

East Sussex Nursery Transformation Programme (2015–2020): embedding a best practice approach to healthy food in early years settings

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East Sussex Nursery Transformation Programme (2015-2020) - embedding a best practice approach to healthy food in early years settings

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Abstract:	The East Sussex Nursery Transformation Programme aims to transform health and wellbeing outcomes for children and their families. Primarily focused on reducing childhood obesity and implemented across the county since 2015, this unique partnership between the local authority, clinical commissioning groups and early years settings was designed to support settings to adopt and embed a whole setting approach to health and wellbeing (including healthy eating). This article summarises the programme and details the impact on participating settings' approach to and provision of food during the 2017-2019 programme years, highlighting the key role early years settings play in developing healthy eating habits in early childhood.

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For Peer Review

East Sussex Nursery Transformation Programme (2015-2020) - embedding a best practice approach to healthy food in early years settings

The East Sussex Nursery Transformation Programme aims to transform health and wellbeing outcomes for children and their families. Primarily focused on reducing childhood obesity and implemented across the county since 2015, this unique partnership between the local authority, clinical commissioning groups and early years settings was designed to support settings to adopt and embed a whole setting approach to health and wellbeing (including healthy eating). This article summarises the programme and details the impact on participating settings' approach to and provision of food during the 2017-2019 programme years, highlighting the key role early years settings play in developing healthy eating habits in early childhood.

Introduction

The role of early years settings in helping to provide and promote a healthy diet in early childhood and prevent obesity has been highlighted internationally and nationally.^{1,2} Research suggests the educational context within which food is provided powerfully influences eating behaviour.^{Error! Bookmark not defined.} Systematic reviews of interventions in childcare settings indicate multi-component, multi-level interventions focusing on the childcare environment, policies and practices, staff training and personal health, child engagement and parental support are most effective in preventing obesity.³ The East Sussex Nursery Transformation Programme (NTP) has applied this growing evidence base to improve food provision and practices in local early years settings. Funded by East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Public Health (and by NHS Eastbourne, Hailsham and Seaford and Hastings and Rother Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) during 2016/17), the NTP is an integral component of the Council's whole-systems healthy weight plan.⁴

In England, all regulated early years settings must follow the mandatory standards of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework,⁵ including that meal, snack and drink provision must be 'healthy, balanced and nutritious'. Voluntary Food and Drink Guidelines for Early Years Settings in England ('the guidelines')⁶ and Government's example menus for early years settings in England⁷ help settings meet these requirements. The RSPH-accredited Eat Better, Start Better (EBSB) training and evaluation programme⁸ was developed to support early years settings to implement the guidelines using a whole-setting approach to food. ESCC was involved in the

Government-subsidised roll out of the EBSB programme in 2012-13⁸ and has continued to offer EBSB training as part of the NTP.

The Nursery Transformation Programme

The NTP, known locally as the ‘Healthy Active Little Ones’ (HALO) programme, has been implemented over four phases. The first phase (2015-2016),⁹ was undertaken as a successful 18-month workforce development and intervention pilot. The pilot evaluation informed a second phase (2016-17), which enabled 140 settings (located within two CCG funded areas) to access a grant of up to £5,000 to fund evidence-based activities to prevent obesity and promote oral health. During a third phase (2017-19), 204 settings accessed a further £3,000 grant. In October 2019, the programme was expanded to include additional health and wellbeing topics and has focused on embedding best practice and building workforce capacity to ensure a sustainable programme.

To receive a grant during the 2016-17 and 2017-19 programme years, settings had to participate in a baseline and six/nine-month follow up audit, known as a HALO Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Check (‘HALO Check’). This was facilitated by a trained, independent Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) co-ordinator employed by ESCC. The healthy eating component of the HALO Check evaluated each setting’s approach to food and nutrition against national best practice guidance, and their food provision against the guidelines.⁶

With support from a HEPA co-ordinator, settings were then required to submit a Grant Expenditure Proposal (GEP), based on needs identified in their HALO Check, which was subsequently approved by a local authority panel. Settings were encouraged to use their grant to fund a range of evidenced-based healthy eating interventions/workforce development opportunities that had been successfully tried and tested during the pilot. The EBSB offer for settings included a one-day or half-day food, nutrition and healthy cooking with children and families course; annual membership for three online early years food and nutrition courses;¹⁰ and application for, or renewal of an Outstanding Food Award. Each setting was given six to nine months to apply the knowledge and skills they had acquired through participating in the EBSB initiatives and the support received from their HEPA co-ordinator to implement changes to their food practices and provision. The outcomes and impact of the changes made were documented in their follow-up HALO Check.

During the first three programme phases, ESCC Public Health also commissioned local authority EBSB support which included:

- Training and support from a Registered Nutritionist for the HEPA co-ordinators, focusing on consistency in completion of HALO Checks.
- An evaluation of the impact of the NTP on participating settings' approach to and provision of food.

Changes in settings' approaches to food and food provision

During the 2017-19 programme years, baseline and 9-month follow up HALO Checks were completed for 180 settings, 64% of which had been involved in one or more previous phases of the programme (2015-16 and/or 2016-17).

Changes in approach to food and nutrition

The guidelines⁶ specify 38 best practice recommendations for approach to food and nutrition. Analysis of HALO Checks found that 96% of settings either increased (69%) or maintained (27%) the number of recommendations 'fully met' between baseline and follow up. The mean number of recommendations 'fully met' in each setting significantly increased from 32.8 (Standard deviation (SD)=4.8) at baseline to 35.9 (SD=3.0) at follow up (paired samples t-test; $t(179)=-10.88, p<0.001$). Settings involved in previous phases of the NTP met significantly more recommendations at follow up, (one-way ANOVA; $F=9.81, p<0.001$), with 46 settings who had participated in all three programme phases increasing the mean number of recommendations met at each phase, demonstrating continued improvement. The main changes observed were the development of comprehensive food policies in consultation with staff, parents, and children; communicating with families about the timing of meals; giving children an opportunity to help plan menus, and for families to give feedback on the food provided, and increased engagement with parents and children around food activities.

Changes in food provision

The guidelines specify 79 best practice recommendations for food provision.⁶ Analysis of HALO Checks showed 72% of the settings increased (48%) or maintained (24%) the percentage of applicable guidelines 'fully met' between their baseline and follow up, with over a third (37%) fully meeting all guidelines applicable to the meals and snacks they provided by follow up. The mean number of applicable guidelines 'fully met' increased from

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47.4 (SD=17.7) at baseline to 51.0 (SD=16.1) at follow up (representing between 94.0% and 95.8% of applicable guidelines being met depending on programme phase). The results demonstrate a positive shift in the nutritional quality of meals and snacks provided (despite revisions to the guidelines made in 2017 making them more challenging to meet).⁷ In particular there was increased fruit and vegetable provision at breakfast, more variety of foods provided, and an increased use of products lower in salt and sugar.

Recommendations

Early childhood has been identified as a critical time for obesity prevention and early years settings have a key role to play. The evaluation of the East Sussex NTP has demonstrated that with investment and ongoing support, settings can continually improve their approach to, and provision of food. Given the scale of childhood obesity, it is recommended that other local authorities consider how elements of the East Sussex NTP could be replicated. Current programme information, including amendments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are available at <https://czone.eastsussex.gov.uk/early-years/halo/>. Adopting the NTP unique collaborative partnership approach would empower and enable childcare providers to become ‘health promoting settings’ supporting them to fulfil their role in encouraging the development of healthy eating behaviours, giving children the best start in life.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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