Testing the feasibility of a sustainable preschool obesity prevention approach: a mixed-methods service evaluation of a volunteer-led HENRY programme

The UK charity HENRY (Health, Exercise, Nutrition for the Really Young) has been providing evidence-based behaviour change programmes to parents across the UK to reduce childhood obesity. They intervene at the parental level to help parents achieve healthier outcomes for themselves and their children. The mixed-methods evaluation discussed in this article consisted of either one-hour one-to-one weekly sessions with parents of children up to five years old and was delivered by volunteers in four boroughs in London. Parental measures were recorded as follows: attendance and programme satisfaction, “stepping stones” of health, parenting efficacy and ability to set limits, emotional well-being of parents and children, eating behaviours, food intake, and physical activity and screen time.

97% of parents participating in the programme were female, 58% of which were from diverse ethnic backgrounds. 52% of the parental participants were not working. Participation was consistent, with an average attendance of 7.2 out of 8 sessions. Post-program, there were significant improvements in many self-reported behaviours, including parenting efficacy, ability to set limits, parental emotional wellbeing, child mood and liveliness, and family eating behaviours. These eating behaviours included eating with others, not eating while watching TV, not eating when angry/bored/low, and eating healthy meals. Improvements in parental awareness of portion sizes and willingness to try new recipes were also seen. Another improvement was seen in the number of times per day parents reported themselves and their children eating fruit and vegetables and their children drinking water.

Volunteers delivering the programme reported that having relationships with the parents they worked with was a key part of the holistic nature of the intervention: “it focused on more than just food”. From this programme, we can see that recruiting and training volunteers is a feasible method for a preschool childhood obesity prevention intervention instituted through parental training. The initial successes of the benefits seen for parents and children from the intervention highlight this.

Due to its ongoing successes in communities around the UK, the HENRY programme has expanded internationally into Israel, the Netherlands and Hong Kong. For more information, its website is https://www.henry.org.uk/.