



Family Research Dynamics



Final Summary Schools Council "IAC Project" Autumn Term 2008

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- To discuss the IAC project, nine schools were visited in the autumn term 2008. There were five secondary schools in: Barnsley, Bradford, Darlington, Cheadle Hulme and Lyme Regis. Four primary schools were also visited in: Higham Ferrers, Liverpool, Southend-on-Sea and Sowerby Bridge.
- The purpose of the discussions in the autumn term were to understand:
 - Their current knowledge of food topic areas, specifically: healthy eating; school food standards and school meals; vegetarianism; eating and mental health; food allergies; food safety; GM Foods; food prices; sustainability and environmental issues.
 - Current sources of the above information.
 - Areas around food that were of particular interest to the children and young people.
 - Which of these topics they would expect to find on a Government food website
 - Opportunities to engage children and young people in a central Government food website.

Key findings

1. Knowledge and awareness of food topic areas

- For the children and young people, learning about food is taking place in the home and at school. There was a high level of awareness around the importance and key components of a healthy diet. There was limited knowledge around other topics such as school food standards and school meals; vegetarianism; eating and mental health; food allergies; food safety; GM foods; food prices; sustainability and environmental issues.
- Information about topics that relate to personal choice and their everyday lives is being delivered through parents and supported through the school curriculum. These are topics about which there is relatively high awareness, such as: healthy eating, cooking and preparing meals, food safety, food poisoning and, where personally relevant, topics such as food allergies and vegetarianism.
- Where topics are of low interest, there is an expectation that an understanding of the topic and detailed knowledge will be delivered through the school curriculum.

2. Perceived information needs

- The topic of most interest to children and young people was healthy eating and in particular managing a healthy weight. This appears to be driven by social perceptions that being overweight is socially unacceptable amongst peer groups.
- There was a sense that they know about the general principles of a healthy diet, such as, '5 fruits and vegetables a day', and reducing the amount of fat and salt. However, children and young people sought more

detailed information on these topics, with an emphasis on how they impact on themselves as they develop both physically and socially.

- Girls were interested in the effects of diet and nutrition on a healthy weight, skin, hair, and an understanding of how to eat healthily and in a balanced way. Boys were interested in the links with diet, nutrition and their bodies, but were specifically motivated by diet and nutrition linked to activity/sport.
- Healthy weight management was the key topic of interest. The perception is that most of the information available is targeted towards adults. The older children (10 years +) and young people were keen to have specific details on how many calories they should be consuming, as well as an understanding of what a healthy weight is for their height and age.
- Children and young people also claimed to be interested in cooking and sought recipes and explanations of how to cook food and prepare healthy dishes. The subject of cost effective dishes was also of interest – especially to young people preparing for independent living and/or going onto university.
- When asked which other topics around food they'd like to know more about, children and young people claimed to be interested in foods and diets in different countries across the world. There was also a claimed high level of interest/concern about the impact of poverty in other countries, such as Africa.

3. Learning sources

- The areas of healthy weight management and cooking and preparing meals were topics of keen interest to children and young people and are likely to prompt spontaneous searches for information on the internet.
- Topics of limited interest to the children and young people were areas such as food allergies and intolerances, vegetarianism, anorexia, obesity, eating linked to mental health and food safety. The level of interest in these was in relation to an individual's personal situation. Consequently, unless there was a personal need to learn more, it was expected that these topics would be learnt at school, or as a consequence of specific feedback and information from a GP to parents. Personal interest could drive learning from the internet.
- Areas of low interest such as sustainability and environmental issues, were expected to be learnt through the school curriculum, rather than by personally driven research.

4. The website opportunity

- For a central website to be engaging for children/young people, it should focus on ensuring there is good quality and an in-depth level of information that is age-targeted. Age targeting should also consider the delivery of the information e.g. cartoon style for younger children, with limited use of words and a greater use of pictures. For older children and young people visual engagement will be key; they are used to sophisticated media and accessing video links through sites such as YouTube. Consequently, suggestions were made around using video presentations of information, recipes, demonstrations of cooking, etc.

- Continually refreshing the website and highlighting different topic areas was also felt to be an opportunity for encouraging children and young people to visit and revisit a website. Likely drivers to the website for the older age group of 15-17 years would be in the regular changes in featured topics, such as new recipes, new topics and facts.
- The other opportunity for engaging children with a website, would be to focus on the topics of particular interest to the children and young people. Specifically, to assist children and young people to understand their individual needs for healthy weight management. The opportunity to work out their individual calorific and nutritional needs and to perhaps keep a diary to help them monitor their food consumption, was very appealing, particularly among the older groups (14-18 years), although there was a high level of interest in this topic with the younger groups as well.
- Key to engaging children and young people with a website would be for the name of the site to be appealing and targeted towards children and young people. It would also be important for the children and young people to see the site advertised through social networking sites e.g. Facebook.

Summary

- Healthy eating is the topic area of most interest to all the children and young people, who seek to understand more detailed reasons why certain foods are important, their calorie needs and BMI targets at their different ages and life stages.
- Information is sought by children on cooking, recipes for healthy and cheap eating. Other areas of interest involve understanding more about different foods and recipes across the world as well as knowing about how poverty impacts on the nutrition of children and people in other countries.
- The idea of a central website is very appealing. To maximise the appeal, material would need to be targeted appropriately towards the range of ages and consideration should be given to how to engage and involve children and young people.
- An appealing name, regular refreshing of the site and the use of Google and/or social networking sites, such as Facebook, to advertise the site were among the factors suggested by the children and young people as those that would encourage them to use it.

1.Introduction

- The Food Standards Agency runs a network of School Councils, which meet every term to discuss issues of policy and/or communication programmes. The Food Standards Agency obtains development feedback from the children and young people on 'various topics that it is researching, for example in relation to new' content, relevance to their age groups, language and style.

- To discuss the IAC project, nine schools were visited in the autumn term 2008. There were five secondary schools and four primary schools.
- The purpose of the discussions were to understand:
 - Their current knowledge of food topic areas, specifically: healthy eating; school food standards and school meals; vegetarianism; eating and mental health; food allergies; food safety; GM Foods; food prices; sustainability and environmental issues.
 - Current sources of the above information.
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 - Opportunities to engage children and young people in a central Government food website.

The School Council meetings were held at 9 schools:

Secondary:

Woodroffe School, Lyme Regis,
 Darton High School, Barnsley,
 Norton College, Darlington
 Buttershaw Business College, Bradford
 Cheadle Hulme High School, Cheadle Hulme

Primary:

Christchurch Primary School, Sowerby Bridge
 Higham Ferrers Primary School, Higham Ferrers,
 Bishop Martin Primary School, Liverpool
 Westleigh Junior School, Southend-on-Sea

Interviewing was with the school council representatives from each school.

2. Key Feedback

1. Where do young people learn about food?

- The children and young people perceive that they learn about food at home as well as at school.
- Some of the topics, such as healthy eating and food safety, were seen to be shared learning through home and school. Whereas other topics such as food poisoning, GM products, organic foods, food allergies were generally felt to be more likely learnt through school, with home learning taking place if the topic was more personal e.g. if the individual child or a family member suffered with a food allergy.
- They rely on the information given by their parents, books, school lessons and the internet as their key sources of information. The use of the different sources depends on the individual child, the knowledge within their family unit, and their ease of access to the internet.

2. What does food mean to young people?

- When asked what food means to them the children and young people spontaneously talk about eating healthily. They quote 5-a-day and comment that the whole area of healthy eating is of keen interest to them and their families.
- The feedback on this discussion point differed slightly when talking to the young people from Darlington, where healthy food was less of an issue and they were more motivated to discuss the fast foods that they like.
- However, common to all the young people was their concern around obesity and which foods “*make you fat*”.
- As part of this discussion were spontaneous comments around the cost of food and how this was impacting on their ability to eat healthily as the price of school meals was going up and they couldn’t afford to eat many of the healthy options.
- When asked which topics they’d like to know more about the children and young people talked about :
 - Knowing more about healthy eating, such as:
 - Which foods are important and why
 - What children and young people should be eating and how much – “*all the information that is available is about adults and what their daily intake should be and how many calories they should have....we don’t know that for ourselves*”
 - How to calculate a BMI for their age and sex.
 - Knowing more about the foods that are eaten in different countries
 - Also there were a number of children and young people who commented upon the fact that there were some children living in poverty and they wanted to know more about how they could help, or what was being done to help them.

3. Information areas and topics

A list of different information areas was discussed with the young people, to gain their perspective on how interested they were in knowing more about these areas and where they’d expect to find out about them.

- i) **Healthy eating** was identified across both the primary school groups and the secondary school groups as being a subject of high interest to the children and young people.
- However their interpretation of healthy eating meant their real area of interest was around being a healthy weight and learning how to manage their weight.
 - Consequently they were curious to know more about obesity as well as other eating disorders (anorexia was spontaneously commented upon as being the opposite of obesity). However, the children and young people were keen to emphasise that their interest was about a healthy weight.
 - They emphasised that they felt they wanted more specific information tailored to their needs, in terms of recommended calorie intake, nutrition and vitamins.

- Understanding more about the contents of ready meals and drinks was also of interest to the young people – less interesting to the children at primary school.
 - Boys mentioned they were keen to know more about nutrition and sport and girls were keen to understand more about nutrition and the impact on their appearance e.g. hair, skin etc.
 - There is a natural association between healthy eating and exercise and both boys and girls wanted to know more about how they should and could exercise. Also, young people asked for information on how they could fit in regular exercise quickly and easily, since they commented on having very busy lives and found it difficult to find time to carry out exercise.
 - The general view was that the specific issues surrounding **obesity** and **anorexia** would only really be of interest to those children and young people concerned about these specific topics from a personal perspective.
 - **School Food Standards and School meals**, were areas of limited interest to the children and young people. They were interested in order to find out more about what their menus would be at school and what their choices would be. However, understanding the standards by which schools would be guided was of little interest.
 - **Vegetarian and Vegan food**, was of interest to some of the young people at secondary school. A few of the young people claimed that this was a subject they'd been thinking about but weren't sure what it meant and how they could go about it, if they were interested in it.
 - There was limited interest in this area for the children at primary school. However, it was also clear the children at primary school didn't understand the definitions and implications and when the whole topic was discussed in more detail some of the children identified that they would be keen to know and understand more.
 - The whole area of **eating and mental health** was not a topic they had considered, but when mentioned said it would be something they'd want to know about.
 - The children and young people wanted recipes to help them cook healthy foods.
 - The older teenagers, thinking about moving onto university or independent living, sought recipes for healthy eating that were easy to make and also were cheap to make.
- ii) **Food Allergies** were of interest to children and young people, but there was a feeling that they were areas of most interest to children and young people directly affected. However, there was a sense that it would be useful to know more about the symptoms related to food allergies and intolerances, so that they could check to see if they were relevant to their needs.

- There was however, also a view that if they were able to identify that a food allergy might affect them personally they would be most likely to follow up with their GP.
- iii) **Food safety** as a subject was of low interest to the children and young people, partly because they all felt they had learnt the important information through school and at home. This whole area was seen to be an area that they would look to for more information if there was a topic at school that needed further research.
- The older teenagers thinking about their next move onto university or independent living were interested in knowing more about this area, and in particular around safe preparation and storage.
 - Being able to find out more about the symptoms of food poisoning was also an area the children and young people thought would be of interest, if they wanted to find out if they had been affected.
- iv) **Food issues, such as GM Food, organic foods** were of limited interest to children and young people. **GM food** was an unfamiliar topic area to the children and young people. **Organic foods** had some limited interest to the children and young people, but this was not a topic they could see themselves wanting to know more about.
- Some of the children and young people claimed that they did not really know or understand what a GM food was. When the principles were explained, many of the children and young people felt they might be interested to know more, but needed to have the whole topic area explained in more detail before considering exploring it in more depth.
- v) The subject of **food prices** provoked a debate on the problem of rising food prices in the current economic climate.
- The major impact appears to be on accessing school meals, which have increased in price to the point they are not being taken up by some. The other impact is that families are cutting out on the treats.
 - In the areas where the impact of the current economic climate was being felt more severely, there were reports of families going back to fast foods, which were perceived to be cheaper than buying from a supermarket and cooking at home. Also some families were reporting increasing numbers of working hours, so the parents were less available to cook and provide meals.
- vi) **Sustainability and environmental issues** were generally not topic areas of interest to the children and young people. There was an awareness of the issues but little pre-disposition to know more about these.
- There was a sense among some of the children and young people that these were topic areas, they could not influence or change and therefore they were 'for adults' and not themselves.

vii) Overall the areas of **most** interest to the children and young people were:

- Those subjects linked to healthy eating and particular weight management and nutrition linked to appearance (for the girls) and sport (for the boys).
- Recipes for children and young people to make at home
- Recipes and preparation/food safety guidance for the older teenagers preparing for independent living.

The children and young people would expect to find out about these topics through their parents, at home, through school and from their own searches on the internet.

Areas with **limited** interest to the children and young people were those where they felt they might want to know more information for themselves or where if they were personally affected they would be keen to find out more advice:

- Vegetarian and vegan food
- Food allergies and intolerance
- Eating disorders
- Food poisoning

The children and young people would expect to find out more about these topics through school and directed learning through school projects etc. If they were individually affected they would expect to find out more about food allergies and intolerances; eating disorders and food poisoning through their GP. Vegetarianism would be expected to be learnt about at school.

Areas of **low** interest were:

- GM Food
- Organic foods
- Sustainability and environmental issues e.g. Local foods, seasonal foods, food miles, climate change, fair-trade, packaging/recycling, food waste/composting.

These were expected to be delivered through the school curriculum and supermarkets.

4. Information through the internet

Across both the primary school groups and the secondary school groups, Google was reported as their main source of information if searching the internet. The children and young people would simply type in the topic area and then explore the websites that Google presented.

The other websites reported as sources of information the children and young people were using included: Wikipedia and the BBC website.

Younger children at primary school also commented on askkids.com as a site they'd go to. There was concern expressed by the children at primary school around the whole issue of safety on websites and their parents are policing their use of the internet, so a site such as Ask Kids was perceived as a 'safe' site and one which their parents would be happy for them to search. Similarly with the younger children, the BBC website was considered to be 'safe'.

Safety was not raised as an issue by the children at secondary school.

5. Central website

The idea of a central website was appealing to both the children and young people.

For the children and young people to be motivated to visit and re-visit the site they made the following comments:

- Name of the site needs to be appealing and not too adult.
- The site needs to be advertised. Google was felt to be the most likely place but it was also suggested that it should be advertised on social networking sites, such as Facebook.
- When visiting the site for the first time, it needs to be easy to access, by age and easy to search. Suggestions were made that it should almost act like a search engine in its own right.
- If it's to be authoritative, it is expected to have links with other websites.
- For the children and young people it would need to have all the information – for the younger ones, all the basic information and for the older children and young people, more in-depth information.
- Both children and young people felt it would be useful to be able to have an area where they can monitor and manage their own weight, nutrition, sports nutrition needs etc. This was felt to be an important attribute to encourage the children and young people to revisit, although it was felt to be more appropriate for the teenagers.
- The children at primary school age sought learning games around the topic areas.
- Amongst the older children at secondary school, there was a perception that the site should promote and encourage 'discovery'
- Both children and young people sought fewer words and more pictures. Primary school children looking for more cartoon style pictures. Teenagers sought more 'real life information' such as videos on cooking, food preparation, tours around factories etc.
- Young people, especially those in the older age group, between 15-17 years, sought recipes and if this was refreshed regularly saw this as a reason for re-visiting the site.
- There is an expectation that the home page would change frequently, with links to different topics being highlighted. A 'did you know section', with unusual facts – some references made to the Horrible Histories approach to delivering interesting facts around history – bringing it alive and making it humorous.

- Through this refreshment process, the children and young people felt it would be an opportunity to introduce interesting, exciting, or scary facts about topic areas, such as GM foods, which might then encourage the children and young people to explore the site more often.

3. Summary of key findings

- The topic of most interest to children and young people was linked to healthy eating.
- They sought more detailed information on this, but with a particular bias on how it linked into themselves as they develop. For girls, they were interested in the impact on a healthy weight, skin, hair etc and boys were most interested in the link to nutrition and activity/sport.
- Healthy weight management was a key topic for them and in particular, the older children were keen to have teenage specific details, on how many calories they should consume, how to know if they were a healthy weight etc.
- This whole area was a topic of keen interest and could prompt spontaneous searches for information on the internet although all commented that they felt they would need to know the name of the website in order to search for it.
- Recipes and explanations of how to cook food, prepare healthy dishes and also cost effective dishes were of interest – especially to young people preparing for independent living.
- Children and young people were also interested in foods and diet in different countries across the world and there was a claimed high level of interest/concern about the impact of poverty in other countries, such as Africa.
- Topics of interest were areas such as food allergies and intolerances, vegetarianism, obesity, eating and mental health and food safety. Although interest in these was felt to be linked to the individual's personal interest, there was a sense that learning about these food areas is more likely to be driven by learning at school, or as a consequence of feedback from their GP.
- Areas of low interest were those relating to sustainability and environmental issues. These were expected to be driven by learning through the school curriculum, rather than by personal motivation.
- A website that is developed to engage children and young people, should focus on the delivery of the information: cartoon style for younger children and visual engagement through the use of videos etc.
- Also refreshing the website and highlighting different topic areas was felt to be an opportunity for encouraging children and young people to revisit.
- New recipes featured regularly were also felt to be likely drivers to the website for the older age group of 15-17 years.
- The other opportunity for the older children was linked to them understanding their own individual needs, being able to work out their individual nutritional need and perhaps to keep a record of their consumption to help them monitor their food intake.