

## Introduction

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*Healthy and Active Lifestyles for the Early Years* arose out of an atmosphere of despair, our response to the almost daily stream of media headlines outlining how unhealthy the lifestyles of today's generation of children are. Of the many issues where it is tempting to look back to a bygone golden age, the sense of freedom lost for children to run around, play in risk free environments and 'come back when you're hungry' to a hearty, healthy meal, is possibly the strongest. Whether this golden age ever existed for all, if any children, is open to question, but what is a fact is that the research into the lifestyles of today's young children makes for concerning reading.

Taking one out of many recent reports as an example, the NHS Information Centre's *Statistics on obesity, physical activity and diet: England, 2012* report, states:

- *"In 2010, around 31% of boys and 29% of girls (aged 2 to 15) were classed as either overweight or obese.*
- *In 2010, 17% of boys and 15% of girls (aged 2 to 15) were classed as obese; an increase from 11% and 12% respectively since 1995.*
- *In 2010/11, around 9.4% of pupils in reception class (aged 4-5 years) were classified as obese which compares to 19.0% of pupils in year 6 (aged 10-11 years).*
- *Overall, in 2008, 32% of boys and 24% of girls were classified as meeting the government's recommendations for physical activity.*
- *The amount of time spent in sedentary pursuits was similar for boys and girls on weekdays (excluding time at school), with both boys and girls spending 3.4 hours in sedentary pursuits. Both boys and girls spent more time in sedentary pursuits on weekend days (4.1 hours for boys and 4.2 hours for girls).*
- *There has been a significant upward trend in household expenditure on eggs, butter, beverages, sugar and preserves in the UK in 2010.*
- *Household purchases of fruit fell by 0.9% in 2010 and are now 11.6% lower than 2007 in the UK. Purchases of vegetables increased by 0.4% but are 2.9% lower than in 2007.*
- *Between 2009 and 2010, the percentage of 5-15 year old boys consuming 5 or more portions of fruit and vegetables decreased from 21% to 19%. For 5-15 year old girls the corresponding percentages showed a similar decrease from 22% to 20%."*

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The longer term effects of this situation are highlighted by the report *Tackling Obesities: The Foresight Report and Implications for Local Government* (Sheffield Hallam University 2008), which showed that “A significant contributor to the increasing rate of crime, aggression, depression and poor school performance is poor nutrition.”

However, the picture is not one of fatalism. The same report recognises that early years services can play a key role in addressing this worrying position, stating: “Children’s services have the power and influence to ‘unlock’ the unhealthy energy balance in the lives of children and their families...Interventions likely to be successful are those that engage the whole family to try to change behaviour – although individual sessions with children can also be effective.” The report also highlights research findings, which state:

- *“Children with learning and behaviour problems improve focus, concentration and school grades when given essential fat supplements and IQ scores improve when given multi-vitamins.*
- *Eating breakfast and a low glycaemic diet, low in sugar, improves behaviour and concentration.”*

So *Healthy and Active Lifestyles for the Early Years* aims to support practitioners with advice, guidance and examples of how they can actively support the children and families who use their services to live a healthier life. This in no way should be seen as teaching granny to suck eggs (no healthy food-related pun intended); the authors recognise that there is much excellent practice around in early years settings already. Indeed the publication aims to highlight examples of this good practice and offers itself as a ‘food for thought’ (sorry, again).

The crucial role of early years services had been recognised by the pre-school movement at least 20 years earlier. The Pre-school Playgroup Association publication *Good Practice for Full Daycare Playgroups* (1989), gives an insight into our recommended approach at that time:

- *“Groups should consider children’s dietary needs to ensure that any food or drink provided is appropriate, acceptable and nutritious.*
- *Drinks and snacks should be available at a time appropriate to the child during the day. These should vary daily, be well balanced, nutritious and include fresh fruit. Sweets and chocolates should be avoided.*

- *Healthy eating habits should be promoted and children should be encouraged to try food they have not had before.*
- *Groups should avoid food with a high salt, sugar or fat content and minimise the use of foods containing additives, preservatives and colourings.*
- *Groups should provide good quality educational equipment and play activities appropriate to the children's ages and stages of development.*
- *Staff/volunteers should encourage children to select their own activities from the range provided...activities should encourage children to move freely and independently from one activity to another.*
- *The day should include a balance of large and small muscle activities to develop physical skills.*
- *Planning should take account of children's varying energy levels through-out the day.*
- *Every effort should be made to use outdoor play space throughout the year.*
- *Groups should provide activities which develop muscular strength and co-ordination."*

Although the above was hoped by many to be common practice within childcare settings, the huge demand for the Alliance's campaign, *Feeding Young Imaginations*, in 2003, showed that there was a lack of knowledge as to what constituted a healthy diet and what practitioners should be doing to provide one. The debate at this time, much of it stimulated by Jamie Oliver's *Feed Me Better* campaign (2005) in schools, focused on healthy eating and what goes 'into children'. This publication seeks to balance this focus with consideration of the equally important elements of active, energetic activities for children.

As the NHS Information Centre's *Statistics on obesity, physical activity and diet: England, 2012* noted: "*The health benefits of a physically active lifestyle are well documented and there is a large amount of evidence to suggest that regular activity is related to reduced incidence of many chronic conditions. Physical activity contributes to a wide range of health benefits and regular physical activity can improve health outcomes irrespective of whether individuals achieve weight loss.*"

The case studies in the book recognise that parents are key partners in the drive to halt obesity. The *EarlyBird Study* (EarlyBird Diabetes Trust 2012), a 12 year research programme observing the health and lifestyle of a cohort of normal healthy children, explains:

- *“Children’s activity levels are not determined by environmental opportunities nor are social inequalities to blame for obesity. All children today are at risk, regardless of family income or postcode.*
- *Most excess weight is gained before the child ever starts school, therefore, it is very important that healthy choices start from birth.”*

One final piece of research needs to be mentioned here. The Institute for Social and Economic Research, through their *Understanding Society: Findings 2012* study, demonstrated the link between children’s health and happiness and that children with unhealthy lifestyles have dramatically lower happiness levels:

- *“Increased participation in sport was associated with high [levels of] happiness.*
- *Increased consumption of unhealthy food and decreased consumption of fruit and vegetables were negatively associated with high [levels of] happiness.”*

*Healthy and Active Lifestyles for the Early Years* has been written by early years practitioners for early years practitioners; special thanks go to the childcare providers who submitted details of their own healthy lifestyle projects, as well as photographs. These case studies provide the main focus of this publication and provide examples of initiatives that you may wish to follow and develop in your own setting. We hope you enjoy the read.

