

Family Cookery

Working with the community to improve diets and social relations

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This case study forms part of the [Big Lottery Fund National Well-being Evaluation](#). CLES Consulting was commissioned in 2008 with nef to undertake the evaluation. This case study is one of nineteen case studies that will be completed throughout the lifetime of the evaluation, which runs from December 2008 to September 2013. For more information about the evaluation, please see the [well-being pages of the CLES Consulting website](#). The Family Cookery project is part of [Chances4Change](#), the South East of England's portfolio of well-being projects.

Background to the project

Family Cookery is run by the Sunshine Centre, a Sure Start centre for children and families in Banbury. The centre aims to provide support and services for families in deprived areas of Banbury, and to help people improve their health and well-being.

KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

The project is designed to reduce the impact of deprivation, exclusion and health inequalities on families in the Banbury area. Family Cookery targets 'at risk' groups and aims to address the following issues:

- ❑ **poor health** – Family Cookery aims to improve health by providing adults and children with the skills and knowledge to make healthier choices through simple and affordable ways for families to change their diets;
- ❑ **social isolation** – the project aims to reach out to isolated families through activities which are designed to encourage positive social interaction and provide opportunities to build stronger relationships within the family and wider community;
- ❑ **low self-confidence** – by helping people acquire new skills, both in the kitchen and socially, the project aims to improve the confidence and self-esteem of participants in their wider lives and encourage them to feel more able to contribute to their community;
- ❑ **access to support** – the Family Cookery team see the courses they run as a way of connecting with at risk or isolated families and providing week by week support. Building this relationship is particularly important for target families who may be in need of more in depth or longer term support. It is hoped a positive experience with Family Cookery activities may encourage families to attend the Sunshine Centre more regularly and to feel comfortable approaching the centre for support with specific concerns or needs.

THE ACTIVITIES

The project activities are designed to provide opportunities for families to develop skills and confidence in cooking healthy food, for them to engage with one another, and to become comfortable interacting with the project staff.

The main activity is the delivery of courses teaching families how to cook together. The courses run for one term (in the school year) and consist of weekly classes teaching basic cookery skills to small groups of parents and their children. Each week of the course covers a different meal idea, and the recipes are designed to:

- ❑ be simple to follow and recreate at home;
- ❑ contain aspects that can involve the children;
- ❑ use relatively few ingredients;
- ❑ use easily available and affordable ingredients;
- ❑ create healthy meals.

The Family Cookery team has also run one-day events such as the 'Picnic Bus' family day out. Families came together on the morning of the event to cook and prepare a picnic lunch. The menu was carefully designed to provide a variety of ideas for healthy and tasty food for lunch boxes and snacks, and to show how simply these could be put together. The families then travelled on a bus provided by Cherwell District Council to share and enjoy the picnic they created. Afterwards the families took part in some outdoor games.

OUTCOMES

As part of this study, we spoke to the Family Cookery team at the Sunshine Centre, the cookery teacher, and number of families. The discussions identified a range of positive outcomes linked to healthy diets, family life, well-being and self-confidence. These are discussed in more detail in the sections below.

Improved diet and understanding of healthy eating

Overwhelmingly, the beneficiaries said that since starting the cookery course they cooked freshly prepared meals more often. Even those who had not often cooked at home had tried making at least one or two of the recipes from the classes. Those who had cooked regularly before attending the course commented that they had learnt new meal ideas or used new ingredients:

'I cook new things now. I really like a couple [of the recipes] we've done.'

Healthy eating outcomes are being monitored through the project's self-evaluation activities for the Chances4Change portfolio level [evaluation](#) being managed by Building Blocks¹. The data sent by the project to Chances4Change for the 2010 end of year evaluation report indicates that as the project intended, beneficiaries are making healthy changes to their diets. Before involvement in the project, the average number of days a week on which families had eaten fruit or vegetables was five; after involvement this average was seven, and in total 51% of those who were evaluated² had increased their score.

One parent described the difficulties she experienced trying to persuade her children to eat healthier food. She was finding the course helpful because the support of Family Cookery and the other families on the course was starting to get the message across:

'I wish my kids would eat better but it's difficult as their parent, sometimes they are more likely to listen to other people.'

At the beginning of each course some children were very reluctant to try new foods but by the end they were trying all the dishes being prepared in the classes. For these children in particular, the project has been successful in introducing families to new and healthier ingredients and meal choices:

'We had kids coming in at the start who hardly ate anything; by the time the five or six weeks were up they were eating the whole meal. We consider that a win.'

Stronger family relations

For some families, taking part in Family Cookery had been the first time the family had ever sat down and eaten together. This had been a positive experience and several families have commented that since being involved they try to eat together more regularly at home. Other families found that as well as learning new cooking skills, the course helped them discover how cookery could be made into a fun, social activity they could do together as a family:

'I think it's important to learn to cook when you're young and it's nice to do with the kids.'

'I cooked before at home but I didn't really know how to get the kids involved.'

The one-day activities, such as the picnic bus, were particularly good at engaging the whole family at once whereas in most cases only one parent attended the cookery course. However on one course, two parents had taken it in turns to participate so that both were able to pick up new skills and spend some quality time with the children:

'We had a family where one week the mum came and the next week the dad so it was the whole family getting cooking.'

¹ Building Blocks is a project in the Chances4Change portfolio but maintains distance by being separate from the main portfolio management.

² 37 parents were involved in the evaluation, out of 53 who were involved in the activity

The beneficiaries we spoke to had all recreated at least some of the recipes used on the course at home, meaning some of the health benefits were extended to family members who had not participated. Families who cook or eat more together at home after being part of Family Cookery also felt this had led to improvements in the relationships between family members. This is an important legacy for Family Cookery because through their participation many families cook, eat and socialise more together, leading to social and health benefits which are being sustained beyond their involvement with the project.

Enhanced social well-being

Family Cookery activities combine the promotion of healthy eating with situations designed to facilitate social interaction. Fostering improved relationships, and reducing isolation and exclusion are some of the project's key aims. Some of the softer outcomes being reported by beneficiaries indicate that Family Cookery was able to meet these objectives. Participants were very enthusiastic about the course as a social event. Friendships and support networks which had developed between the families were felt to be one of the main benefits of participating:

'We're friends in the group and we help each other.'

For many families, the course is a valued opportunity to socialise and the classes become an event in the week which participants look forward to. Once involvement ends, the participants lose this regular social activity and contact with the support from Sunshine Centre staff. At the close of one course, beneficiaries commented:

'I'll really miss it; I don't know what I'll do next week.'

'I came for the girls. They think it's great and it's been good for them, but I've really enjoyed myself too.'

After participants finish the course some of these social benefits also end; however some families stay in contact and sustain the new friendships they have made. In particular, several families on one course became such good friends through Family Cookery that they have continued to cook and eat together at least once a month, often recreating the recipes they learnt on the course.

Increased confidence and self esteem

Of particular note is the impact on the confidence and self-esteem of participants. Several of the beneficiaries we spoke to had become confident enough to adapt recipes from the course. Parents became more confident in their ability to cook from scratch and make healthy choices for the family:

'I'm not much of a cook but they make you confident.'

'I could cook a bit before, but pastry and things like that I couldn't. Now look, I'm doing it!'

The effects of this confidence extended beyond cookery. One particular example is a beneficiary whose increased confidence helped her to develop new leadership skills, becoming a mentor for others on the course. She had been referred to the project by social services and was initially uninterested in the idea of a cookery course. However she turned up and participated fully, gaining confidence quickly and became so supportive of the other participants that the Sunshine Centre team wrote to social services praising the progress she had made:

'[At first] she really did not want to come, but she got involved and enjoyed the cooking. The next week another family joined and she really took it upon herself to help them find things in the kitchen... she found confidence she didn't know she had.'

Wider impacts on communities

The project also aims to promote healthier eating in the wider community. There is some evidence of this happening because parents taking part in the courses often mentioned that they share the recipes and advice from Family Cookery with friends and other parents at their children's schools. Depending on how often these recipes are used and whether they are passed further along, Family Cookery could be having a multiplier effect on healthy eating and cookery, with recipes being passed through social networks. The team hope that the project will disseminate knowledge and ideas for healthy snacks and lunch boxes among the families of children in the two host primary schools.

WHY THE PROJECT WORKS

The research identified a number of factors important to the project's successes.

Flexible content

There is no fixed content to be covered on the cookery courses, instead a flexible approach is taken and the meals are tailored to the specific groups of families, their likes, needs and existing knowledge. This means for each group the recipes are pitched at the right level of cooking ability and include family members with allergies or special dietary requirements. This has included providing recipes for Halal and Coeliac diets. Family Cookery tries, where possible, to accommodate requests to include recipes for specific dishes. The extra effort to ensure that recipes will be useful to the families in the group is something that is highly valued by the beneficiaries:

'They've been really good at including me in the class. After all, why learn to cook something I can't eat?'

'I asked about doing this last week, I thought it was something nice the kids could join in with.'

As the course progresses each family builds up a folder of the recipes used on the course, making it easy for beneficiaries to recreate the dishes at home. Recipes can be daunting for those who do not feel that they can cook proficiently, but the Family Cookery format helps to overcome this barrier. Recipes are selected or adapted so that each one consists of just a few, easy to follow steps. The cookery teacher and Sunshine Centre project staff work closely together to make sure the recipes are healthy, affordable, and contain short lists of ingredients.

'Normally, you'd just look at a recipe and think it's too hard but this one, it's just four ingredients... they start easy and it builds you up.'

Targeted recruitment

Family Cookery is an inclusive project and the team endeavour to include any family expressing an interest in the activities. At the same time, they target recruitment toward families and children in the Banbury area who are identified as being in need of extra support and who may be socially isolated. This is intended to assist in achieving the project's aims of addressing the damaging impact of deprivation on families and improving their diet and nutrition.

Family Cookery achieves this by engaging participants through word of mouth and referrals from schools, social services, health providers, and other local Sure Start centres. The referral process is aimed at those families who, because of their social isolation, are unlikely to be in the networks reached through word of mouth.

The Family Cookery project shows a good understanding of the communities it seeks to engage (e.g. activities are free of charge, making it more likely that deprived and isolated families will feel able to participate). The ingredients used are inexpensive and readily available in the local shops, ensuring that families will be able to make the dishes at home. The recipes are chosen to be easy to read and follow, which is ideal for the children and reassuring for parents who are not used to cooking dishes from basic ingredients. To help those with low self-confidence feel able to participate, the Sunshine Centre provides a high level of support for families during recruitment and once they are involved in Family Cookery activities. Family Cookery introduces families to new ingredients and meal ideas, and because they only use ingredients which are widely available, the recipes are accessible and achievable for families to recreate at home:

'They use the things you can easily get in at home.'

Accessible courses

The project worked hard to help families overcome barriers to engagement. The courses have run in three local venues: the Sunshine Centre; and two Banbury primary schools. This provides options of different times and locations so families are able to select a course which is convenient for them to attend. The team works closely with the two primary schools to identify families or children who may be in need of support thus in many cases children can attend straight from school. The venues are also chosen to offer a familiar and non-threatening environment in which to participate.

Family Cookery estimate that at least a third of all beneficiaries were from the target group, although the vast majority have low cooking skills or struggle trying to persuade their children to eat more healthily. A minority are interested in the course more as a social activity or to pick up some new recipe ideas. Whilst the project initially struggled to recruit participants, both word of mouth and referrals increased towards the end of the funded period as families and service providers became more aware of the project's activities and the associated benefits.

Many of the outcomes experienced by beneficiaries arise directly as a result of the social and family orientated format of the project's activities. The children tended to be more willing to try new foods when they were involved in the cookery. Including both children and parents in the activities means two generations of the family are learning to cook and socialise together, helping prevent childcare becoming a barrier to participation. With the cookery course, parents knew they had the support of the Family Cookery team and that the children would be eating well, having fun and learning new skills:

'Here they're making things and having fun...at other classes you'd have to find somewhere to put them like a crèche.'

That the children attend alongside their parents has been important in enabling parents take the course. Securing childcare would have been expensive and parents were concerned to avoid relying on friends or wider family every week:

'No one wants to look after them after school; everyone has been working and are exhausted.'

The connection made with some of the families is an important part of what the project has achieved. Relationships of trust and respect have been built between families and the support staff, even in cases where people have been very reluctant initially to engage with the activity. This rapport makes it more likely families will engage with support or even seek out services. In this way, the progress made by Family Cookery could prove invaluable in helping to further reduce the impacts of inequality and deprivation.

Addresses a gap in provision

If the Family Cookery programme had not gone ahead, it appears that many of the benefits described above would have been lost. Cherwell District Council had previously run basic cookery courses; however these finished before Family Cookery began. There are other basic cookery or healthy eating courses available in the area but the Family Cookery activities stand apart from these in a number of ways:

- there is a choice of times and local venues;
- the recipes are tailored to the needs of each group;
- parents and children participate together;
- the classes are free of charge.

Participants commented that without the class they would not have made changes to their diets or taken up a different activity:

'If we weren't here, do you know where we'd be, just sat at home.'

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SIMILAR INTERVENTIONS IN THE FUTURE

- There may be a benefit from forging further partnerships to try to sustain the project activity and to link into other well-being and health services in the area.
- Referrals and targeted outreach to families has been one of the project's strengths and, should be considered for the future.
- Engaging parents and children together has proved to be a successful best practice approach, with changes in the healthy eating behaviour being reinforced within the family.
- Training volunteers to teach and lead their own family cookery groups may be a way for the centre to continue to provide activities after the funding ends. This would be an excellent next step for people who progress on the course but it would mean less direct contact between Family Cookery beneficiaries and the Sunshine Centre's staff. This contact has been important in building people's trust and willingness to engage with support.
- With well-being and happiness moving up the political agenda there may be opportunities for the Sunshine Centre to grow its relationships with Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County

Council³, which recently identified Banbury as in particular need of targeted assistance in public health and social inclusion.

- The Sunshine Centre should continue to develop the relationship with the NHS healthy eating project, and look for similar opportunities as they arise. Healthy eating interventions may be of interest to local GP surgeries when their expected powers to commission health services are brought in.

³ Oxfordshire Children's and Young People's Plan 2010-2013

APPENDIX 1: HOW THE PROJECT WORKS

About the Chances4Change portfolio

The Family Cookery project is managed and delivered by the Sunshine Centre, which alongside the cookery classes provides a wide range of services for children and families. The project contributes to the healthy eating theme of the Chances4Change portfolio.

Chances4Change is run by the South East Coast Strategic Health Authority and consists of 62 projects across the South East which aims to help and encourage people of all ages to eat more healthily, be more active, and improve their mental well-being. The portfolio received £5.6 million from the Big Lottery Fund Well-Being Programme. The focus of the portfolio is to address hidden health inequalities in the South East and improve the health and well-being of the region's people.

Project inputs

Costs

The Family Cookery project received £20,000 of funding from Chances4Change. This was to be spent over a three year period, which came to an end on 31st December 2010. The funding has been primarily used to contract the teacher for the family cookery course, and to provide ingredients and basic cookery equipment for all project activities. There were no further sources of funding, although the Sunshine Centre has input significantly into the project. This has included the time committed by two staff to manage and deliver the project, and for the use of its facilities as one venue for the cookery courses. At the time of writing the Sunshine Centre is seeking alternative funding sources, to develop new partnerships or to downsize provision to enable Family Cookery, or a similar a basic cookery training programme to continue.

Staffing

Delivery of the project has been coordinated between the two members of the project team from the Sunshine Centre and a contracted cookery teacher. Recipes for the activities are supplied by the cookery teacher and agreed with the team at the Sunshine Centre, in terms of their fit with the families involved and with the project's healthy eating aims. Organisation of the activities, venues, and support has been the responsibility of the Sunshine Centre team. Family Cookery has been run by an experienced team from the Sunshine Centre which has provided similar activities in the past; as a result, the project has not been significantly involved with other Chances4Change projects or the portfolio itself, with the exception of some assistance designing self-evaluation tools that fit with the portfolio as a whole.

Whilst the Sunshine Centre is the sole organisation delivering the project, there has been some involvement of outside organisations. This has included initial contact and support from the Chances4Change portfolio. Two local primary schools have hosted cookery courses, giving the Family Cookery project access to their kitchens and facilities. Finally, Cherwell District Council provided the bus for the picnic bus activity.

Outputs

The Chances4Change funding for the Family Cookery project ran until 31 December 2010. By this time, the full £20 000 had been spent. Overall, 392 beneficiaries have been reached by Family Cookery; the figure includes both parents and children involved in Family Cookery courses or activities.