

# **Fit Futures: Focus on food, activity and young people**

**Findings from the consultation exercise with parent focus groups**

**Submitted to the Department of Education and the  
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety  
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by the Parenting Forum[NI]**

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## **Context and rationale**

A task force, Fit Futures: Focus on food, activity and young people, has been established jointly by the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in response to concerns that more children and young people are becoming very overweight. This can have long term implications for health and wellbeing. The role of the task force therefore relates to both healthy eating and active living.

A key aspect of the work of the task force is to gather the ideas of children, young people and parents across Northern Ireland on what would encourage children and young people to be more active and to eat healthily. In this context the Parenting Forum NI was approached to carry out a consultation exercise with parents. Consultation with parents is an integral part of the work of the Parenting Forum [NI] and, as such, the organisation has developed effective methodology to carry out such consultations. To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately 2 hours for use with a number of parent focus groups throughout Northern Ireland.

Whilst it is clear from research that the consequences of obesity resulting from inappropriate diet and physical inactivity persist into adult life, there is also clear evidence of the effect that obesity has during childhood. The most widespread short-term effects are social and psychological: obese children and adolescents tend to have lower self-esteem and are at increasing risk of anxiety arising from poor self-image, teasing, bullying and social isolation. However, obesity in childhood is also associated with cardiovascular risk factors such as raised blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood sugar. Adults who were obese as children also have lower social success than their peers. This consultation therefore serves to make a difference to the health and wellbeing of children and young people by listening to the views of parents in order to impact on government policy in relation to children's eating and physical activity patterns.

## **The Consultation Process**

In September 2004 the Parenting Forum [NI] commenced the task of carrying out a consultation exercise with parents on behalf of the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Parenting Forum has considerable experience in carrying out such exercises: it has contact with a network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland on a daily basis and is well placed to carry out real and meaningful consultations with parents within a tight time frame-work. The consultation method chosen was focus groups.

The Parenting Forum used their own internal facilitators for the majority of the focus groups. External facilitators were members of the Parenting Forum and all were experienced in facilitating focus groups. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and facilitators were chosen accordingly. The majority of focus groups were well attended and parents clearly valued the opportunity to be consulted on the issue of healthy eating and physical activity and readily contributed their views and their experiences.

## Consultation Methodology

A consultation pack was designed to ensure a uniform approach across all the focus groups in collecting and collating the views of parents. The pack also included information for parents on the purpose of the Fit Futures consultation and how the focus groups fit in with the overall work of the task group. User friendly materials were designed in order to present to parents the key areas on which their views were being sought [see appendix 1: Fit Futures consultation pack]. Focus groups were chosen as the data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their views and identify issues both of individual and common concern. They also made effective use of the resources available. Existing support groups/networks were approached with a view to becoming involved. The Parenting Forum was aware at the outset of the need to ensure that a diverse group of parents was consulted and therefore parents were consulted from differing socio-economic backgrounds and also from ethnic minority backgrounds. Post codes relating to the parents consulted have been recorded below.

16 focus groups were set up [representing 18 groups], though 2 did not proceed due to the time constraints of the groups. 1 focus group contained one parent so the facilitation exercises were not used. Comments from this parent have, however, been included in the analysis of information. Two of the focus groups included parents from 2 groups. Quantitative information was collected from the focus group parents. 127 parents were consulted and these parents cared for a total of 275 children. Focus groups were held at times that would most suit the parents and transport and childcare costs were met to ensure accessibility.

The groups which proceeded were located as follows:

Belfast [NICEM and traveller's group]	BT2
Larne	BT40
Omagh	BT79
Londonderry: Waterside	BT47
Londonderry: Creggan	BT48
Cookstown	BT80
Newry	BT34
Belleek	BT93
Irvinestown	BT94
Londonderry: travelling community	BT48
*Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus	BT38
W Belfast	BT12

Newbuildings  
Claudy

BT93  
BT 47

Note: Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey groups were combined and the NICEM and the traveller's group were combined

Each facilitator compiled a report based on the 4 exercises carried out. The responses were analysed by an independent consultant. She was responsible for writing this report which presents the views of parents both quantitatively and qualitatively. Key issues are identified in the recommendations.

## **Parent focus groups: the Findings**

Exercise 1 aimed to find out whether parents are aware of the importance of what their children eat/drink and of being active for health. It also asked parents did they think it is more important for children to be physically active/eat healthily at any particular age.

### **Parents were asked what healthy eating meant to them.**

The majority of groups mentioned fresh fruit and vegetables. Half of the groups mentioned sugar/sweets. 5 groups listed water, salt, junk or fast food and limited access to fats. In relation to fats 2 groups mentioned a low fat diet as relating to healthy eating. Having a good breakfast and eating 3 – 4 meals a day was cited by 4 groups. Other factors/foods mentioned by 3 or fewer groups were:

- Absence of food colours
- High energy food
- Brown bread
- Natural food
- Milk
- Less snacks
- Healthy choice yoghurts/dairy
- Organic
- Fresh meat
- Chicken/fish
- Good food mix
- Balanced diet
- Home cooking
- Cereal
- Healthy choice yoghurts
- No snacks before meals

In response to the question: **is healthy eating important and why?** all the parents felt it is important. All the groups gave 'for health' as their reason with some expanding to mention growth and to prevent illnesses. Five groups cited 'energy' as one of the reasons. Some groups mentioned the prevention of specific illnesses: obesity, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Obesity, heart disease and cancer were mentioned by 3 groups. Other reasons given were by 2 or fewer groups were: for good skin, to live longer, to feel good, to look better, to build good eating habits, to set an example to your kids, it affects behaviour, for whole life, for concentration and for calcium for bone health in later life.

In answer to the question: **do you think it is important for children and young people to be physically active**, there was a general consensus by the groups that physical activity is essential for health. Half of the groups specifically mentioned to burn off fat and to prevent obesity. Five groups mentioned the prevention of a number of health problems as the reason: heart disease, osteoporosis, depression and joint problems. Four groups mentioned the social/entertainment value of physical activity and three groups stated that it helped children to sleep better. Other reasons given were: limits time spent in front of the computer/TV, concentration, helps school work, builds confidence, to give Mum some peace, to prevent laziness, to help people live longer and to build muscle. One group, which contained several parents who cared for children considered to have behavioural problems, noted that children with ADHD need to sit in front of the TV sometimes to calm down. This group also commented that children need exercise to help them sit and be good and that without it they would 'kill each other and wreck the house'.

**The fourth question in this section asked whether it was considered that it was more important at a particular age to be active.** Virtually all the parents thought that it was important for children to be physically active and eat healthily from an early age/birth. In one group four parents felt that children need more activity from the age of 5 whilst another group stated that diet and exercise were particularly important at times of stress and exams. One group mentioned the importance of good diet in the teenage years for energy, good looks, skin, hormones, to like themselves and learn to take care of themselves. One group felt that physical activity and healthy eating were not a problem at an early age; another group felt that the teenage years were problematic in relation to healthy eating and physical activity. Computer games was stated by one group as a reason why children as young as 3 spend long periods indoors and that boys with Nintendo under the age of 6 do not want to go outdoors to play. The overall message from many of the groups is that both healthy eating and physical activity are important at an early age because young children need to adopt good habits to last them for life.

**The parents were asked what they felt they could do to ensure that their children eat healthily and participate in physical activity.**

Whilst there was a vast array of suggestions there were some common themes running through most of the focus groups. Most groups named a number of sports and physical activities/clubs they should encourage their children to be involved in: bike riding, the park, swimming, walking, ice skating, rugby, hockey, Duke of Edinburgh's awards, activity clubs and

horse riding. 9 groups mentioned walking though in one group this was qualified eg walking to school. Several groups mentioned the importance of setting an example to children and young people. Some were more specific and suggested ways of doing this such as limiting what food is brought into the home, changing shopping habits and doing physical activities with children. Limiting the use of computer games/TV/videos was mentioned by three groups and one group said that older children were less active due to the influence of computer games/TV. Making physical activities a treat was mentioned by one group.

Most of the focus groups emphasised the importance of parents providing good food for children with several examples being given of how this can be done: limit sweets, buy the best food you can afford, read food labels, limit unhealthy foods, hide crisps etc to make them inaccessible, send a packed lunch so you know they are getting good food at school, get children to eat breakfast, find out a variety of good foods they like and get practically involved in the healthy breaks in school scheme. One group mentioned the importance of making meal times fun and a few groups suggested the importance of the parent's role in educating their children about healthy eating. Listening to children was suggested by another group.

**In answer to the question: do you think your children eat or are trying to eat healthily and be active, virtually all groups of parents said 'yes'.** Some qualified their responses:

Yes, trying but they tend to eat too much in the evening

It's difficult when in a hurry

Yes, but it depends on their age

Yes, but there is a temptation to eat crisps/sweets

Children don't have a regular good diet: children develop likes/dislikes and limited diet when very young

Some physical activity but computer and TV don't help

One group said that they didn't think their children really understood about healthy eating and physical activity: most of the children of the parents in this group were under 11.

**The last question in this section was designed to see what the words 'overweight' and 'obesity' mean to parents.**

From the many responses it is possible to conclude that parents see these words as relating to being fat or big and either bad diet or overeating. Several groups also linked these words with being unfit and taking no

exercise. Other definitions or linkages were: eating out of boredom, lazy, lethargic, slow, low self-esteem, bullying, a problem for teenagers, self-destructive and named medical conditions such as heart disease. Two groups recorded a technical definition of obesity and another pointed out it was a stereotypical term. 'Fat' was the most frequent definition.

**The second exercise was designed to find out what health campaigns parents are aware of and their thoughts on which had proved most effective. This exercise also sought parent's views on the health messages parents had received through other sources such as advertising, training courses, food labelling or through people such as health visitors or their parents.**

The overwhelming response from all the groups was that campaigns on TV had a positive impact: TV adverts were mentioned by all the groups, though 1 group also mentioned TV programmes, for example, 'You are what you eat'. The following campaigns/adverts on TV were noted:

Limit salt

Stop smoking

Watch cholesterol

Drink water

Use the stairs

Use Niquitin

Buy foods with probiotics

Consume omega 3 oils

Eat 5 a day or an apple a day

Get walking/cycling

Eat shredded wheat for the heart

Fast food can be tasty/healthy [2groups mentioned McDonalds in this context]

Anti drugs campaigns

Practice safe sex

Don't drink and drive

Use seat belts

Them bones them bones

Keep fit

Whilst most groups described the influence of these campaigns/adverts as having been positive 1 group felt that the following adverts had not had a strong impact: no added sugar, use less salt, limit alcohol, test cholesterol, Mc Donalds. Another group noted that TV advertising around food influenced children to only eat food for lunch that that been advertised on TV, for example, DairyLee lunchables and this group also suggested that

TV advertising and magazines promote the idea that girls should be slim and that girls were becoming more conscious about their weight and appearance. Of all the TV health campaigns the most frequently mentioned ones were stop smoking, 5 a day, don't drink and drive and get walking/cycling. Magazines were the second most frequently mentioned media parents gave as being a source for receiving health messages. Their own parents were deemed to have had an impact in some instances with three groups noting the following messages which had stuck with them:

Carrots help you see in the dark

Always finish your food

Spinach gives you muscle

Broccoli/cabbage/cauliflower gives you hairs on your chest

Eat fresh cooked food

Freeze fresh pureed food for babies

Eat your veggies

Fast food is handy when you're busy

Breakfast is a good start to the day

Take away food is better than home cooked food [parents and peers]

Schools and a variety of health professionals were mentioned by a couple of groups with differing opinions about impact. Two groups described the healthy eating messages coming from schools as having little impact [specifically leaflets] whilst another described the healthy lunch boxes/lunch meal campaigns as positive. Parenting classes were only mentioned by one group and this was in relation to the stop smoking campaign though this may reflect a lack of parenting classes on the importance of good nutrition and physical activity.

Some feedback was given by one group about the helpfulness of TV in relation to the safe sex campaign and no smoking. They felt that their children were all anti smoking and that TV adverts on sex made it easier for parents to raise the topic once it had been on TV. The 'get walking' TV advert was described by another group as visually appealing and the anti drink driving advert was described by 3 groups as powerful and motivating because of the graphic visuals. One group felt patronized by the 'get walking' advert.

**The third exercise was designed to find out parent's views on what encourages children to eat healthily or be physically active or conversely those factors which encourage unhealthy eating/physical inactivity.** The groups came up with a long list of positive and negative influences. However, an analysis of the responses shows the following:

- Most groups thought that parent's are the single most influential factor as to whether their children eat healthily or participate in physical activity.
- The second most influential factor is seen as the school. Parents feel that the school can influence children and young people by offering healthy breaks or dinners, by offering healthy exercise, by having school rules such as no coke or chips, by providing water and through curricular activities. One group suggested that education should start in the early years.
- Parents in about half of the groups were critical of the school food provided: their children didn't like it or it was not considered to be healthy. Schools providing vending machines were not seen as having a positive influence.
- Advertising was named by half of the groups as having a negative influence. Parents stated that food was promoted as healthy when it is not. Free toys advertised with junk food were seen as having a bad influence.
- Fast food outlets such as KFC and McDonalds were listed as having a negative influence. One group suggested that it would be helpful to have healthy fast food outlets.
- A small number of groups stated that the promotion of unhealthy food at supermarket check-outs and in video shops was unhelpful.
- Parent's time pressures were seen as influential by about half of the groups. One group stated that parents staying at home was helpful in raising healthy children.
- The price of food was given as a factor by half of the groups. The cost of fruit was specifically mentioned in one group.
- Safety was raised as an issue by a third of the groups: this was identified as a lack of supervised safe space and stranger danger was specifically mentioned by one group.
- The travelling community recorded the lack of safe play space on traveller sites as an issue. They also pointed out that the lack of space in vans is problematic for food storage.
- Health advertising campaigns were seen as positive and it was suggested that more use could be made of famous people or 'power rangers' to promote health messages in relation to physical activity and healthy eating.
- The easy availability of convenience/microwavable food in supermarkets was seen as having a negative influence by a small number of groups.

- Specific organisations were mentioned by some groups as having a positive influence, for example, BB, GB, Brownies Surestart, parent and toddler groups

**Lastly in this section parents were asked whether there were factors which they felt were more applicable to one gender or age group.**

There was a general consensus in many of the focus groups that boys are more involved in sports than girls, particularly in the teenage years. However one group highlighted the fact that boys are more involved with play stations than girls. One group suggested that girls are not encouraged to be active at the secondary stage of their education. It was felt that girls become very aware of their weight and what they eat when they become teenagers. In the comments from the travelling community it was pointed out that teenage boys become active through work whilst girls are involved in cleaning: these young people take on roles resembling those of adults.

In respect of age differences, there was no consensus between the groups. One group suggested that young children are more influenced by McDonalds advertising though another group suggested that older children are more influenced by TV. A couple of groups thought that parents have more influence over young children whilst one group said that older children are harder to influence, are more demanding in what they are prepared to eat and are more susceptible to what is deemed 'cool'. Once again it was suggested that girls are less active in the teenage years than boys whilst conversely teenage boys are more sporty. One group from the travelling community thought that good food was important for babies and that in the teenage years boys and girls are more influenced by their friends.

**General comments**

Vending machines should be removed from schools.

Leisure facilities should be more geared to families.

There is too little PE in schools.

Even when we try to provide healthy food it is hard to know what is in it.

Children are turned off PE at Secondary School.

We don't always 'walk the talk' about healthy eating and active living.

Our diets as children were healthier than our children's diets.

Children have too much freedom and choice: too much pocket money.

One parent with a disability mentioned the difficulties in taking her children swimming.

A history of social exclusion has meant that travellers have not participated in many activities like school sports or leisure centres.

TV has brought more influence in to travelling communities and would have more influence on traveller children.

The idea of having too much food is a relatively new one to the travelling community.

Travelling communities do not see government messages as relevant to them unless delivered more directly through health visitors/doctors etc. The group of mothers whose children had a disability mentioned the helpfulness of the dietician.

**The fourth and final exercise was designed to gather parent's views on who they consider to have a role in supporting children to eat healthily and be physically active and who they consider to have the most important role. It was also intended to ascertain their views on what they consider needs to happen to support them to support their children to live more healthily.**

### **Important roles**

The following represents all the people/groups/media considered by the parents to have a role:

Parents	School
TV	Friends and family
Health visitor	Food manufacturers
Advertisers	Clubs
Childminders/babysitters	Government
Surestart	Children themselves
Peers	Sport stars
Shops	Fast food outlets
Council/leisure centres	Community groups
Doctor	Grandparents
Mother	

Of the above all groups mentioned parents and schools as having an important role. Half the groups mentioned government and health professionals. TV and friends and family were also considered important by several groups. Parents and schools were considered by many of the groups as having the most important role. There was no consensus about who has the least important role. In spite of the comments just made 1 group considered schools to have the least important role though they felt this related more to the school's role in promoting physical activity as opposed to healthy eating.

In relation to the role of schools the following comments were made:

- Schools should do more activities like taking children swimming or to the park.
- School dinners could be better [2 groups].
- Teachers opinions will only be listened to if considered realistic to traveller's everyday experience.
- Schools have children much of the day so their role is very important [4 groups].
- Needs to be part of the school's curriculum to get the message across.
- What school offers at meal times is important.
- PE should have a bigger priority.
- Schools should involve parents more.

As is clear from these comments the school is seen as having an important role by most of the groups and 4 groups pointed out that a substantial part of the day is spent in school.

The parent groups were then asked to discuss what positive/negative experiences they had had of schools supporting children to eat healthily and be active and to give reasons why positive experiences had worked. [Reasons were rarely recorded].

### **Positive**

Healthy breaks x 5 groups

Water in classroom x 3 groups

Starting the day with exercise

Schools encouraging girls to play football x 2 groups

Lunch menus provided for parents to make choices

Bringing in empty fruit containers for recycling encourages children to eat fruit

1 day healthy eating initiative in primary schools

Breakfast clubs

### **Negative**

School lunches: children want chips, buns and sausages all the time

Vending machines and tuck shops x 2 groups

Milk in schools no longer available

Water not available in the classroom

Children refused permission to go out for a drink of water

Poor choice at cafeteria style lunches eg chips and nuggets

Over use of processed foods in school canteens

School dinners under funded

Fruit and vegetables not ripe or overcooked

Lunch boxes not monitored

Lack of restriction in choice for school lunches  
Chips on offer every day  
Not enough sports facilitated  
Salt is placed on tables at lunchtime

The main message is that much more could be done to provide healthier food choices at lunchtime. One group mentioned the importance of pupils and school staff working together on policy in relation to children and young people's health.

**Parents were then asked how they could support schools in promoting healthy eating and physical activity**

The following responses were given:

Set an example by own diet and exercise and become involved with children in physical activity – make it fun.

Cut out chips and replace with fruit and digestive biscuits.

Provide healthy snacks and lunches.

Ask what is on the school lunch menu.

Help with healthy break.

Walk to school.

Set foundations for children when young/involve children in making healthier choices.

Offer to help out with after school's exercise classes or breakfast clubs x 6 groups.

Support children playing sports x 2 groups.

Join the PTA.

Provide healthy lunch boxes for children.

Ask school to have sports days more than once a year.

Make sure children obey the rules [relating to health eating and being active].

Re-introduce family cooking skills classes in schools and for parents.

Parents clearly see they have a mayor role in supporting schools in their role in encouraging healthy eating and physical activity and 6 groups suggested becoming directly involved in school activities.

**The final question asked parents to consider what else could be done by them or others to support their children to eat healthily and be physically active.** The following responses were given:

Start early: try different ways to engage children's interest in healthy living.

Public displays of information.

Ban alcohol advertising on daytime TV.

Have guidance for supermarkets and school kitchens.  
Make food affordable and accessible to everyone.  
Provide free 'good food' coupons to parents.  
Provide free fruit/milk drinks in schools.  
Provide more youth leaders for teenage clubs.  
Good school awards to reward schools/pupils for their efforts.  
Local centres to run fitness marathons.  
Cheaper meals if 2 or more children at school.  
Provide a positive role model x 2 groups.  
Read labels and know what they mean.  
Do things as a family.  
Only have 1 healthy dinner each day.  
Don't make McDonalds a treat for children.  
Get involved in youth or sports clubs.  
Unhealthy product adverts should not be run using children.  
Provide more information on product contents.  
What is 'bad' food? We need clearer information.  
Take time to cook fresh food that looks and tastes good x 2 groups.  
Buy toys to encourage exercise.  
Encourage children to watch less TV/limit computer x 2 groups.  
Take children for walks x 3 groups.  
Go and 'do' with your children x 2 groups.  
Refuse to buy junk foods and restrict treats such as sweets and crisps x 3 groups.  
Learn how to cook healthy food: it is an essential skill.  
Have more fresh fruit and vegetables in the home.  
Walk children to school.  
Take competition out of physical activity to encourage wider participation.  
Provide lower cost leisure facilities.  
Government need to re-enforce health messages so people do not become complacent.  
Improve road safety in rural areas, for example, provide pavements /traffic calming measures.

One group made substantial comment about the inflexibility of the benefit system. It suggested that the benefit system is too rigid, for example milk tokens cannot be used for fruit/vegetables if the children do not drink milk. This group also made the point that families spend more on food and leisure in the summer months: government should recognise the extra costs associated with this period for people on benefits. Transport is also an issue for low income rural families. It was suggested that tokens could be provided for access to leisure centres/swimming/football etc or

alternatively extra benefits should be given to these families. This group also stated that support should be provided for parents with a disability so their children can partake of leisure activities such as swimming.

Once again it is clear that parents feel they could be supporting the healthy development of their children in a variety of practical ways. One group [NICEM and Traveller Women's group combined] recorded that being involved in the consultation had given them ideas to think about and they had enjoyed the discussion.

## **Conclusions**

Parenting Forum [NI], has developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on their views in relation to healthy eating and physical activity to feed into the work of the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 'Fit Futures' taskforce. The organisation is in a unique position to carry out such consultations because of its links with a huge network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland. The organisation consulted with 275 parents from 16 groups spread across Northern Ireland. The required mix of parents was met by selecting groups situated in areas of high deprivation eg Surestart groups, ethnic minority groups, groups parenting children with special needs and groups both in rural and urban locations.

The consultation has provided a range of useful information. The views of parents in areas of deprivation did not seem to differ from those in less deprived areas. Some small differences were noticed between the views of parents from the travelling community and those in the settled community and these were recorded in the main findings. Parents whose original country of origin is not the UK seemed to have an excellent knowledge of what constitutes healthy eating.

The key themes emerging from the discussion with parents are:

Parents have a good awareness of what is healthy and unhealthy food and feel it is important for their children to eat healthily. Some parents are unclear about the requirements for full fat products in the early years and little mention was made of essential fatty acids.

All the parent groups are aware of the link between poor diet and health.

All the parent groups see that physical activity is essential for health though only a third of the groups mentioned the direct link between inactivity and obesity/being overweight.

Parents feel that it is important for children to eat healthily and be physically active from an early age. They felt this is the time when good habits are adopted for life.

Parents see encouraging sports/participation in clubs and other physical activities as the main ways of ensuring that children are physically active

Walking was the most frequently mentioned form of exercise. This may reflect the effect of the TV campaign, 'Get Walking'.

Parents think that their children are trying to eat healthily and be physically active but name several challenges which sometimes get in the way, for example, time pressures, TV, computers, age related factors and taste preferences for sweet/salty foods.

TV campaigns are considered to have a positive impact on influencing children and young people.

TV advertising for foods/food outlets that are not healthy is considered to have a negative impact.

Parents deem themselves to be the single most influential factor as to whether children eat healthily and engage in physical activity.

Travelling communities have particular problems in relation to safe play space and food preparation.

Parents view boys as being more interested in sports/physical activity in the teenage years than girls.

Parents and schools are seen as having the most important role in supporting children and young people to eat healthily and to be physically active. Government is seen as important by half of the groups.

Whilst schools are seen as promoting healthy eating and physical activity in some instances, parents feel much more could be done. Unhealthy food on lunchtime menus was cited as an area for improvement. One early years group demonstrated commitment to healthy menu planning and the views of the centre's cook about healthy eating seemed to be influencing young children's food preferences positively.

Parents see they have a major role in supporting schools in their role of encouraging healthy eating and physical activity and have suggested a number of ways in which this could be achieved.

## **Recommendations**

- Parents are clearly interested in the issue of healthy eating and physical activity for their children. Ways should be found of involving them at local level in any strategy to reduce obesity in children.
- Greater use should be made of the TV as a medium for promoting healthy eating and physical activity.
- Adverts that suggest the health benefits of food that is largely unhealthy should be banned.
- The school's role in supporting children and young people to eat healthily and be active is seen as vital by parents. Further education based initiatives should be introduced.
- The school lunch is seen by many parents as an area for improvement. Any strategy should take this into account.
- The process of engaging with parents on healthy eating and physical activity has stimulated parents to think about the issues involved. Further use should be made of engaging with community based groups on this issue.

## **Executive summary**

A task force, Fit Futures: Focus on food, activity and young people, has been established jointly by the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in response to concerns that more children and young people are becoming very overweight. The role of the task force relates to both healthy eating and active living.

A key aspect of the work of the task force is to gather the ideas of children, young people and parents across Northern Ireland on what would encourage children and young people to be more active and to eat healthily.

The Parenting Forum NI was approached to carry out a consultation exercise with parents. Consultation with parents is an integral part of the work of the Parenting Forum [NI] and, as such, the organisation has developed effective methodology to carry out such consultations. To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately 2 hours for use with a number of parent focus groups throughout Northern Ireland. This ensured a uniform approach across all the focus groups. User friendly materials were designed in order to present to parents the key areas on which their views were being sought.

The Parenting Forum was aware at the outset of the need to ensure that a diverse group of parents was consulted and therefore parents were consulted from differing socio-economic backgrounds, from rural and urban areas, because they parented a child with a disability or because they were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

16 focus groups were set up [representing 18 groups]. Of these 14 focus groups were facilitated: 2 groups did not proceed for individual reasons.

The following is a summary of the main findings.

### **Exercise 1: the parents were asked to discuss a number of questions in small groups**

#### **1. What does healthy eating mean to you?**

The majority of groups mentioned fresh fruit and vegetables. Half of the groups mentioned sugar/sweets. 5 groups listed water, salt, junk or fast food and limited access to fats.

**2. Is healthy eating important and why?**

All the parents felt it is important. All the groups gave 'for health' as their reason with some expanding to mention growth and to prevent illnesses. Five groups cited 'energy' as one of the reasons. Some groups mentioned the prevention of specific illnesses: obesity, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

**3. Do you think it is important for children and young people to be physically active?**

There was a general consensus by the groups that physical activity is essential for health. Half of the groups specifically mentioned burning off fat and preventing obesity. Five groups mentioned the prevention of a number of health problems as the reason: heart disease, osteoporosis, depression and joint problems.

**4. Is it more important at a particular age for children to eat healthily or be physically active?**

Virtually all the parents thought that it is important for children to be physically active and eat healthily from an early age/birth.

**5. What do you feel you can do to ensure that your children eat healthily and participate in physical activity.**

Whilst there were many suggestions, there were some common themes running through most of the focus groups. Most groups named a number of sports and physical activities/clubs they should encourage their children to be involved in: bike riding, the park, swimming, walking, ice skating, rugby, hockey, Duke of Edinburgh's awards, activity clubs and horse riding. 9 groups mentioned walking which may point to the impact of the TV campaign, 'Get Walking'. Most of the focus groups emphasised the importance of parents providing good food for children with several examples being given of how this can be done.

**6. Do you think your children eat or are trying to eat healthily and be active?**

Virtually all groups of parents said 'yes'. Some qualified their responses.

**7. The last question in this section was designed to see what the words 'overweight' and 'obesity' mean to parents.**

From the many responses it is possible to conclude that parents see these words as relating to being fat or big and either bad diet or overeating.

### **Exercise 2**

**The second exercise was designed to find out what health campaigns parents are aware of and their thoughts on which had proved most effective. This exercise also sought parent's views on the health messages parents had received through other sources such as advertising, training courses, food labelling or through people such as health visitors or their parents.**

Parents were aware of many TV health campaigns. The overwhelming response from all the groups was that campaigns on TV had a positive impact: TV adverts were mentioned by all the groups, though 1 group also mentioned TV programmes, for example, 'You are what you eat'. Of all the TV health campaigns the most frequently mentioned ones were stop smoking, 5 a day, don't drink and drive and get walking/cycling. Magazines were the second most frequently mentioned media parents gave as being a source for receiving health messages.

### **Exercise 3**

**The third exercise was designed to find out parent's views on what encourages children to eat healthily or be physically active or conversely those factors that encourage unhealthy eating/physical inactivity.**

The groups came up with a long list of positive and negative influences. Most groups thought that parents are the single most influential factor as to whether their children eat healthily or participate in physical activity. The second most influential factor is seen as the school. Parents feel that the school can influence children and young people by offering healthy breaks or dinners, by offering healthy exercise, by having school rules such as no coke or chips, by providing water and through curricular activities. Advertising was named by half of the groups as having a negative influence. Parents stated that food is promoted as healthy when it is not. Free toys advertised with junk food were seen as having a bad influence. Fast food outlets such as KFC and McDonalds were listed by several groups as having a negative influence. Parent's time pressures and the price of food were also seen as negative influences by about half of the groups.

**Lastly in this section parents were asked whether there were factors which they felt were more applicable to one gender or age group.**

There was a general consensus in many of the focus groups that boys are more involved in sports than girls, particularly in the teenage years. In respect of age differences, there was no consensus between the groups.

#### **Exercise 4**

**The fourth and final exercise was designed to gather parent's views on who they consider to have a role in supporting children to eat healthily and be physically active and who they consider to have the most important role. It was also intended to ascertain their views on what they consider needs to happen to support them to support their children to live more healthily.**

All groups mentioned parents and schools as having an important role. Half the groups mentioned government and health professionals. TV and friends and family were also considered important by several groups. Parents and schools were considered by many of the groups as having the **most** important role.

**The focus groups were then asked to discuss what positive/negative experiences they had had of schools supporting children to eat healthily and be active and to give reasons why positive experiences had worked.**

Parents gave a variety of positive and negative experiences though no reasons were given. Many of the groups were critical of school lunches and felt that much more could be done to provide healthier food choices at lunchtime.

**Parents were asked how they could support schools in promoting healthy eating and physical activity**

Is clear that parents feel they could be supporting the schools in promoting healthy eating and physical activity amongst children and young people and gave a long list of suggestions as to how this could be achieved.

**The final question asked parents to consider what else could be done by them or others to support their children to eat healthily and be physically active.**

There were many suggestions given with no one suggestion being mentioned by several groups. One group had substantial comment about the inflexibility of the benefit system. It suggested that the benefit system is too rigid, for example milk tokens cannot be used for fruit/vegetables if the children do not drink milk.

