Young children’s food in Liverpool day care settings: reducing inequalities in pre-school nutrition policy and practice

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To explore nutrition in local day care settings in order to develop a package of interventions that will promote healthy eating in Liverpool across deprived communities.

DESIGN: Qualitative: participant observation, direct observation, interviews.

SETTING: Preschool nurseries.

PARTICIPANTS: Nursery managers, cooks, staff, parents, children.

RESULTS: Nurseries are genuinely interested in implementing healthy eating policies and need further support to achieve this. Private nurseries have minimal access to information and guidelines compared to those based in Sure Start children’s centres. Nurseries have an important role in supporting parents in their children’s and their own healthy eating. Communication between different levels of government and departments needs strengthening.

AIM

• To explore nutrition in Liverpool pre-school day care settings in order to develop a package of interventions which will promote healthy eating in across deprived communities.

• Explore children's experiences of eating in pre-school childcare settings.

• Explore facilitators that enable the provision of healthy food and potential barriers.

• Identify package of interventions to promote healthy eating in pre-school settings in deprived communities.

OBJECTIVES

• Identify the types of foods consumed in local nurseries.

• Explore children's experiences of eating in pre-school childcare settings.

• Explore facilitators that enable the provision of healthy food and potential barriers.

• Identify package of interventions to promote healthy eating in pre-school settings in deprived communities.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

6 nurseries recruited: 4 private and 2 children’s centres.

3 in more affluent areas.

3 in more deprived areas.

DESIGN

Qualitative: Participant and Direct Observations.

Semi-Structured Interviews.

RESEARCH PROCESS

2 to 4 hrs a day over 5 working days in each nursery.

Participant observation with children attending nursery to examine nursery environment.

Direct observation of meal times - breakfast, lunch, tea and snack times.

Observation of a food related learning activity with a small group of children aged 4 – 5 years.

Interviews with Nursery managers (n = 8), cooks (n = 6), staff (n = 12), parents (n = 12).

ANALYSIS

Thematic approach using Nvivo 8 software.

FINDINGS 1

HEALTHY EATING KNOWLEDGE

Nutrition knowledge was limited. The ability to explain the term ‘healthy eating’ was mixed, with many giving vague answers, such as ‘having your five a day’ or ‘a balanced diet’.

NURSERY HEALTHY EATING POLICIES

Only one private nursery had developed a healthy eating policy which was linked into their overall nursery policy and one of the children’s centre nurseries was in the process of developing their policy. The other nurseries used their menu planning as the way to maintain a focus on healthy eating.

ACCESS TO HEALTHY EATING INFORMATION

Compared to children’s centres, private sector nurseries felt relatively isolated. In particular they appear to lack access to information and policy guidelines concerning healthy eating for young children.

COOKS AND COOKING PRACTICES

Most cooks were experienced with some having had formal training; however none had specific training in healthy eating for children under-five.

There is a reliance on bottled and packet sauces and gravy mixes (all high in salt content). Tinned tuna is used as a main fish source with a misunderstanding that tinned tuna is rich in Omega 3.

Snacks are more likely to be (unhealthy) processed foods such as sausage rolls, dips etc. Similarly some puddings are ready made or from packets, e.g. ice cream and whipped cream.

Budget and food purchasing are related to the quality of the ingredients used. For example, the nursery in the affluent area of Liverpool had the financial capacity to provide good quality food.

Higher quality of food seems to be related to more time available to purchase food and greater knowledge of what to buy and where.

OFSTED SNACKS STRATEGY

OFSTED currently recommends that snack food should be available to children at anytime of the day (as a means of encouraging independence). Nursery Managers were concerned about its effect:

“No we don’t and like you said I think obviously there is a bit of emphasis coming through about giving them the choice and you know this freedom of whatever, but how on earth do you monitor what they are eating, how do you interact, how do they interact with each other. If someone is playing in a corner and while someone is having their toast or what have you, how is that a, you know a learning experience, it’s just like just pulling into a petrol station” NF Manager.

TRAINING

Nursery managers, especially in the private sector, feel there are few opportunities for cooks and early years’ practitioners, to attend relevant training courses (apart from the compulsory food handling and hygiene courses).

RELEVANCE TO LIVERPOOL PCT AND LIVERPOOL RESIDENTS

A significant number of Liverpool children attend nurseries for a substantial proportion of the week. Therefore they can receive the bulk of their food and nutrition from the nursery. With children developing patterns of healthy eating from an early age, it is important that Liverpool nurseries provide nutritious food and promote positive attitudes to good nutrition.

This research also supports and contributes to Liverpool PCT’s Taste for Health Strategy: Maternal, Children and Young People and provides evidence to support Liverpool PCT’s initiatives to tackle childhood obesity.

CONCLUSIONS

A statutory framework is urgently required to provide supportive policy and practical guidance.

Funding is required for health eating related training:

Not only menu planning and cooking skills for cooks but for classroom staff – encouraging healthy eating, learning about healthy eating, learning through food.

Mechanisms to encourage improved information and communication especially for private nurseries.

Nurseries have a key role in supporting parents.

FINDINGS 2

CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

In all the nurseries the children sat together to have their meals and in some nurseries table cloths are used.

The size and type of cutlery and crockery used appears to help the children to eat. One nursery used child sized brightly coloured cutlery and crockery sets which appeared to encourage good eating practices.

One nursery demonstrated that making meal times fun can help children to eat their food, e.g. the staff wearing different hats each day (e.g. fireman, policeman).

LEARNING AND FOOD

Observation of classroom based early years practitioners suggests a greater emphasis could be placed on the role of food, eating and meal times within the context of wider early years learning and social skill development.

PARENT NURSERY RELATIONSHIP

The level and depth of communication between the nursery and parents is important regarding what the child has eaten both at the nursery and at home.

CONTEXT OF INEQUALITIES IN HEALTHY EATING PROVISION

Being located in a deprived area did NOT appear to influence healthy food provision.

Negative factors were:

• an uninvolved management

• the manager’s and cook’s relative lack of knowledge and experience of healthy eating.

• an open plan layout of the nursery accommodation

Positive factors outweighing being located in a deprived area were the enthusiasm and knowledge of the manager and cook.

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