

Helping children grow their way out of health inequalities



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Introduction

A Better Start Southend (ABSS) is part of a ten-year programme, set up by the Big Lottery Fund with the aim of transforming services for very young children. Eligibility criteria for the projects is age (0-3 years and expectant parents) and residence within the six targeted wards.



The 2011 Diet and Nutrition Survey of Infants and Young Children identified that mean energy intake exceeded the Estimated Average Requirement (EAR) by at least 75%. It also found that sodium intakes, associated with consumption of processed foods, pastries, breakfast cereals and potato snacks, increase as infants and toddlers age and depend less on breast milk or infant formula for energy intake^{1,2}.

Regular consumption of a healthy diet, including fresh fruit and vegetables, is less likely in less advantaged families than their more affluent counterparts³. Food growing in primary schools has been seen to influence students' consumption of fruit and vegetables. Local insight work conducted in Southend during 2017 suggests that family food consumption is heavily influenced by the acceptance of food by children (Figure 1).

Parental perception that a 'healthy' diet is not affordable when compared to processed or take-away foods presents a barrier to providing fresh foods to children. However, food preferences of infants and young children can be positively influenced by availability, accessibility and familiarity with foods, as well as modelling by parents and peers⁵.

The benefits of food growing activities are not limited to encouraging a diverse dietary intake, but also increased opportunities. These include physical activity and development of fine and gross motor skills, improved social skills such as taking turns and team-work as well as community engagement, increased environmental awareness and the value of delayed gratification⁶.

Building on this research, ABSS will commission a food growing project, based at one of our children's centres and delivered by early years' practitioners. The food growing activities will be complimented by cooking sessions delivered to families to increase confidence and competence in preparing home-cooked foods using fresh produce.

Aim

The aim of this project is to identify changes in the ability of early years' children to recognise fruits and vegetables and, though growing the products; increase their willingness to try new foods and, increase their consumption and acceptability of fruit and vegetables.

Method

The food growing space will be accessed by children in early years' settings including: the children's centre, pre-school, nursery and, childminders. Parents, the wider family and the local community will be encouraged to join the children in all aspects of food growing. Additionally, running alongside these sessions, a six-week basic cooking skills course will run to improve confidence and competence in home food preparation.

What parents have said



Eating Habits of Sample Southend Population

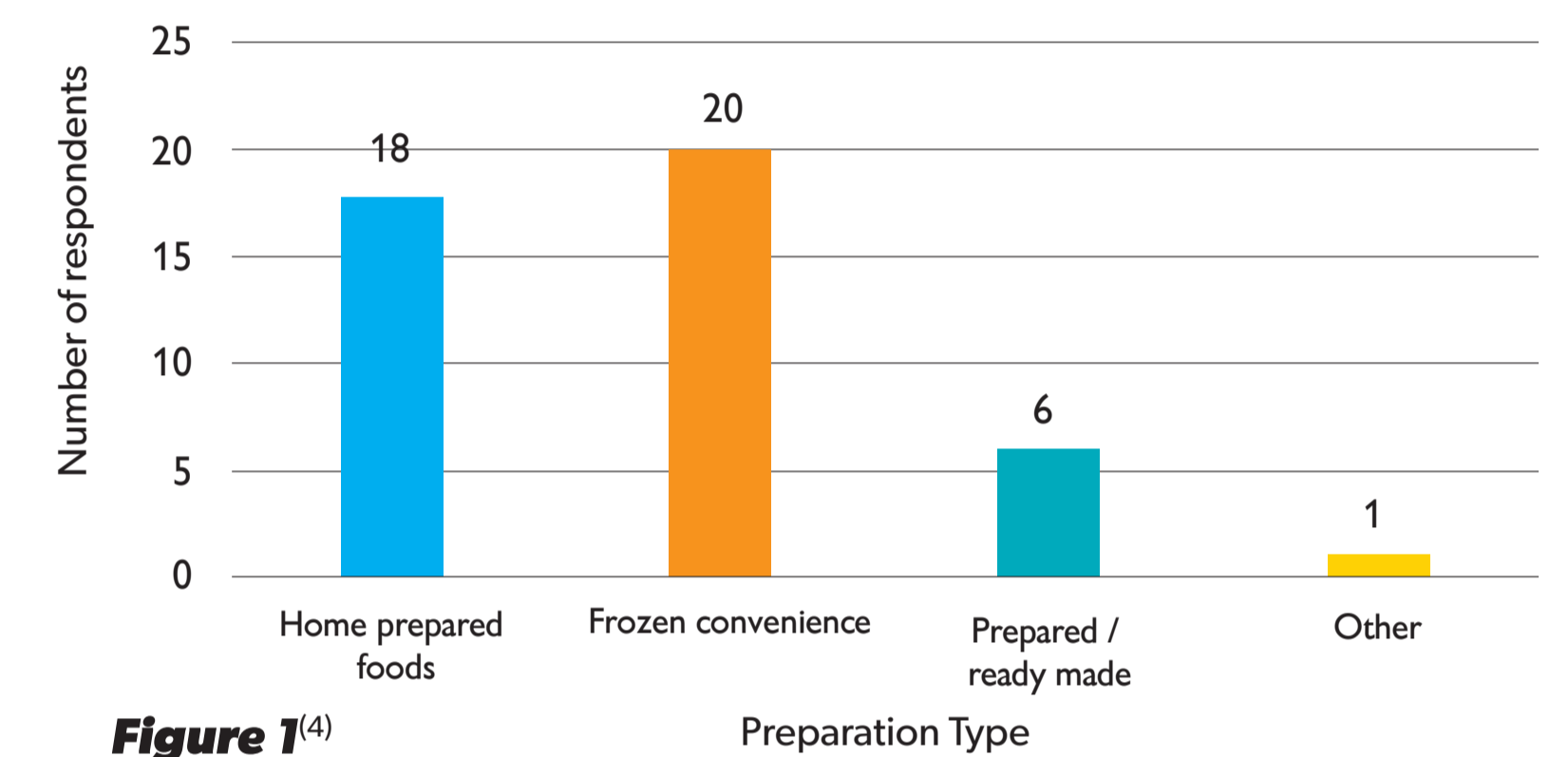


Figure 1⁽⁴⁾

Data Collection

Data Collection will be achieved through validated survey instruments and semi-structured interviews with children and their parents, once ethics approval has been obtained according to the protocol of a partner academic institute.

We will aim to identify any changes in: ability to recognise specific fruits and vegetables, willingness to try new foods and, acceptance of those foods. An adapted food frequency questionnaire, completed by parents, will identify changes in habitual consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables.



References:

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