

A qualitative study investigating young people's opinions on barriers and facilitators to physical activity and eating well, and the development of a new behaviour change programme

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Background

Physical activity and diet quality decline during the adolescent years,^{1,2} putting young people at risk of health conditions and failure to reap health benefits.³ Therefore, interventions are warranted to support young people to be active and eat healthily. The development of such interventions benefit from seeking the views of young people to understand influences on their behaviour and gather opinions on programme design.⁴

Objectives

- To understand from the perspective of young people, the factors that influence their physical activity and healthy eating behaviour
- To seek opinions on the design of a future programme to support young people with making positive changes to their physical activity and healthy eating behaviour

Methods

- Online qualitative 1:1 interviews with 23 young people aged 11-19 years, (M=14, SD=2), 78% female
- A semi-structured interview schedule used open-ended questions to elicit views on barriers and facilitators, support needed for behaviour change, and opinions on features of a new programme
- Pseudonymised, verbatim interview transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis⁵

Results

Five themes were developed, the first four of which centre around barriers and facilitators for physical activity and healthy eating, and the last focusing on future programme development (Figure 1).

Theme one: Knowledge of physical and mental health impact

Young people displayed some knowledge around what physical activity is and how to eat healthily, though this was limited to overarching concepts rather than specific details, while gaps were both evident and acknowledged. They expressed some awareness of the benefits of being active and eating healthily, both in relation to physical health and mental health, and they appreciated these behaviours contribute to wellbeing through resulting emotions.

“I try to do 15 minutes a day because I think as long as you do a little bit every day it's okay.”
(Isla, 17)

“Say you eat something bad, you feel good at the moment, but then once you've eaten it you kind of feel like, Oh that was a bit, maybe I shouldn't have eaten that, I feel a little bit kind of fat now, maybe I should have eaten something a bit better.”
(Francis, 16)



Theme two: School and the wider environment

Young people spoke about the environment being non-conducive to being active and healthy eating, whether that be through infrastructure of where they live or the abundance and easy availability of junk food. Schools were also considered incongruous with health behaviours, though their potential to support young people was noted, by providing more opportunities to be active and eat healthily, and providing information on these topics.

“As soon as you walk in the door at the Co-Op outside my school you've got the, like the stand of cookies and freshly baked doughnuts and things and it's all really cheap.”
(Edith, 17)

“Getting you involved can be quite an issue for quite a lot of people, and teachers are usually, generally very good at that sort of thing.”
(Owen, 16)



Theme three: The role of social systems

The role of other people in the social system of young people was considered important. Current behaviours were seen as a result of their upbringing during which young people were dependent on their parents to provide guidance and opportunities. Young people considered themselves, as adolescents, to still be reliant on parents so they need to be onboard with making changes. Young people spoke about friends being a source of support and influence, to engage in both healthy and unhealthy behaviour alike.

“If I did my own food shop I would have a lot more control of what I could have. Like I'd definitely buy more stuff that I personally liked, which was more healthy.”
(Braylee, 17)



“We're all eating unhealthy so I'm like Oh it's fine, we're all doing it... As soon as everyone starts eating healthy I'll be like Oh hang on a minute, maybe I should too.”
(Juliet, 19)

Conclusions

- This study discovered barriers and facilitators faced by young people in the general population when trying to be active and eat healthily
- The support young people want in order to change their behaviours was identified and they detailed how new programmes should look to provide optimal support
- Incorporating the findings from this study into future behaviour change programmes will create a useable, appealing, and beneficial source of support for young people

What factors can influence a physical activity and healthy eating behaviour change programme for young people?

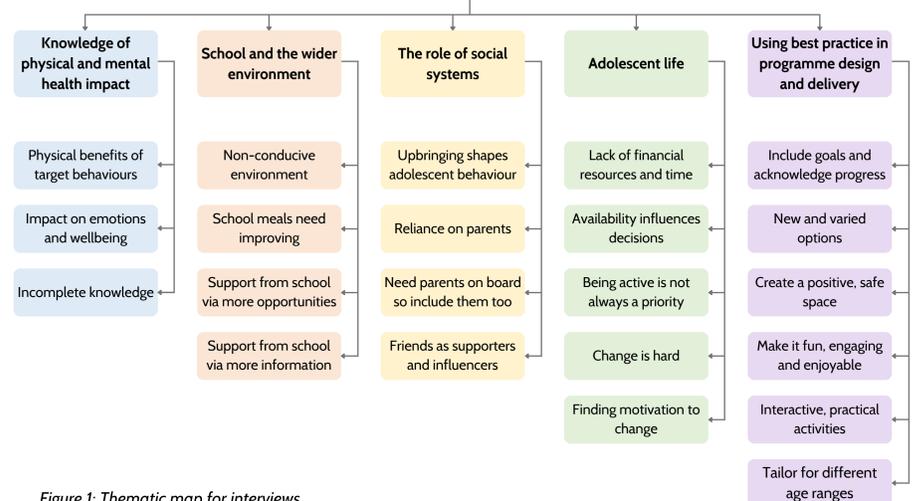


Figure 1: Thematic map for interviews

Theme four: Adolescent life

Young people identified prominent features of their lives which influence their behaviour. They spoke about resources required to be active and eat healthily, which often they lack. Therefore, young people make use of what is available to them, which may not be the healthiest option. Young people identified that physical activity is not always a priority and is trumped by other activities which are more important or more desirable. They also expressed finding change difficult and discussed the role motivation plays in engaging in healthy behaviours.

“If you've got like ice cream, then obviously you're gonna have the ice cream if you're hungry, and so it's about the food that you...have in your house.”
(Edith, 17)

“I'd need support from people around me like motivation for me to do something because I know it's very hard to motivate yourself.”
(Miley, 14)



Theme five: Using best practice in programme design and delivery

Young people considered what they want from a programme to support them with health related behaviours. Goals were considered a way to focus on what it is they want to achieve and monitor progress, which they would need to see. Having options on how to make changes was considered important. Young people voiced wanting programmes to be a safe, positive space that is fun and engaging, with peers their own age. They expressed wanting information to be delivered in interactive, practical ways to make sessions more engaging and also to provide an opportunity to develop skills.

“You will need like varied, like variations and everything so it's not too hard for some people and not too easy for others.”
(Ruth, 14)

“I know like for me if it wasn't interactive I wouldn't really want to do it.”
(Amelia, 15)



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