

# **Breakfast and Breakfast Clubs for Primary School Children**

## **UK Literature and Lessons to be Learned**

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# **Breakfast and Breakfast Clubs for Primary School Children**

## **Literature and Lessons to be Learned**

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## **Introduction**

Medical experts and educationalists have long held the view that eating a healthy breakfast every morning is essential in helping children's performance at school, staying healthy (Smith, 2003) and maintaining a healthy body weight<sup>1 2 3 4</sup>. Despite being thought of as the most important meal of the day, recent surveys have revealed that up to 20 per cent of British School Children regularly leave home in the morning without having had anything to eat<sup>5</sup> (for example, The Sodexo School Meals and Lifestyles Survey, 2004). The recent National Diet and Nutrition Survey of young people aged 4 to 18 years<sup>6</sup> reported that schoolchildren's diets were not meeting recommended standards (Ref.).

Eating a healthy balanced diet is crucial to everyone's health needs, but this is particularly true for active, growing school children that have high energy, vitamin and mineral requirements<sup>7</sup>. Children over 5 years of age are beginning to take responsibility for their own food intake so it is important that they understand the need for a healthy diet<sup>8</sup> and develop good eating habits from an early age<sup>9</sup>.

## **Why is breakfast important?**

### **▪ Health Benefits of Breakfast**

Breakfast provides the ideal opportunity for children to take in plenty of the essential nutrients that the body needs each day<sup>10 11</sup> by eating bread, other cereals, fruits and vegetables, which are all important elements of a healthy and balanced diet<sup>12</sup>. Health professionals recommend that breakfast should provide 25 per cent of the day's nutrient requirements<sup>13</sup>, many of which, if missed at breakfast, are unlikely to be compensated for at other meals throughout the day<sup>14</sup>.

Overnight our bodies need energy and in particular the brain needs glucose, a form of carbohydrate. Carbohydrate is supplied from the day's meals and snacks and is stored as glycogen in our muscles and liver<sup>15</sup>. We need to eat breakfast to end the night-time fast, replacing some of the glycogen stores and raising blood sugar levels (which tend to drop overnight and can be low on waking), allowing us to function more effectively and providing energy for the morning's activities<sup>16</sup>. This is particularly important for sustained mental work

(including memory and concentration) over the morning<sup>17</sup> and for the muscles for physical activity<sup>18</sup>.

Another reason for having breakfast is the so-called *kick-start* it gives to our metabolic rate. After every meal there is a surge in oxygen uptake as food is digested and absorbed. Overnight your metabolism slows down so eating soon after you wake up helps boost your metabolism and gets the body going again<sup>19</sup>.

Regular consumption of breakfast cereal has also been associated with lower blood cholesterol levels in children (Resnicow, K., 1991. Relationship between breakfast habits and plasma cholesterol levels in school children. *Journal of School Health*, 61, 2, 81-85). Children who eat breakfast cereals regularly tend to acquire less of their energy from fat – high levels of fat may be linked to obesity which can, in later life, lead to diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Fortified breakfast cereals provide important vitamins such as the B vitamins (necessary for energy production) and minerals such as iron (necessary for healthy blood). Milk is an important source of protein (necessary for growth and repair), B vitamins such as riboflavin and B12, and minerals such as zinc, magnesium and particularly calcium (necessary for healthy bones and teeth). A serving of milk on cereal can provide up to half our daily calcium requirement<sup>20</sup>.

The consumption of wholegrain foods offers many advantages to general health and well being. Research has shown that people with a lower risk of diseases such as heart disease and some cancers tend to eat more wholegrain foods as part of a healthy lifestyle (Richardson, D. (2003) Wholegrain health in Europe. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 62, 161-169). A diet high in fibre is recommended to promote good bowel health<sup>21</sup>. High fibre cereals with semi-skimmed milk are a good option as they give a more sustained energy boost, thus promoting a feeling of satisfaction for longer. In addition, wholegrain foods are high in iron, which some studies have suggested has a positive link with IQ<sup>22</sup>, though this remains equivocal.

Research suggests that people who eat breakfast are more likely to have more nutritionally balanced diets that are lower in fat and higher in carbohydrate compared to those who miss breakfast<sup>23</sup>. When a person skips breakfast they are more likely to feel hungry and crave food before lunch and consequently snack on high-fat, sugary foods, such as biscuits, doughnuts or

pastries to boost their energy levels<sup>24 25</sup>. It is therefore unsurprising that research has found an association between skipping breakfast and obesity<sup>26 27 28</sup>. Regularly skipping breakfast at an early age also has implications for later life, as eating habits tend to be formed at a young age. For example, Finnish researchers found that children of parents who skipped breakfast tended to follow their example<sup>29</sup>. The Finnish researchers also found that smoking, infrequent exercise, a low level of education, frequent alcohol use and a high body mass index were all associated with skipping breakfast in adults and adolescents. However, this does not mean that one leads to the other. The consensus appears to be that it is better to have something for breakfast, rather than nothing<sup>30</sup>.

### ▪ **Educational Benefits of Breakfast**

A growing body of evidence has exposed the importance of eating a nutritious, healthy breakfast for children's performance at school<sup>31 32 33 34</sup>. Hungry children may be too sleepy or easily distracted to pay attention in class (Ani, 1999, in *Fit for School*). It has been suggested that children who regularly eat breakfast have better concentration, score higher on tests, have better attendance and punctuality, and have better muscle co-ordination<sup>35 36 37 38</sup>. In addition, research has shown that eating breakfast improves children's problem solving abilities, their memory, visual perception and creative thinking<sup>39</sup>. A recent study has found that these benefits are further enhanced if instant oatmeal is eaten for breakfast, as opposed to ready-to-eat cereal<sup>40</sup>.

Skipping breakfast is also thought to have detrimental effects from an educational perspective, for example, a recent UK study found that having no breakfast leads to declines in attention and memory<sup>41</sup>.

Children's arrival earlier in the morning in order to eat breakfast has the added benefit of ensuring that they are on time for the first lesson. Many teachers believe that such a positive start to the day can exert a calming influence, particularly from those children whose life is less than calm (*Breakfast is Brilliant*). Breakfast at school will also allow children to socialise more with their friends and provide an opportunity to get into the positive habit of sitting at a table and sharing a meal together (*Breakfast is Brilliant*).

Nonetheless, the findings from these studies must be taken with some degree of caution as many are based on small numbers of children, often the tests lasted only a few days, little could be done to ensure that nothing else was eaten/drunk (for example, it has been suggested that water

consumption also improves attention/concentration during the school day<sup>42</sup>), time of morning tested varies (this may account for more/less favourable findings and factors such as circadian rhythms would have an impact<sup>43</sup>), some of the tests are carried out in strange environments (such as computer labs), tests that are undertaken are often very abstract cognitive tests (which would not necessarily test learning and attention and are often not transferable to a classroom setting) and finally the impact of a ‘test’ would have a bearing on performance (a child would want to perform at their best and would therefore make an extra effort and one would expect a child to get better at the tests each day as they would become more used to them). Another factor to bear in mind is that very few studies have been undertaken with children under 9 years of age.

### **Breakfast provision in schools: breakfasts and breakfast clubs**

The term ‘breakfast scheme’ is used in this review to describe the wide range of school-based breakfast provision which includes breakfast clubs, nurture groups providing breakfast and breakfast canteens. Breakfast schemes have been operating in schools across the UK for several years, however the emphasis of different schemes and the way in which they are run varies considerably - usually depending on the individual circumstances of the school<sup>44</sup>. Breakfast initiatives complement the work already being carried out on healthy eating and nutrition through healthy school schemes and underpin the goals of a health promoting school.

Breakfast schemes have attracted widespread interest since the 1990’s because they can collectively meet a range of important and complementary objectives around the principal aim of improving the health and well being of children<sup>45</sup> (Mapping Breakfast Services in Scotland). Four main areas of need can be addressed at the breakfast clubs: children’s health needs by providing a balanced meal at the beginning of the day; educational needs in terms of ensuring children start the school day on time, feeling well-nourished and settled; and the childcare and social needs of children and their families through the provision of a safe, supervised and often stimulating environment before school starts<sup>46</sup>. Each ‘area of need’ is discussed in detail below.

Breakfast clubs also help to tackle many current areas of concern regarding children’s nutritional, educational and social development, including: the poor long-term health prospects arising from the imbalanced diets of many children; the social isolation experienced by children unable to enjoy the same foods as their friends; educational difficulties due to the erratic attendance and the poor concentration & behaviour in school exhibited by a significant number

of children right from the first year of primary school; the poor socialisation of pupils and increasing problems in schools with bullying amongst pupils; and the lack of adult supervision before school experienced by a significant number of ‘latchkey children’, which may heighten the risks of road accidents<sup>47</sup>. The extent to which this is evident is, however, extremely variable across studies<sup>48</sup>.

### ▪ **Health needs**

The National Diet and Nutrition Survey for young people aged 4 to 18 years<sup>49</sup> recorded foods and drinks taken over a one-week period and revealed that children eat less than half the recommended daily amount of fruit and vegetables, 40 per cent drank no water, 50 per cent drank fruit juice and less than 70 per cent ate some type of breakfast cereal. Results such as these can help us to focus on the foods and drinks to be encouraged in breakfast clubs<sup>50</sup>.

The majority of breakfast clubs attempt to provide children with healthy options. Strategies which have found to be particularly successful in engaging children have included: a ‘softly softly’ approach, offering options rather than trying imposition; a pragmatic approach, for example, offering beans on toast rather than fruit; and engaging the children’s interest, for example, offering ‘special days’ with different food<sup>51</sup>.

Nonetheless, breakfast club participation is not necessarily associated with superior nutrient intake or improvements towards a well balanced diet<sup>52</sup>. Researchers at the University of East Anglia found that children (aged between 9 and 15 years old) who attended breakfast clubs (at three schools matched for eligibility for school meals) had significantly greater intakes of fat, saturated fat and sodium<sup>53</sup>. Indeed, the Food Standards Agency<sup>54</sup> have highlighted that not all breakfast cereals are healthy choices because some contain as much fat and sugar as biscuits, and lots of salt. In a recent survey of breakfast clubs, researchers reported that while two-thirds of clubs offered healthy options, one third gave up promoting more nutritious food due to low take up or strains on budgets and often resorted to a *give them what they want* philosophy<sup>55</sup>. A breakfast programme mapping exercise in Scotland, however, found that the clubs using out of school providers only were more likely to serve unhealthy options (Mapping Breakfast Services in Scotland).

Leeds: the community dental service have worked alongside LCBI to encourage a number of breakfast schemes to provide toothbrushes for the children.

Leeds: school nurses support breakfast schemes in schools, as they provide a focus for a variety of activities that improve children's health and well-being. These include improvements in diet, increased exercise levels, encouraging children to drink more and an opportunity to socialise.

Mapping: The health impacts of breakfast services extend beyond immediate nutritional benefits to include the promotion of healthy eating habits, personal hygiene and oral health (see below).

### ▪ **Educational needs**

The provision of breakfast services have been linked to improved educational attainment and behaviour by benefiting children's concentration levels, memory, school attendance and punctuality<sup>56 57</sup>, improving examination results<sup>58</sup>, problem solving abilities and reducing truancy<sup>59 60</sup>.

A recent evaluation of breakfast clubs by the New Policy Institute<sup>61</sup> found that all schools participating in the initiative believed that attending a breakfast club provided a good start to the day, leaving the children more settled, attentive and motivated to learn. In terms of school performance, three quarters of breakfast club supervisors felt that the club had helped to improve attendance at school (one in five of these supervisors reported improvements to be significant); three quarters of supervisors believed that the club had helped to improve punctuality (a quarter of whom reported the improvements to be significant); four in five schools reported that the club had helped improve concentration in morning lessons (although few reported significant improvements); and half of the clubs felt that the club had helped improve academic performance in morning lessons (however, few reported significant improvements and one third said they were unable to give an opinion). Many supervisors and parents also noticed improved attitudes towards school<sup>62</sup>. However, few supervisors and teachers noted improvements in children's behaviour during the morning<sup>63</sup>.

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be classified as being at nutritional risk, tend to have significantly poorer attendance, punctuality and grades at school, more behaviour problems, and are less likely to eat breakfast than those children who were not at nutritional risk<sup>64</sup>. Researchers found that, after only six months, participation in a universal-free school breakfast program enhanced daily nutrient intake and improvements in nutrient intake were associated with significant improvements in student academic achievement and psychosocial functioning and decreases in hunger<sup>65</sup>.



As breakfast clubs last for only a short amount of time, the majority of breakfast clubs felt that there was little time for activities other than breakfast and informal social interaction<sup>66</sup>. Nonetheless, some breakfast clubs took the opportunity to provide a supportive, learning environment where children can choose to read, play games or finish off homework, without these activities being forced on them<sup>67</sup>. This environment has been shown to benefit the children through the development of personal and interpersonal skills, self-esteem and confidence, as well as for their learning<sup>68</sup>.

It is important to take into consideration that only a minority of a year or school cohort might be expected to attend a breakfast club on a regular basis, so one would not necessarily expect improvements in these children to have a noticeable impact on the school's overall academic performance, particularly in a few months or a year<sup>69</sup>. It is at an individual level that the differences can be evident.

During the quiet breakfast times, children are able to talk to staff more and tell them about what they have done the previous day. This has helped develop their language and communication skills enormously (Pre-school Learning Alliance National Centre).

Leeds Evaluation: The Leeds initiative found that pupils are beginning the day healthier and better fed, which is resulting in noticeable improvements in pupils during the school day. The Leeds schools believe that their breakfast schemes contribute to improvements in children's attendance, punctuality and attainment levels.

Leeds: at least half of the clubs reported setting up a breakfast scheme to improve attendance and punctuality and a third identified improved behaviour, concentration and attainment as an aim of the breakfast scheme. Assessing the impact the breakfast schemes have on attainment levels and educational achievement is generally extremely difficult. Nonetheless, many schools do attribute improved educational outcomes for particular pupils to them attending the breakfast scheme and the benefits of improved punctuality and attendance. It is widely reported in the evaluation forms that attendance at a breakfast scheme can increase children's concentration, attention span and alertness. It has also been observed that children's attitude to learning and school can generally improve as a result of a breakfast scheme.

## ▪ Social needs

In general, breakfast clubs aim to meet children's social needs through improving the social experience of the school day and equipping children with enhanced social and personal skills<sup>70</sup>.

Leeds – social benefits were the least common reason for schools to start a breakfast scheme. However, improved social skills and general social benefits were found to be one of the major unexpected benefits of a breakfast scheme.

- To build social skills & form friendships, to encourage older children to help younger children, how to eat 'properly', nice community feel which supports school ethos, improvements in relationships of children attending with other children and with staff.
- Opportunity to recognise and address any issues children may have, in an informal environment, before they go into the classroom
- Contributed to a calm, relaxed & settled start to the day

University of East Anglia: 'Breakfast clubs can provide valued support on several levels to a broad range of children and families...breakfast clubs are well positioned to address a range of educational, nutritional, health, psychosocial and childcare needs as constructed from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers'.

Leeds: The range of benefits and issues raised through the evaluation forms and visits were very extensive. Many of the benefits of breakfast schemes can be extremely difficult to categorise, e.g. 'happier children'.

Recent research has revealed that participation in a school breakfast program is associated with significant improvements in psychosocial functioning<sup>71</sup> and mental health (Smith, 1998). In addition, researchers have found that children in schools with free breakfasts were less likely to wish they were thinner, to go on a diet, or skip breakfast because it might make them fat and more likely to believe that eating breakfast will give them energy and help them pay attention in school<sup>72</sup>.

Breakfast clubs not only provide a warm, dry place for children to have a healthy breakfast and spend time with friends before school<sup>73</sup>, they also enable children to engage in social interactions that they might not otherwise experience – with adults, with children in other years, and with their friends in a reasonably quiet, calm way<sup>74</sup>. Case studies also suggest particular

benefits for specific groups of children including those who were bullied, lacked confidence or had learning or behavioural difficulties<sup>75</sup>.

Mapping: by incorporating play and recreation, they also encourage greater levels of physical activity and social interaction in a safe environment.

### **Poverty and social exclusion**

It has been reported that nearly one third of children in the UK live in poverty – such circumstances can have serious implications in terms of the amount of money families can spend on food<sup>76</sup>. The Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that 30 per cent of children do not go home to a cooked meal and that for some, a school meal is the only real meal they get each day<sup>77</sup>. By targeting provision at areas of greatest need, breakfast services are potential vehicles for tackling social disadvantage and exclusion (Mapping Breakfast Services in Scotland), health inequalities and community regeneration<sup>78</sup> by ensuring vulnerable children and those living in low-income households have access to a nutritious breakfast<sup>79</sup>.

### **Parent and family life**

The Government (both Whitehall and the Welsh Assembly) have a range of strategies (for example the UK National Childcare Strategy and the Welsh Assembly Government's Childcare Action Plan) and grant funds (for example, the merger of Sure Start and the Children and Youth Partnership Fund to create *Cymorth*) to improve educational standards and to increase childcare opportunities for working parents. Breakfast clubs can support these strategies by offering breakfast and early morning care/activities for children<sup>80</sup>, allowing parents to attend work or further education<sup>81</sup>. Breakfast initiatives in Canada saw this as being particularly important (Why breakfast clubs were started. Foodpath Breakfast Programmes Canada, 1999: <http://www.foodpath.org>). Obviously, providing childcare is not the main or most important objective for the majority of breakfast clubs, though it is clearly viewed as a key benefit for many parents and helps to improve/sustain good relations between the school and parents<sup>82</sup>. Breakfast clubs in France, however, did not prove popular, possibly due to the fact that many parents viewed breakfast time as the only opportunity that the whole family could eat together.

A recent UK review of breakfast clubs revealed positive responses from both parents and children<sup>83</sup>. Parents felt that it was often a struggle to get their child to eat breakfast before leaving home and many believed that their children were happier to eat their breakfast at the

club. Parents regarded clubs as successful in encouraging children to eat a healthy, nutritious breakfast, reducing pressures in the morning and providing an additional source of affordable, trusted childcare to those in work, studying or seeking employment<sup>84</sup>. Children who took part in the survey reported that they were usually happy with the food on offer and more than half of the children attending the clubs admitted that, without the breakfast club, they would not have breakfast and went hungry before lunch.

Leeds: Breakfast schemes are not intended to act as a childcare service for working parents. This is reflected in the low cost to children and families of breakfast schemes. This report does not refer to any before school provision that is primarily run as a childcare facility for working parents.

Leeds: (Headteacher): the breakfast club is good for parents who didn't have a good experience at school themselves, to make them feel more comfortable in the building. The school used to regularly have aggressive confrontations with parents, but that they have not had any such incidents recently which she attributed to a combination of the breakfast club, learning mentor and walking bus. The breakfast club is a way of inviting people in and giving them access to school and staff. It breaks down barriers between school and parents in a way that is totally positive and containable.

Leeds Evaluation: Breakfast schemes result in a wide range of social benefits, specifically, improved social skills of pupils in school, and improved relationships between the schools and parents.

Mapping: For many parents, breakfast services fulfil childcare needs that allow them to attend work or further education. By targeting provision at areas of greatest need, breakfast services are potential vehicles for tackling social disadvantage. They can ensure vulnerable children and those living in low-income households can have access to a nutritious breakfast and encourage school attendance.

Breakfast provision in special schools has also been successful. If the provision is co-ordinated with a number of schools receiving in a locality then the special schools have not excluded anyone (e.g. year groups, age ranges) as this would lead to more problems.

## **Running breakfasts/breakfast clubs**

Just as breakfast clubs may provide different things for children to do, there are many ways in which clubs can be set up and run<sup>85</sup>.

### **▪ A Healthy Option**

Breakfast provision in schools should be healthy and nutritious, ensuring children start the day in the best possible way. The Leeds Children's Breakfast Initiative, for example, stated that all breakfast clubs had to offer the following foods each day: a starchy food, a milk-based food (using whole or semi-skimmed milk), a fruit item and a drink. Foods such as cereals, toast or other bread type products, fruit, yoghurts and pure fruit juice should be encouraged. Often restrictions on budget can deter breakfast clubs from offering a fruit choice every day, but fruit options should be provided as often as possible. Unsweetened (or less sweet) cereals should be encouraged, as well as fewer spoonfuls of added sugar on cereals. Many breakfast clubs have found it beneficial to slowly introduce more healthy items onto the menu as otherwise children may be put off.

Mapping: Over half of the services surveyed provided low-fat, low-sugar foods such as non-sugar-coated cereals (92%), fresh fruit (75%) and wholemeal bread/toast (64%). White bread/rolls/toast were more available than wholemeal options. More than three-quarters of services provided spreads, including jam, marmalade, chocolate spread, honey and peanut butter and almost half provided sugar-coated cereals.

Leeds: There is a growing concern about the availability of drinks, especially water or sugar free options, for school children. There is a small body of evidence that suggests an inadequate fluid intake is linked to continence problems and urinary infections. Mental ability and concentration is also thought to improve with better hydration. Breakfasts offer an ideal opportunity to increase drinks.

There may be a concern about children having a second breakfast or overweight children having more than they should at breakfast time. It is therefore advisable to be sensible with second helpings, whilst fruit is to be encouraged, cereals, toast and yoghurts could be kept to a single helping (this would probably depend on the child though – common sense required).

Foods should be kept simple and 'safe' in terms of hygiene risk; for example, it is better to avoid cooked items and cold meats or eggs (Leeds). It is advisable that at all breakfast supervisors attend food hygiene training to at least Foundation Certificate Level. Hot drinks were thought of as risky to many breakfast clubs, however, it is a useful way of getting children to drink milk, especially for those who do not like cereal and yoghurts.

In the planning stages it is a good idea to consult with the pupils as the breakfast provision will be for their benefit. Make it clear what will be available, how it will work and what it will cost, otherwise pupils may be put off by misinformation (Breakfast is Brilliant).

- **Special dietary requirements**

- **Health and Safety**

Attend to relevant regulations, e.g. health and safety regulations apply to premises, equipment, storage of food and disposal of waste.

Leeds: Breakfast clubs are recognised as providing a valuable service to parents and children at schools throughout the city. However, as with all food businesses the hygiene associated with food preparation and service must be maintained at a satisfactory standard, based on risk assessment principles.

Leeds: The key to good food hygiene and safety practices remains effective and informed supervision of activities. It is essential that the adult supervising is aware of and understands basic food hygiene rules. It is strongly recommended that all supervisors attend food hygiene training to at least Foundation Certificate level (formerly known as the Basic Food Hygiene Certificate).

- **Finance**

Finding funding has often been identified as one of the key barriers to setting up a breakfast club (Breakfast Daze: A report of the Scottish Community Diet Project's Breakfast Club Seminar, Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> August, 1999). How much a breakfast clubs costs can vary quite widely, depending on what food is offered, what things the club actually has to pay for (for example, staff/rent/equipment), and the ratio of staff to children. Staff, rather than food and equipment,

are the major costs of running a breakfast club. NPI suggested approximately £1.50 per child per day. Once the club is up and running, its financial viability will depend above all else on sustaining a good level of attendance, day by day, as close as possible to the maximum ratio of children to staff (Breakfast Clubs: A how to guide, New Policy Institute 2000).

The majority of breakfast provision receives funding from a wide range of sources.

Finance has been a concern but by using existing staff and offering a limited menu it is possible to break even. Schools have also been successful in securing sponsorship and feel that the benefits to children outweigh the financial difficulties (Breakfast is Brilliant).

Mapping: 20% of services made no charge to users. Many offered volunteers and/or parents a discount per breakfast for families with more than one child using the service (44%).

#### ▪ **Staffing**

Breakfast clubs across the UK use a wide range of people to staff the clubs, and frequently make use of non-teaching members of staff such as learning mentors and classroom assistants (Harrop and Palmer, 2000). There was general agreement that involving heads and deputy heads, teachers, catering staff, lunchtime supervisors, parents and children was beneficial. Half of the breakfast clubs surveyed in the DoH evaluation were staffed by teachers, heads and deputy heads. However, many of clubs acknowledged that it would not be feasible, or in fact fair, to be reliant on head/deputy head teachers or teachers to co-ordinate and run the breakfast clubs as they have so many other time commitments and need the time in the morning before lessons begin to prepare their classroom for the first lesson. Nonetheless, clubs often worked well if teachers were 'around but not in charge' (Harrop and Palmer). Half of clubs made use of catering staff and a further fifth used lunchtime supervisors. One fifth of clubs were staffed by parents but the majority of clubs found this difficult, largely due to the fact that they were not involved in the school more generally. Also, anyone working at the school needs to undergo police checks, costing the school money which they cannot always afford. Nonetheless, many breakfast initiatives (e.g. in Leeds) encourage parents to volunteer to help at breakfast clubs and run training courses for the volunteers, in addition to their regular 'breakfast club workers network meetings'. A clearly written volunteer agreement setting out what the school and the volunteer expect of each other is advisable. Having training and support structures for volunteers built in from the outset was thought to be beneficial (Breakfast Daze: A report of the

Scottish Community Diet Project's Breakfast Club Seminar, Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> August, 1999). In Scotland, for example, staff and volunteers went on courses provided by the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland which included: elementary food hygiene, first aid, health and safety and child protection (Mapping Breakfast Services in Scotland).

In approximately one third of the clubs evaluated as part of the Department of Health breakfast club initiative, children were heavily involved in the running of the club, to the perceived benefit of both the club and the children (Harrop and Palmer, 2000). Examples include involvement in the decision-making about future menus and activities, taking responsibility for preparing and clearing away the food, and acting as a volunteer worker for the club.

Since breakfast clubs will either be classed as 'out of school care' or 'in school care', a staffing ratio cannot be set as conditions will determine the ratio to be applied. However, a minimum of two adults should be on duty at any one time.

The most cost-effective way of staffing breakfast is for the school meals service to run it with existing canteen staff. In many cases these staff are on site at this time and the service will also increase its profits by providing breakfast (Breakfast is Brilliant).

In some schools a breakfast club is part of childcare, and is available as part of a longer session. In this case qualified play leaders run the club (Breakfast is Brilliant).

Leeds: by far the most common problem was a lack of staff, helpers and volunteers. Schools also commented on the problems of relying on volunteer support. Schools differ greatly as to whether they want parent/carer volunteers to help in the breakfast scheme, and also as to the amount of parents/carers that are willing to volunteer.

The Leeds Children's Breakfast Initiative has set up a network for breakfast club workers (both voluntary and paid), which meets regularly to share ideas and good practice and discuss relevant issues. The network meetings are also intended to be an opportunity for workers to access free training in areas such as first aid, food hygiene, and child protection. Encouraging and supporting the involvement of parent volunteers, students, and employed volunteers in breakfast clubs is a current key area of work.



## ▪ **Staff Training**

Leeds: the evaluation showed that there is a lot of variation in the training that staff, and in particular volunteers, had received. Several schools have already provided a wide range of courses for their volunteers. Many other schools expressed an interest in training opportunities related to the breakfast scheme. The most common request was for food hygiene training, other courses requested included, first aid, health and safety, managing challenging behaviour and playwork. Several schools were keen to visit other breakfast schemes and to share ideas.

Mapping: The most popular training for staff and volunteers was courses provided by the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS). These included courses on Elementary Food Hygiene, First Aid, Health and Safety and Child Protection. Concerns were raised about the number of services offering no training support to paid staff (38%) and volunteers (61%). This may have a negative impact on the quality and type of service.

## ▪ **Environment**

The provision of a calm, caring, less pressured and supportive environment for a period before the formal school day begins may well be an important element in actually getting some children into school in the first place and from this, into a frame of mind receptive to teaching (Fit for School: How breakfast clubs meet health, education and childcare needs (Donovan & Street, NPI): Professor Sally McGregor & Dr Cornelius Ani, Institute of Child Health).

## • **School Facilities**

For schools who have not got a kitchen on site or a separate dining room there are ways around the problem. Although it is easier with a separate dining room that doesn't need to be used for assembly or other lessons, schools have found ways around the problem. The whole hall will not be used for breakfast; four or five tables will probably be enough with pupils arriving at different times. As long as breakfast finishes 10-15 minutes before school starts there is enough time to clear away (Breakfast is Brilliant). Another alternative is to alter the time of assembly. Some schools have found an assembly works immediately before or after the morning break. Some schools have even made use of an on site Youth Centre to provide breakfast.

If you do not have a dining room, make sure that a suitable breakfast club room is available.

Mapping: Breakfast services are mainly located in relatively populous urban areas. The premises used to house the breakfast service provisions are therefore mainly school buildings (78%) and community venues (17%).

- **Guidance**

Leeds and Hull provide guidance, one in more detail than the other for the breakfast initiative.

- **Timing**

The vast majority of breakfast clubs are held prior to the start of the school day, from 8am to around 8.45am (although the times do vary according to the school and circumstances). School breakfast providers usually serve breakfast up to 10 minutes before school is due to start. An early morning break with breakfast offered may be a good idea where pupils travel a long way and might otherwise be unable to attend (Breakfast is Brilliant).

According to the pre-school learning alliance, a breakfast club runs early in the morning, usually starting between 7.30am or 8.00am until 9.00am before usual school/pre-school hours. With parents working further from home there is a need for more flexible childcare. It is often more convenient for a parent to leave a child in a breakfast club than to use a childminder to take the child to school. The breakfast club provides a safe supervised environment before school.

Leeds: in most cases, breakfast schemes open 20-45 minutes before school.

Mapping: most services started between 8am and 8.15am and operated for an hour or less each day.

- **Take up**

All of the clubs under the Department of Health's breakfast club initiative emphasised the importance of providing for children where food is not on offer at home, although none saw themselves as exclusively there for deprived children who would otherwise not eat in the morning (Harrop & Palmer (New Policy Institute): Lessons from the best). Encouragingly, most of the clubs were succeeding in attracting disproportionate numbers of children claiming free school meals, a group which is less likely to eat breakfast at home.

It is important to dispel any ‘poverty stigmas’ which may be associated with attending a breakfast club (Breakfast Daze: A report of the Scottish Community Diet Project’s Breakfast Club Seminar, Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> August, 1999). Clubs have often reported that it was not always straightforward to persuade particular children to attend. Suspicion and stigma from children or parents, or an inability to arrive early, meant that some of those who would most benefit were not necessarily taking advantage of clubs. There was general agreement that any proactive efforts to attract particular children had to be handled sensitively to avoid stigmatisation.

In the Scottish mapping exercise of breakfast provision in it was found that, on average, up to 30 children used the service in Primary Schools (Breakfast Service Provision for School Age Children: a mapping exercise: [www.hebs.com/research/cr/](http://www.hebs.com/research/cr/)).

Declines in take up during the summer months have been noted in many breakfast clubs (Breakfast is Brilliant).

Mapping: on an average day, up to 30 children used the service with a mean attendance of 23.

- **Impact on other initiatives/provisions**

School transport

School crossing facilities

Leeds: some schools have children arriving on the ‘walking bus’ who then go into the breakfast scheme, meaning they have a healthy and punctual start to the day.

Other health school initiatives

- **Source of food**

- **Delivery mechanism**

The schools participating in the Leeds Children’s Breakfast initiative were encouraged to link their breakfast schemes into existing quality frameworks and work in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations that are working to improve the health, well being and achievement of children<sup>86</sup>.

## Local authorities/councils

A successful breakfast initiative requires teamwork and partnership at many different levels. Breakfast clubs involve a range of areas including health, education, childcare, play and schools.

### ▪ **Marketing**

Pre-School Learning Alliance National Centre. Promoting the breakfast provision is important to its success. This is something that has to be maintained in order to keep up attendance. The more children you have attending the club the more sustainable your club will be and the more affordable it will be. Some ideas which may be worth considering include sending out a regular newsletter, inviting staff to have breakfast (for free), inviting parents to attend special breakfast days or running themed breakfasts with foods from different countries, which will also help vary the menu.

Promote the breakfast club to encourage the children to attend, perhaps by involving them from the outset, e.g. naming the club or designing a menu (BNF). Continue promoting interest in the breakfast club. It may take time to establish the club within the school. You could offer an end of term prize for good attendance; send out regular newsletters; or encourage school staff to be involved and promote the club as an integral part of the school.

### ▪ **Sustainability**

Many breakfast clubs have to spend a great deal of time applying for new sources of funding, as the majority of grants are for a year or less. Securing long term funding is often a key barrier to sustaining a breakfast club (for example, it is a concern to over 70 per cent of the Scottish breakfast clubs), as well as maintaining the support of professional workers and volunteers (Breakfast Daze: A report of the Scottish Community Diet Project's Breakfast Club Seminar, Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> August, 1999). Lack of monitoring and evaluation procedures to develop the club further and justify its continuation to funders was cited as a barrier to sustainability by many breakfast clubs in Scotland.

## ▪ **Monitoring and evaluation**

The Leeds Children's Breakfast initiative request termly monitoring information from schools with breakfast clubs, as well as a qualitative evaluation from clubs (the evaluation report from the Leeds Children's Breakfast initiative is currently in press)<sup>87</sup>.

As mentioned above, monitoring and evaluation also helps to secure funding, which is usually scarce and short-term.

## **Value-added activities**

Pre-school learning alliance National Centre. It is important to offer a choice of activities even though there is a limited time. Different activities will be helpful if you have staggered arrival times. You could have areas where children can watch television, read books, play games or even a homework area for older children.

## ▪ **Educational and social activities**

*Breakfast Clubs: A how to guide, New Policy Institute 2000:* There are some activities that can be done which will help the children to get ready for the school day, such as:

- Reading/book reviews/book swap
- Literacy-related activities
- Weekly/monthly quiz
- Music club/bring in the music they like
- Singing club
- Board games
- Aerobics/tai-chi/yoga/table top sports
- Computer-based activities
- Homework corner

Further 'healthy eating' messages can also be promoted through various educational activities involving a range of subjects across the curriculum, as demonstrated in the 2004 *Great Farmhouse Breakfast Campaign* from the Home Grown Cereals Association (HGCA). There appears to be a general consensus that a whole school approach is beneficial in emphasising a healthy lifestyle and a healthy diet in the influential childhood years (The Sodexo School Meals and Lifestyle Survey, 2002).

Leeds: the majority of breakfast schemes include some additional activities such as board games, books, drawing, and colouring and include an element of out-of-hours learning. Some schools use the breakfast scheme to provide more structured support, for example with homework or IT.

Many breakfast initiatives see play as an important part of the breakfast club (e.g. in Leeds (Leeds Children's Breakfast Initiative) and Scotland (Mapping Breakfast Services in Scotland)). Numerous clubs employ playworkers to create an environment that is rich in possibilities and to support children in their play.

Mapping: The most popular activities were games of concentration, reading and arts-and-crafts. Services offering activities had a high proportion of play leaders/workers. However, services also relied upon school canteen staff, voluntary workers, parents and teachers to supervise and deliver activities.

Mapping: two-thirds of services were involved in a health promotion or healthy lifestyle initiative. Most were involved in healthy-eating initiatives (90%), personal hygiene skills (62%) and tooth-brushing programmes (55%).

#### ▪ **Brushing Teeth**

Dental caries is the most common disease of childhood in the UK, with less than 50 per cent of children disease free when they start school<sup>88</sup>. In Wales, the average 5 year old has at least 2 decayed, missing or filled teeth (British Association for the study of Community Dentistry, 2000). These prevalence rates are continuing to rise<sup>89</sup>. Fluoridation of water and good teeth brushing routines are clearly important, however, minimising the amount of sugar consumed is particularly critical. A recent American survey of more than 4,000 children found that those who missed breakfast tended to fill up on sugary snacks instead and were up to four times more likely to develop tooth decay<sup>90</sup>. The findings also suggest that even eating a sugary cereal was preferable for a child's teeth and gums. As found in a previous UK study<sup>91</sup>, children who ate sweetened cereals with milk every day were no more likely to suffer from tooth decay than those who ate other types of breakfast.

An increasing number of UK breakfast clubs have successfully incorporated a tooth-brushing programme into the daily breakfast club routine<sup>92</sup>, which has been found to contribute successfully to reducing plaque. Many breakfast clubs have involved their local community dentist in advising children about caring for their teeth<sup>93</sup> and some have provided, or sold at a very reduced rate (e.g. Leeds Children's Breakfast Initiative: toothbrushes were available for schools to purchase for 8p and free toothpaste), each child with a toothbrush and toothpaste, often through funding from their Local Health Authority<sup>94</sup>.

The tooth-brushing programmes obviously have to adhere to strict hygiene regulations. Appendix 1 details the guidelines/requirements put forward by (i) Leeds Community Dental Services for the Leeds Children's Breakfast Initiative<sup>95</sup> and (ii) Scottish Breakfast Clubs<sup>96</sup>, as examples of good practice.

▪ **Other breakfast club ideas**

- 'Special days' to encourage experimentation in food and/or activities
- Involving children in the decision-making about the club
- Children helping out as volunteers (or paid a small amount) with responsibilities
- Expecting children to prepare/clear up for themselves
- Involving catering staff in non-food related activities
- Recycling
- Brain gym
- Awards for attendance or trying something new
- Walking buses
- Experts coming to the club to talk about health/nutrition (e.g. dentist, school nurse, farmer – if in a rural area!)

## **Conclusion**

Evidence suggests that children who have the opportunity to eat a healthy and nutritious breakfast prior to the start of the school day are healthier and are more likely to achieve their full educational potential.

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