

Research reveals new benefits of school holiday clubs

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Prof. Greta Defeyter with children growing vegetables in an allotment at Bridgewater Primary School holiday club. Credit: Northumbria University

With the Government's announcement today (27 July) of a £2 million

fund to provide holiday activities for children, newly-published research from Northumbria University, Newcastle has revealed that holiday clubs provide many more benefits for both children and parents than previously believed.

Northumbria University undertook the largest ever study of school holiday clubs in England during the 2017 summer break.

The holiday clubs taking part in the study had been organised by the North East Child Poverty Trust, Children North East and the Big Lottery Fund, in response to the impact of 'holiday hunger' as a key issue for struggling families in the North East.

School holiday clubs will keep millions of [children](#) across the country entertained while parents work over the summer period. While it was already known that holiday clubs help to combat childhood hunger through their provision of healthy meals, researchers found they also helped parents by alleviating their stress and improving their all-round health and wellbeing.

Parents said that the clubs provided their children with safe places to play; gave them opportunities to learn new skills and engage in a range of new experiences. Many of the children transferred these new skills and experiences into their homes, for example, through offering to cook meals or wanting to grow their own vegetables.

Importantly, parents also reported that the clubs increased their own wellbeing by relieving the financial strain that comes with finding food and activities for their children during the holidays.

They said the clubs also allowed them to establish or strengthen their relationships in the local community and enabled them to spend more quality time with their families.

The study examined 17 holiday clubs across the North East region. The clubs provided over 600 children aged 5-14 with more than 3,000 breakfasts and 7,000 lunches, as well as offering a varied and stimulating programme of activities. These included growing and cooking foods, arts and crafts, sports and games, storytelling and day trips to beaches and local National Trust sites.

More than 130 parents shared their experiences of the clubs with researchers. Mother of five, Clare Hutchinson, from Benwell, Newcastle, said that school holiday clubs had given her considerable help, both financially and emotionally.

"Financially you never have much money – we'd usually just go to parks – so doing groups with other people is brilliant for the community and the school," she said.

"I went to a gardening club, a trip to Gibside and another trip to a museum. I suffer from panic, anxiety and [mental health problems](#), so doing that with the kids was a big thing for me. It made me feel much more confident to do things with my children and attend more groups at the school. It brings everyone together. You meet new parents that you wouldn't have spoken to and you all make new friends."

Other notable findings emerging from the research included:

- Children's diets significantly improved on the days children attended holiday clubs. They consumed more fruit, vegetables, protein, dairy, grains and cereals and drank water more frequently, rather than sweetened drinks.
- Children engaged in more physical activity and said they enjoyed exercise more on the days they attended the clubs.
- They spent less time playing video games on computers, games consoles, phones and other devices.

- They said they enjoyed attending the clubs as they participated in a variety of activities they did not normally have access to during the summer holidays.

Professor Greta Defeyter, Director of Northumbria University's Healthy Living Lab, said: "Our findings suggest that [holiday club](#) provision offers the potential to have a far wider impact than previously evidenced on children's health, wellbeing and education.

"They revealed that activities provided at clubs are one of the most highly valued aspects of this provision, both by children and parents. The consistent theme of 'safety' reported by children, parents and staff was quite remarkable and something not previously reported.

"The clubs provided parents with the peace of mind that their children were in a safe environment and not unsupervised or on the streets where they could become targets of abuse or violence.

"The parental data also provided clear insight into difficulties parents often face during the holidays including difficulties in finding and paying for childcare, and general cuts in child and youth services in local communities."

Provided by Northumbria University

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