

A means of combatting childhood obesity

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Children taking part in the Food Dudes programme find that they enjoy eating fruit and vegetables.

Recently, the World Health Organisation has highlighted that child obesity is a major problem. More than 40 million pre-school children worldwide are now overweight, the UK being no exception. Child obesity tends to track into adulthood, and increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some cancers in later life.

So finding ways to prevent child obesity has therefore become a major public health priority. But there is good news too: evidence suggests that increasing the amount of [fruit and vegetables children](#) eat can help curb their weight gain.

[Food Dudes Health](#), a Social Enterprise working in partnership with Bangor University, have developed the Food Dudes Healthy Eating Programme, an evidence-based behaviour change intervention, that

produces large and lasting increases in the amount of [fruit](#) and vegetables children eat.

The core psychological principles of the Programme are Role-Modelling, Rewards, and Repeated Tastings.

All [primary school](#) children in Ireland have taken part in the Food Dudes programme, and it is also being rolled out regionally across primary schools in the UK.

However, child obesity begins well before children start primary school. To try to make a difference even earlier, a KESS-funded project has now helped develop a Food Dudes programme for nursery-aged children. Led by KESS scholar Catherine Sharp, and supervised by Prof. Pauline Horne and Dr. Mihela Erjavec, the project measured the impact of the nursery programme in a six-school controlled evaluation.

To encourage the toddlers to eat a range of provided fruit and vegetables, they first watched a role-modelling video showing young versions of the Food Dudes characters, Rocco, Razz, Tom, and Charlie, who love eating fruit and vegetables because they provide "special energy" for fun and play. When the toddlers then ate the fruit and vegetables provided each day, they were given small, Food Dudes customised rewards.

The children who took part in the Programme began to eat a lot more fruit and vegetable. At 3-months follow-up, they were still eating 60% more fruit, and 131% more vegetables as compared to before they started the programme. Meanwhile, the children in the control nurseries - who were given the same fruit and vegetables as in the Intervention nurseries, but without the Food Dudes role-modelling video and rewards - did not show these improvements.

The large and lasting increases in fruit and vegetable consumption achieved by the new nursery programme adds to the success of the Food Dudes Programme to increase the amount of fruit and vegetables primary school children eat. The results also shows that giving children fruit and [vegetables](#) alone is not enough to motivate children to eat the foods.

This KESS-funded research has received the top Health Research Award from LARIA (Local Authorities Research Intelligence Association). The new Nursery Programme has now been commissioned in over 130 UK nurseries, with further interest from Italy and the U.S.

Building on the KESS partnership established with Food Dudes Health, Catherine has now embarked on a PhD funded by the School of Psychology, Bangor University. In partnership with Food Dudes Health, she will develop a programme targeting physical activity in nursery children to provide an even more powerful means of preventing [child obesity](#) and the health risks that go with it.

Provided by Bangor University

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