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Family cooking lessons and fun exercise could be the key to cutting childhood obesity

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Organising cooking lessons for parents and children and planning extra exercise classes in school time are some of the activities that have shown promise in preventing obesity in primary school aged children, a University of Birmingham study published today has shown.

The study looked into a range of interventions across eight primary schools in Birmingham, in a bid to find out which types of activity were most acceptable to children, parents and school staff – and which were the most feasible to carry out. More than 1,000 children aged between six and eight-years-old took part in the activities. The researchers chose schools with high proportions of children from a South Asian background, as national childhood surveillance programmes have shown that children from South Asian ethnic groups are more likely to become overweight whilst at primary school than others, and are more likely to suffer the health effects of obesity in adulthood.

Six interventions were included in the study, and these included physical activities within the school day, an incentive scheme to encourage physical activity away from school, attendance at a course run by a Premier League football club, cooking courses for family members, taster sessions for families at local leisure centres and community walking programmes.

Schools were paired up and divided into intervention and comparison groups so the outcomes from the interventions could be compared across the two groups. When the children were followed up two years later, it

was found that children who received the interventions were less likely to become overweight or obese.

The physical activities held within the school day were found to be particularly acceptable to all – teachers, parents and children, with parents feeling their children were undertaking a noticeably larger amount of exercise. Cookery classes for parents and children in school time also proved popular and the researchers found evidence that the classes influenced confidence and cooking practices.

The one intervention which was found to be neither acceptable or feasible was community walking programmes. There were a lack of volunteers to become trained walk leaders to initiate the walking programmes even where there was initial interest.

Some components of the study were acceptable to children, parents and teachers but were not feasible as the co-operation from outsiders was not able to be maintained – such as giving children special stickers for a chart each time they visited local leisure facilities.

Following on from this study, university researchers have refined the programme of activities to include only those that are feasible to deliver and acceptable to families and schools. They are currently running a large trial to determine how big an effect the programme has in terms of helping young children to avoid obesity.

Prof Peymane Adab, Senior Lecturer in Public Health and Epidemiology at the University of Birmingham, said: "These activities have the potential to make a real difference to the future health of our children".

More information: "Preventing childhood obesity, phase II feasibility study focusing on South Asians: BEACHeS." Peymané Adab, Miranda J Pallan, Janet Cade, Ulf Ekelund, Timothy Barrett, Amanda Daley,

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