

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

CO 09

Inquiry into Childhood Obesity

Evidence from : Focus on Food

Focus on Food welcomes a National Inquiry into Childhood Obesity.

Focus on Food has been campaigning for several years for the reintroduction of practical cooking in schools. Today's young parents are from a generation that has missed out on any compulsory formal practical cooking education in school. Many children have a poor relationship with food and have limited food choices. We need to get children interested in food early before they establish poor food habits. By getting young children and their parents to cook and connect with where food comes from we will be able to help change our food culture.

Focus on Food runs the Health Challenge Wales Cooking Bus. The Cooking Bus focuses on cooking as the key experience bringing together the range of food messages prioritized in national and local strategies such as reducing unhealthy eating (Our Healthy Future 2009), supporting a good start in life (Together for Health 2012), and achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight (All Wales Obesity Pathway).

The Cooking Bus travels to every county in Wales. It was commissioned by Welsh Government as part of the Food and Fitness Implementation plan and Appetite for Life. Since launching in 2006, the Cooking Bus has worked with over 300 schools. A total of 30,000 children have learnt about healthy eating, food safety and hygiene through practical cooking activities. Teacher training is a fundamental part of our work, as it encourages teachers, teaching assistants and senior management teams to strengthen and embed cooking in the curriculum and wider school learning.

We also deliver focused training events in the school holidays that are widely attended by professionals from a range of public health and education backgrounds. The main purpose of these events is to give the participants the confidence to carry out practical cooking sessions and ensure that there is consistency in the teaching of cooking skills across Wales.

Our experience since the Cooking Bus was launched has shown us that working in partnership with other projects is a highly successful approach to health improvement. We have a strong relationship with the Healthy Schools programme, and with Preschools, Communities First and Public Health Dieticians. We work together to provide a coordinated approach to healthy eating in schools and communities. Evidence suggests that a coordinated

approach to food and fitness is likely to be the most effective. Public Health Departments in a number of English Local Authorities are commissioning Focus on Food to deliver practical cooking leadership training for primary teachers and community project workers.

Cooking is a successful tool of engagement, it is non threatening and enjoyable. Through cooking, a variety of health messages can be delivered. The most obvious ones relating to eating more fruit and vegetables, reducing saturated fat and salt and adjusting portion sizes to help maintain a healthy weight. Through practical food preparation and cooking activities the nutrition messages become more realistic. By making healthy dishes that are easily reproducible, economical and appealing, children and parents are more likely to continue cooking.

Obesity rates among young people in Wales are not declining. Focus on Food maintains that the diet and health of the nation will not change unless people are taught the basic skills to cook tasty meals from fresh ingredients. Cooking is the key to empower and enable children and their families to exercise choice over what they eat and take full control of their food lives.

Richard Shaw  
Advisory Teacher, Health Challenge Wales Cooking Bus