthy growth, development and well-being. As children copy behaviour, role models within the school and home setting are beneficial for a child to make a more conscious decision to follow a healthy lifestyle.

Over half of children walk to school every day so the importance of this statistic could be emphasised.

Bexley seems to have a growing problem with obesity which needs to be tackled with nutritional education and the promotion of physical activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS for schools:

1. Increase opportunity for physical activity during the school day
2. Continue to promote active travel to school
3. Continue to deliver balanced eating messages and the link to concentration at school

RECOMMENDATIONS for Local Authority and the wider Bexley community:

1. The issues identified in this report are likely to be similar and heightened amongst secondary school children, who travel independently to and from school to a greater extent and thus, is more in control of their food choices. Healthwatch Bexley recommends that the Local authority, in partnership with the Great weight debate, consider commissioning a study to explore this.

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