

Report Prepared for:

Kirklees PCT

**A Qualitative Insight into Obesity
Children's Service Users
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Contents

The Research Programme	3
Introduction	3
Project Objectives	3
Methodology	4
Report Format	5
Summary of Key Findings	6
Health Awareness	6
Weight Gain	6
Perceptions of Obesity	7
Motivations for Weight Loss	7
Weight Management Programmes	8
Information	9
The Future	9
Conclusions & Recommendations	10
Weight Management Programmes	10
Channels of Communication	11
Motivational Messages	12
Theme and Design	12
Accessibility	13
In Summary	13
Context	14
Weight Management Programmes	14
Detailed Research Findings	15
Health Awareness	15
Weight Gain	17
Perceptions of Obesity	19
Motivations for Weight Loss	20
Weight Management Programmes	23
Information	28
The Future	31
Appendix 1	36
Case Studies	36
Appendix 2	40
Discussion Guides	40

The Research Programme

Introduction

The Kirklees Partnership, representing all the main partners’ organisations in Kirklees, has identified obesity as a major health challenge for the area. An Obesity Programme Plan has been developed to ensure there is a coordinated set of actions in place to tackle obesity. The Plan recognises the partners must invest in social marketing approaches to ensure that local interventions reflect the needs of the target groups. Social marketing was identified as an approach to improve the effectiveness of interventions that aim to change behaviour.

Kirklees Primary Care Trust (PCT), on behalf of the Council and its partners, commissioned Enventure Consultancy Ltd to conduct the scoping stage of the social marketing research process, focussing specifically on children and young people (5-18 years old), living in Kirklees and currently attending or attended in the past 12 months a specific weight management programme. Parents/carers/family were also considered to be part of the target audience, where they were participating.

The research findings will be used to inform the development of weight management provision in Kirklees and communication with the target audience, thus encouraging participation in appropriate weight management activity.

Project Objectives

The aim of the project was to:

- Prevent year-on-year weight gain and to achieve weight loss that results in health benefits within the children and young people of Kirklees.

The research aim was to:

- Scope the behaviours and motivational issues related to weight management with the chosen target audience to inform current and future weight management provision in Kirklees.

Within this aim, the research objectives were to:

- Understand what the incentives and barriers are to changing lifestyle
- Consider the competing personal behaviours and external factors which will limit interventions.

Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature and comprised a series of research sessions with both children and their parents. Discussions were guided by a plan which covered the key areas important to the investigation but which also allowed respondents the flexibility to raise issues pertinent to the discussion that were important to them.

Research took place with children and young people aged five to 18 and parents/carers/family who were living in Kirklees and attending or had attended in the last 12 months one of the following weight management programmes:

- MEND
- Young PALS
- COBWEBS

Sessions were adapted from the original research proposal according to availability at the various weight management programmes. On some occasions, this meant the length of the research sessions were limited by the timing of the weight management programme. Furthermore, attendance at the sessions was subject to attendance at the programme on the day the research took place.

A combination of mini groups (involving four to six participants), parent and child interviews, focus groups and workshops took place at MEND and Young PALS weight management programmes in both Dewsbury and Huddersfield. A mini group was also held in Huddersfield with participants on the COBWEBS weight management programme, and respondents to this were recruited independently of the programme. All research sessions included some ethnic minority representation (with the exception of the parent and child sessions at MEND in Dewsbury). The Young PALS Fusion session in Huddersfield also included three children with learning disabilities.

Details of the research sessions are show in **Tables 1-3** below and overleaf:

Table 1: Children & Young People’s Workshops

Weight Management Programme	Methodology	Age of Participants
COBWEBS Huddersfield	Mini Group with four young people	15-16
Young PALS, Fusion Huddersfield	Workshop with 16 young people	6-13
Young PALS, Fusion Dewsbury	Three mini groups with 3-4 children	5-12
‘Giving it Large’ Young People’s Forum, Huddersfield (Young PALS)	Workshop with eight young people	10-16

Table 2: Parent & Child Sessions at MEND, Dewsbury

Session No.	Participants	Age of Child(ren)
1.	Parent and two daughters	15 & 10
2.	Parent and son	12
3.	Parent, son and daughter	12 & 8
4.	Two parents & daughter	12
5.	Parent & son	11
6.	Parent & daughter	11

Table 3: Parents’ Focus Groups

Weight Management Programme	Participants	Age of Child(ren)
Young PALS, Fusion, Huddersfield	Five parents	6-13
Young PALS, Fusion, Huddersfield	Six parents	6-13
Young PALS, Fusion, Dewsbury	Seven parents	5-12

All research sessions took place between 2nd and 16th April 2008. Participants in the research were given a financial incentive to encourage them to take part, thank them for their participation and cover any expenses they might have incurred in attending the session.

Each weight management organisation was given a donation of £100 to their funds to thank them for organising the research sessions.

Copies of the various group discussion guides used in the research sessions are appended.

Report Format

Research findings are reported thematically, with parents, young people and children grouped together, where appropriate.

For ease of reference, people involved in the COBWEBS programme are referred to as ‘young people’ throughout the report, as they were older than people on other weight management programmes. Those involved in both MEND and Young PALS are referred to as ‘children’.

Summary of Key Findings

Health Awareness

Respondents had a reasonable level of awareness of ‘healthy living’, which is unsurprising given that the majority had spent a significant amount of time on a weight management course. Following on from this, respondents tended to think their family’s health was either better or the same as other families they knew. Parents who had been involved in MEND tended to have greater knowledge and awareness of healthy living than the parents of children attending Young PALS.

Parents stressed the importance of not depriving their children of ‘treats’ , such as chips and doughnuts on special occasions, however, children were usually the ones to resist the treats by seeking alternatives such as fruits.

Very few respondents had been undertaking any physical activity prior to their involvement with a weight management programme. Apart from the weight management programme, only a minority of children and young people were taking part in any formal exercise, though a number of respondents said they were more active now.

Weight Gain

Respondents gave three main reasons as to why they had gained weight. Firstly, lack of activities for children and young people coupled with a general reluctance from parents to allow their children to ‘play out’ due to safety issues. Secondly, ‘comfort eating’ as a result of emotional issues such as problems with parents or bullying, and thirdly, the belief that weight gain was a result of an external, uncontrollable factor such as genetics or medication.

Secondary reasons given for weight gain were the availability and affordability of cheap ‘junk food’ and general laziness. These were coupled with parents working long hours resulting in children and young people eating whatever they could find on returning home from schools and easy, fast food for evening meals.

Perceptions of Obesity

‘Obesity’ was not a term which was used by any of the users of Children’s Services. Children and young people were most likely to refer to themselves as “*fat*” or “*tubby*”. Parents discussed obesity in more removed ways, using terms such as “*overweight*”, “*larger*” or “*needing to lose weight*” when referring to their child. Children and young people referred to themselves in the ways they believed others saw them, perhaps with a degree of self-preservation.

Young people from the COBWEBS programme often referred to ‘being fat’ in a more positive light, as if it was a lifestyle choice over which they had control. To them, neither the elusive size 0 nor obesity were acceptable in our society which they felt left them in a no win situation.

For both children and young people, ‘being fat’ was not so much about the state itself as what it translated to in everyday life. It was limitations such as not being able to go shopping with friends, being poor at sport and being called names which children understood, more so than the concept of ‘being overweight’.

Motivations for Weight Loss

The majority of children and young people had been referred to a weight management programme by their school. Few parents had proactively sought help for their child, and those who had had been unsure as to where to get it. These parents had looked on the Internet, seen an advertisement in a magazine, read an article in a local newspaper or visited their GP.

Prior to starting on a weight management programme, many children and young people had been caught in a vicious circle of weight gain. For example, their size had resulted in bullying and name calling, which had led to a lack of friends, meaning they had no-one to play out with and so suffered from a lack of exercise.

Children and young people embarking on weight management programmes had wanted to make friends and become fit to stop the vicious circle of weight gain and bullying. Young people particularly wanted to ‘fit in’ with peers, in terms of being able to wear the same clothes and take part in the same activities. For these people, losing weight meant fitting in with the accepted ‘norms’ in our society.

Weight Management Programmes

Weight management programmes provided by Children’s Services appear to be largely unknown by people, which results in a lack of knowledge regarding what to expect from them.

Common fears amongst children and young people include: being the largest on the programme (and being singled out by programme leaders), struggling to make friends and not being sufficiently fit to partake in the activities. Similarly, parents’ fears were around being branded a ‘bad parent’ for having an overweight child. In general, neither parents nor children were sure what to expect from the weight management programmes. For example, the majority of parents on MEND recounted that they had been unaware they would be required to stay for their own session.

For parents, the start of their child joining a weight management programme was a catalyst for encouraging the whole family to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Some had simultaneously joined a commercial weight management organisation, such as Slimming World.

Positive feedback was received on all three weight management programmes, though the young people undertaking the COBWEBS programme were more likely than children on other programmes to pinpoint some of the more negative aspects, such as disputes between programme members.

The most popular aspects of both Young PALS and MEND were the physical activity and the range of activities in which respondents had participated. Also popular with MEND participants were the recipes provided and the session looking at foods at a supermarket.

For the majority of respondents, weight loss was not the main benefit of the weight management programmes. Improved confidence and raised self-esteem as a result of making friends were believed to be the main benefits, and weight loss was seen to secondary benefit to this.

The greatest reward or anticipated reward of losing weight for parents, children and young people was ‘fitting in’ with peers; wearing the same clothes, going to the same shops and partaking in the same sports.

Other benefits of weight management programmes were improvements in behaviour and no longer being tired at school, resulting in improved grades. Some young people also reported developing an interest in cooking after following some of the MEND recipes.

For parents, seeing their child happier and more confident was usually the greatest reward of the programmes. On a practical level, for parents involved in MEND improved knowledge of healthy eating and nutrition was an important benefit.

Information

Parents thought there was a lack of information about weight management programmes for children and young people in Kirklees, and this was evidenced by parents not knowing where to go for help in managing their child’s weight. In the main, however, people are not proactively seeking information about weight management programmes from Children’s Services, however, once parents become aware of these programmes they are effectively ‘selling themselves’.

Respondents thought that the programmes should be approaching parents, children and young people via schools not only to inform people about the programmes but also to provide information on healthy living.

The key messages which respondents thought should be conveyed about weight management programmes for children and young people were around making friends, getting fit and having fun. They also thought that communication about the programmes should be clear about the ethos and values of the programme to ensure children and young people were aware that everyone would be treated equally.

Some young people thought information regarding weight management should be largely targeted at parents, as it was ultimately their decision as to whether their child attended.

The Future

The benefits of weight loss need to be translated into tangible benefits for parents, children and young people to motivate them to become involved in the various programmes.

Respondents foresaw issues around maintaining the changes that they had made as a result of being on a weight management programme. Suggestions were made for follow-up work to take place with people to ensure that children and young people continued to exercise and eat a balanced diet.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Weight Management Programmes

The research illustrates that the perceived primary causes of obesity in children and young people are a mix of social, emotional and medical/genetic issues. Secondary factors include lack of knowledge about healthy living coupled with susceptibility to promotions (such as ‘buy one get one free’ offers). To encourage parents, children and young people in Kirklees to adopt a healthier lifestyle will require activities containing a number of different messages to address these causes of obesity.

Parents, children and young people involved in weight loss management programmes run by Children’s Services in Kirklees are generally positive about them. The emphasis the programmes place on making friends and having fun is a great motivator for parents and children alike.

The main benefits which children and young people have gained from attendance at weight management programmes is increased confidence and self esteem. Some, but not all, have lost weight and to them, this was an added benefit of the programmes rather than the main motivator for attendance.

Young people appear less likely to benefit from weight management programmes if they could not see short-term, tangible benefits. Furthermore, if social aspects of the programme are difficult, such as various age groups struggling to befriend each other, this can distract from its purpose. Greater tailoring of weight management programmes to age groups would be beneficial to ensure that children and young people feel comfortable amongst other members of the programme. We do, however, acknowledge that this could potentially cause timing difficulties for families who bring more than one child to a programme.

At the end of weight management programmes, maintenance of weight loss and levels of exercise are a concern, particularly for parents - as is the cost of paying for physical activities at sports centres. The PCT could consider long-term subsidy of activities for children and young people who have completed one of the weight management programmes to ensure that they are still able to maintain participation in formal activities.

Channels of Communication

A number of factors are key to the success of the planned social marketing initiative:

- Developing a campaign which incorporates appropriate motivational messages for parents, children and young people, which would involve translating weight loss into tangible benefits for them.
- Providing the information that is necessary for people within the region to adopt a healthier lifestyle within their own constraints of income, health, education and skills.
- Providing information through channels appropriate to their current lifestyle.

Current channels of communication regarding weight management programmes do not appear to be reaching parents, children and young people unless they are referred to a programme via their school. At present, even parents who are proactively seeking assistance in managing their child’s weight are struggling to find information; therefore, it is extremely unlikely that parents who have not yet acknowledged their child’s weight issue will be compelled to enrol them on a weight management programme. The key to success with this group, is to take the campaign into their daily lives via schools, supermarkets and the Internet for example.

There exists groups of parents, children and young people living throughout Kirklees who have had positive experiences of weight management programmes provided by children’s services. These people are already, and could become more so, the greatest ambassadors for these programmes. Both parents and children are already talking to others about their experiences and giving recommendations. Why not formalise this by recruiting ambassadors at the end of each nine week MEND course, or ongoing ambassadors from the Young PALS programme? Young people not only wanted to lose weight and have fun, they also wanted to fill their time and particular requests were made for activities during the weekend. These people will become excellent role models for future generations. Not only visually, but also verbally – they have all gained a huge amount of confidence by being on the programmes and this could be used to great effect.

The benefits of an ambassador scheme would be two-fold: other children and young people would find out about the weight management programmes and healthy living, and the ambassadors themselves would have the opportunity to refresh their knowledge of healthy living by talking about their experiences with their peers.

Motivational Messages

The first stage of communication will need to raise awareness amongst parents, children and young people about obesity and the problems which can arise as a result. This awareness raising should proactively target the relevant audience, as at present, parents, children and young people are generally not seeking out such information.

Children and young people want to know what the short-term, tangible benefits of weight loss will be for them; therefore, the second stage should include messages around what these benefits are. They want to know that weight loss will mean they are able to fit into the same clothes as their friends, be faster in races at school or improve their football skills. Messages around the health benefits of weight loss might have an impact on parents, but for children and young people health-related benefits are too far in the future to be considered an incentive.

Further motivational messages could be around improved performance at school and the aesthetic benefits of weight loss. Impactful messages are those that appeal to people emotionally and are couched in plain English, so that they can be easily understood by the target audience.

Theme and Design

Communications materials must be accessible to those in the target audiences, including languages appropriate to the local population. Materials should have an emphasis on realism; real children and young people (along with their parents) working towards realistic goals, talking about what helps and why the programmes have helped them. There is a clear case for the use of case studies featuring actual participants – children, young people and their parents speaking in their own words.

With regard to terminology, ‘obesity’ is not a term which is used by parents or children and young people, therefore, as with communication materials for adults the ‘medicalisation’ of programmes should be avoided. The importance of weight loss for aesthetic and social reasons should be acknowledged at least as much as health-based reasons. The aim of content should be to empathise with potential users, not preach at them, frighten them or tell them what to do.

It will also be important to address the barriers that exist for both parents and children and young people to attending a weight management programme, including embarrassment or fear of being the largest on the programme, difficulties socialising with other children and young people and fear of the unknown (what to expect from the programme).

Accessibility

The research suggests that the parents of obese children and young people are not particularly proactive in seeking help for a variety of reasons. It is, therefore, important that communications about not just weight management programmes but healthy living are proactively given to parents to ensure that people are well informed before weight becomes an issue.

Current weight management programmes provided by Children’s Services are easily accessible for people who know about them, as they are offered free and at local sports centres. Programmes should continue to be offered for free, as this is important to gain participation from parents, particularly those on low incomes or where more than one child is attending.

In Summary

There is an enormous need for public authorities to do more to convert the, as yet, not-fully-emerged understanding of the connection between obesity and ill-health into the kind of action that leads to people taking care of themselves in a sustained way.

At present, children, young people and their parents are rarely recognising the connection between their weight and health in the same way that adults (both service users and the target group) are beginning to.

The ‘brand values’ of the weight management programmes provided by Children’s Services, like the NHS represent a near perfect fit with people’s needs because unlike the commercial organisations, the NHS can put the needs of the participant first and has arguably the greatest body of knowledge and expertise that it can bring to bear on the problem.

Existing programmes, such as Young PALS, MEND and COBWEBS currently available to only a few who perhaps have the greatest need, have enabled the NHS to develop a body of practical experience and a series of activities and interventions that appear to work extremely well for those who have experienced them. There is a pressing need and indeed a public demand for these to be rolled out and made available to greater numbers of people - before issues with obesity begin. However, there is also a need to ensure that the experiences of those who have attended these programmes are used as a resource in persuading those who have yet to be convinced of the pressing importance of weight loss in cases of obesity.

Referral by doctors, other clinicians and schools will start out and should remain an important way in which potential participants are connected with programmes. However, in the longer term, it will be necessary to engage in mass social marketing activities, including leafleting and above the line media advertising.

Context

Weight Management Programmes

The consultation focussed on participants from three weight management programmes specifically for young people in Kirklees. An outline of each programme is shown below.

COBWEBS

Combating Obesity Ltd (COBWEBS) is a not-for-profit company operating in Huddersfield. They design, develop and deliver a variety of educational and social activities to children and adults to combat the destructive effects of obesity. Projects are designed to increase self-awareness and to inform on issues of weight and well-being.

COBWEBS also provide specialist one-to-one and group counselling with fully qualified counsellors.

Young PALS

The aim of Young PALS (Practice Activity & Leisure Scheme) is to get more young people, more active, more often with a view to improving health well being and quality of life, in particular to reduce the incidence of overweight and obesity. Young PALS is for any child aged 5-13 who is resident in Kirklees, registered with one of the GPs in Kirklees and/or attending a Kirklees school. The child must be on the 91st centile or above on the BMI chart.

The Young PALS activity provision includes a one-to-one motivational interview, MEND, FUSION stepping stone activity, followed by ENERGISE mainstream activity.

MEND

MEND is a community, family-based programme for overweight and obese children aged between 7-13 and their families (in Kirklees, there are some older children also attending the programme). The multi-disciplinary programme places equal emphasis on (M)ind (E)xercise and (N)utrition...(D)o it! It combines all the elements known to be vital in treating and preventing overweight or obesity in children, including family involvement, practical education in nutrition, increasing physical activity and behavioural change.

The core MEND Programme comprises 18, two-sessions over nine weeks. The sessions feature an hour of discussion and an hour of fun land or water-based exercise. ¹ The Dewsbury MEND session used in the research also had an additional 10th week celebration session, in which participants had a treat of their choice – in this case it was a bowling outing.

¹ MEND factsheet

Detailed Research Findings

Health Awareness

There exists a reasonable level of awareness of ‘healthy living’ as a topic amongst both children and their parents who are involved in weight management programmes. In general, respondents think their family’s health was either better or the same as other people they know. Parents involved in the MEND programme tend to have a greater level of awareness of ‘healthy living’ and buy in to the principles of the programme than parents whose children are involved in Young PALS.

The majority of parents and children consulted as part of this research tended not to think their family’s health was any better or worse than other families they knew. Though the majority of parents and children we spoke to reported that the whole family was overweight. Some families thought their health, particularly their diet, was now better than other families especially since becoming involved in a weight management programme. Parents recounted the changes they had made in their eating habits since their child’s involvement in a weight management programme – some of which were somewhat misguided.

“We’ve swapped to red top milk [skimmed] and we have Nimble bread because that means you can have two slices instead of one and if you have WeightWatchers [bread], you can have three [slices]”. Parent, Young PALS Huddersfield.

“We drink fresh orange juice now”. Parent, Young PALS Dewsbury

In a number of cases, parents themselves were involved in commercial weight management programmes – Slimming World was particularly popular – in addition to their child attending a weight management programme. These parents usually had a more structured awareness of healthy eating, than their children gained from programmes such as ‘food optimising’ on Slimming World.

Awareness and understanding of food labelling varied greatly amongst parents. In the majority of cases, children, particularly those on MEND, appeared to have a greater grasp and understanding of the meaning of food labels. Consequently, they tended to be the primary driver in ensuring the principles of healthy eating they had learnt on their weight management programmes were adhered to. Indeed, many parents reported that it was their child who read and understood the labels on foods at the supermarket, and the child who would demand they were returned to the shelf should the sugar and fat content be too high.

Young people involved with COBWEBS appeared to have the least amount of concern of all the weight management programme participants about healthy eating. These young people appeared to know what constituted healthy foods, but were not making attempts to change lifestyle or diet in consideration of this.

Many parents talked of the importance of not depriving their children of the food they wanted from time to time. Examples were given of having family “*pig out nights*” in which the whole family ate unhealthily, always buying a large bag of doughnuts at the seaside and having crisps and sweets sporadically.

“At Easter, normally they have about 10 Easter eggs each, but this year they only got two”. Parent, MEND Dewsbury

Again, it was usually the child who recounted that they had turned down ‘treats’ in favour of healthy snacks, such as fruit. Only a minority of parents said they were trying to move away from providing food as a ‘treat’ by encouraging their child to have other rewards such as a DVD.

South Asian parents tended to comment that prior to attending a weight management programme their families had used to eat a lot of fried foods including meat and chapattis. In some cases despite becoming more knowledgeable about nutrition and healthy foods, parents and children were living with extended families and were not the primary cook for the family. This presented difficulties in ensuring a healthy diet was followed, as they felt unable to dictate what foods were eaten.

Both children and parents commented that it was sometimes hard to follow a healthy diet, particularly if the healthy eating was not supported by schools providing healthy meals. Reports were made of some schools not providing healthy foods, such as breakfast clubs serving sugar coated cereals and lunches providing puddings which were high in fat and sugar.

Both children and their parents who were involved in the MEND weight management programme appeared to have a greater grasp of healthy lifestyles than children involved in the other programmes. This is undoubtedly due to the nutritional education they and their parents undertake as a key component of the MEND programme.

Very few children or parents were doing any formal exercise other than the activities in which they partook at Young PALS & MEND and compulsory physical activity at school. The children who were doing other formal exercise tended to be involved in football clubs via school. Some South Asian children also attended events at their local community centres where they “*played games*”. A number of children did say they had become more active, however, as a result of being involved with a weight management programme. This usually involved “*playing out*” with friends more often, or going on bike rides with family members, whereas formally they had tended to stay indoors watching television.

Some parents commented that they came from families with a myriad of health issues, such as diabetes, arthritis and heart problems, therefore, healthy living was not in the culture of their family.

Weight Gain

Reasons given as to why children had gained weight varied greatly but can be divided into three main areas. Firstly, lack of activities for children and young people coupled with a general reluctance on parents’ part to allow their children to ‘play out’. Secondly, issues at home such as parents separating leading to ‘comfort eating’ and poor food choices. Thirdly, a belief that weight gain was due to an external factor such as genetics or medication therefore nothing could be done to prevent it.

Respondents were asked what factors they thought had contributed to weight gain in both themselves and others.

Parents, children and young people tended to give different answers to this. Beyond listing the foods which they thought had made them gain weight (chocolate, sweets, crisps, fast food etc), responses from children and young people tended to focus around boredom and lack of activities to take part in as key factors in weight gain. This was especially the case for older children, particularly those who had been involved with COBWEBS. These young people tended to live on housing estates where they said anti –social behaviour was rife, which made it difficult to go out in the evenings. Consequently, they reported staying in, watching television and eating the “*wrong sorts of food*”.

“Round here you either get fat or go and stab people”. Young Person, aged 15, COBWEBS

Psychological and emotional factors were also cited as reasons for weight gain by COBWEBS participants. Examples were given of an unhappy homelife including bullying by siblings and problems resulting from parents separation.

“I can’t stand my brother so I eat to shut him up. If I eat enough, I fall asleep”. Young Person, aged 16, COBWEBS

Cheap fast food and the easy availability of junk food were also given as reasons for weight gain. Young people commented that there are always “*good offers*” in places like McDonald’s which are generally cheaper than buying a healthier salad from somewhere else. Some parents also commented that ‘junk food’ such as “*a frozen dinner from Farm Foods*” is cheaper than buying all of the ingredients separately and cooking a meal from fresh ingredients.

A number of children commented that prior to joining a weight management programme they had simply been lazy, and had fallen into a cycle of coming home from school and watching hours of television while eating. They had simply “*stopped playing out*” with friends or even considering this option. They had begun to gain weight without realising how large they were becoming. In some cases, children and parents commented that in comparison to some of their peers they were not overweight.

“It happens to people [weight gain] because they think they’re okay in terms of weight, but they’re not”. Female, aged 11, MEND

Some children reported *“eating everything in the house because it was there”* while waiting for their parent to return home from work and prepare an evening meal. Some went further and blamed their parents for buying food such as biscuits and crisps, which they in turn, ate in times of boredom and hunger.

“The only time we eat something bad for us is when mum buys it”. Male, aged 10, MEND

“You have to tell your parents not to bring the fatty foods into the house”. Male aged 12, MEND

A number of parents countered this by claiming that it was wrong to deprive their child of the food they wanted to eat. These parents were keen to emphasise the importance of ‘treats’.

Parents tended to believe that time and general laziness had contributed to weight gain. Examples were given of them not getting home from work until 6pm and, therefore, having no inclination to start preparing a meal from scratch. This issue was exacerbated for single parents who were lacking in support for childcare.

“We were a happy family and then we had problems and it was just me as a single parent with two kids and I think laziness on my side meant I went to work, came home and just sat watching telly”. Parent, Young PALS Huddersfield

Some parents also felt concerned at letting their children ‘play out’ in the area surrounding their home due to worries about safety. These parents said they were *“afraid to let the children out of their sight”*. Parents acknowledged that this had resulted in their children staying indoors and becoming involved in more sedentary activities thus encouraging weight gain.

Participants from the South Asian community commented that it was sometimes difficult for their children to be involved with after school activities, as the children had to go to mosque. This had resulted in lack of exercise and is also a potential barrier to attending weight management programmes.

Long working hours and extensive use of wraparound childcare compounded issues around healthy eating for some parents, as they reported having little awareness as to what their child was eating as their food, when in childcare, was prepared by someone else.

“I’ve never any idea what she’s eating as she has breakfast at breakfast club, lunch at school and tea at after school club”. Parent, Young PALS Huddersfield

A number of parents were conscious that they themselves had passed on poor eating habits to their children. Several parents from various groups had suffered bereavement and had taken to ‘comfort eating’ when stressed or upset – a habit which they knew they had passed onto their children. Another family had lived abroad for several years and had compensated for the lack of nearby relatives by going out for frequent meals. When at home, parents said they would have visited family instead of eating out.

Several parents blamed weight gain on genetics, stating that obesity ran in their family so there was little they could do to prevent their child from gaining weight. They were pessimistic as to the chances of their child actually losing any weight and they thought the most they could hope for was that their child’s weight remained the same. Further to this, a minority of children and young people were also incredulous that their weight gain was a direct result of overeating or eating the ‘wrong’ foods. These children gave examples of siblings or other children at school who they claimed had similar diets, but did not gain weight. This inconsistency confused them and left them feeling helpless of their weight gain and they could not understand what they were doing wrong.

“People just assume we’re greedy and we’re not”. Young Person, aged 15, COBWEBS

In several cases, where children had learning difficulties parents thought that certain medications their child was taking were known to result in weight gain, therefore, there was little they could do to prevent it.

Perceptions of Obesity

The way people talked about their weight reflects the source of the sentiment, with external perceptions often experienced as judgemental. In social marketing terms, it is important to focus on the internal experience of being or feeling fat in order to empathise and thereby increase motivation and minimise resistance to the message.

None of the users of Children’s Services referred to themselves or others as ‘obese’. Perhaps because like the Adult Service Users, to them ‘obese’ is a word which is associated with doctors and health care professionals. Children were most likely to refer to themselves and others on their programme (if at all) as “fat” or “tubby” (young people) in the group environment. Both children and parents also talked about obesity in more removed ways such as, being “overweight”, “larger” or “needing to lose weight”. For children “fat” is the way they believed others saw them, particularly other children at school who labelled them “fatty” or “pig”. It was these labels which were most emotive to the majority of parents, children and young people. From a social marketing perspective, therefore, this feeling of being perceived as ‘fat’ increased motivation and minimises resistance to the message.

Conversely, some of the older children in the COBWEBS group often spoke about being fat in a positive light; as they believed being this way meant “*you’re proper hard*”. In this way, the group presented being overweight as a lifestyle choice, perhaps a rebellion. They went on to discuss the recent publicity around being ‘size 0’ concluding that there is little point in trying to lose weight as neither size is acceptable in our society.

“You can’t be fat, you can’t be thin. What do people want you to be? Invisible?”. Young person, aged 16, COBWEBS

This group of young people perhaps demonstrated a degree of self-preservation in the way in which they referred to themselves and their weight in derogatory terms. They talked openly and without embarrassment about “*being fat*”. They spoke in a similar derogatory manner about other people on the COBWEBS programme using words such as, “*humongous*” and “*fat cows*” to describe their peers.

Across the board, ‘being overweight’ was related back to what this meant to people in their everyday life. Examples were given of:

- Not being able to go shopping for clothes in the same places as friends
- Lack of choice in what clothes to wear
- Bullying and name calling
- Coming last in races
- Being poor at sport.

In many cases, it was these limitations as a direct result of being overweight that children understood, rather than the concept of ‘being overweight’.

Motivations for Weight Loss

In many cases, parents had not proactively sought help in managing their child’s weight. Where parents had been proactive, a number of reasons were given for this proactivity, but health improvement tended to be far from being the most important. More frequently, parents were motivated by the child’s unhappiness and isolation amongst their peers due to their physical appearance. In these cases, they and their child were often caught in a vicious circle of weight gain which they did not know how to break. They had sought help in desperation. Children themselves tended to be motivated to lose weight by a desire to ‘fit in’ with peers by being able to do the same things as other children they knew.

All respondents were asked what they thought motivated people such as themselves to try to make a change in their lives by joining a weight management programme.

Many of the children on MEND and Young PALS who we spoke to did not seem sure as to how they had come to be on a weight management programme – most simply reported that their parents had brought them along. These children, whilst acknowledging they were overweight, tended to view the weight management programme foremost as a hobby and a social activity rather a means of losing weight.

Parents confirmed that the majority of children had been referred to a weight management programme via the school nurse after they had been weighed at school. Other parents had found out about the programmes via word of mouth. Only a minority of parents said they had proactively looked for help for their child in managing their weight. One parent had seen an advertisement for MEND in a women’s magazine, someone else had read about Young PALS in the Huddersfield Examiner, one parent was a member of PALS and heard about Young PALS via this and another had used the Google search engine on the Internet and had searched for ‘health in Kirklees’.

“It was by accident really that we got onto it [MEND]”. Parent, Huddersfield MEND

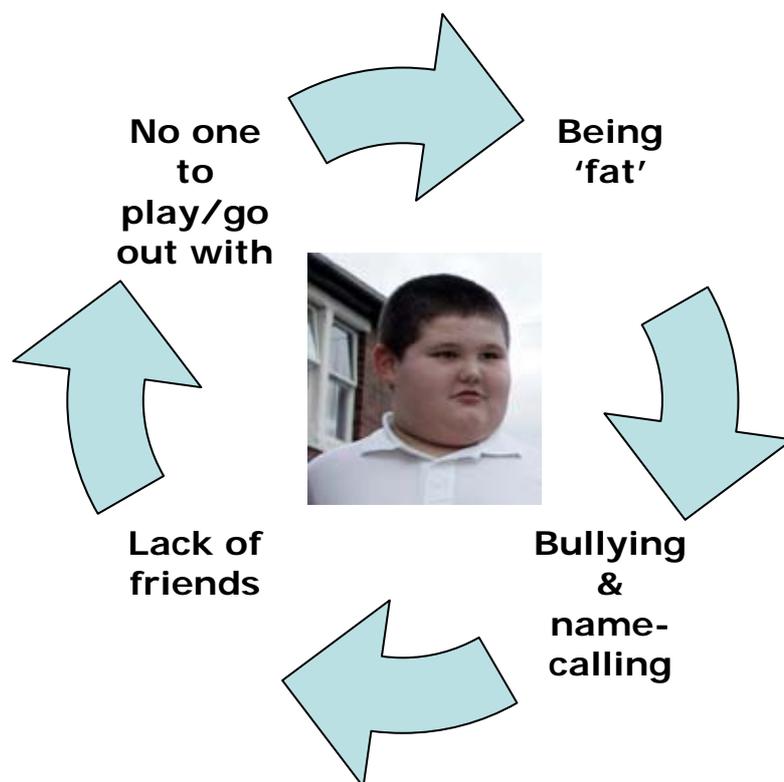
Some parents had proactively approached their GP *“in despair”* about their child’s weight and had been referred to Young PALS. These parents often did not have a weight problem themselves, but said they were struggling to communicate the importance of healthy eating and exercise to their child.

“I need to feel like I’m doing everything I can [to help]”. Parent, Young PALS, Huddersfield

All of the young people involved in COBWEBS said they had been referred via their school as a result of bullying about their size. For these young people, weight gain was usually related to emotional issues rather than a lack of knowledge about healthy living.

A number of children and young people appeared to be caught in a vicious circle as a result of their weight gain. An example of this was given by a parent taking part in the MEND programme, who commented that the more weight his children gained, the less active they became as they did not like people’s reactions to their weight. As a result, they became extremely insular and stopped getting involved in activities, such as children’s clubs on holiday. This vicious circle is illustrated in **Figure 1** overleaf.

Figure 1
Vicious Circle of Weight Gain



Motivations for losing weight for children focussed around wanting to make friends and being fit so that they could partake in sports activities with their friends at school. They also recounted incidences of bullying and name-calling at school as a result of their size, which made them want to lose weight.

"Not having many mates and people calling you fat and pig and stuff like that [makes me want to lose weight]". Female, 10, Young PAL, Dewsbury

"I wanted to stop being last in races on sports day". Male 10, Young PAL, Dewsbury

"I was getting out of breath and getting a stitch when I was running". Female 9, Young PAL, Dewsbury

Older children often simply wanted to 'fit in' with their peers, which meant being able to go and look for clothes at the weekend in the same shops as their friends.

"You go to the shops and it's all little tops – they want to be able to buy them. She'd like a Bench jacket, but the ladies' largest size isn't big enough". Parent, MEND

For these young people, losing weight was related to fitting into the 'norms' of our society.

Weight Management Programmes

Weight management programmes for young people are largely unknown, therefore, they have little idea as what to expect of programmes. It is common for children to fear they will be the largest on the programme prior to joining. If weight management programmes are to be promoted as part of a social marketing campaign, these uncertainties and fears will need to be addressed via campaign messages. Across the board, people had enjoyed the group-based weight management activities. These activities make children and parents alike feel they are included and acknowledged without feeling like they “stand out”. Again, this is an important message to be conveyed.

Initial Perceptions

Respondents were asked what they thought their specific weight management programme would be like prior to coming to first session.

The majority of children on MEND and Young PALS said they did not know what to expect from their weight management programme, but their greatest fear had been that they would struggle to make friends. Parents upheld this claim commenting that their child had often struggled to make friends prior to coming on a weight management programme as a result of their weight. This issue was compounded for some boys who thought the programme would mostly comprise girls, therefore, they would have even greater difficulty in making friends.

Another fear which was frequently voiced by both children and young people was that they would be the largest on the programme. This concern was usually the result of the child being the largest at their school or in their friendship group.

“I was the chubbiest on my whole estate, and then I went to COBWEBS and there were people who were absolutely humungous. It shocked me – they were four times my size”. Young Person, COBWEBS

“I thought people skinnier than me would call me names”. Young Person, COBWEBS.

Another fear which was frequently expressed by children was that they would not be fit enough to take part in the exercises on offer. They envisaged the sessions to involve a lot of running to encourage rapid weight loss, and given that many recounted unsuccessful attempts at school sports this was a terrifying prospect.

“I was scared, because I thought we were going to do races and I would come last”. Young PAL, Dewsbury aged 8

Prior to starting on a weight management programme, some children were also concerned that they would be chastised about their weight by the leaders of the various programmes.

“I thought they would talk about us weight and put us down”. Male aged 10, Young PAL, Huddersfield

The majority of parents said they had been very positive about their child enrolling on a weight management programme. Only a very small minority said they were initially sceptical as to what the programme could achieve. Some families reported experiencing negativity from wider family members about their child enrolling on a weight management programme. This negativity usually came from grandparents, who described the child’s obese state as ‘puppy fat’ and went on to try to convince the parent that the child would lose weight naturally over time.

In most cases, parents were also overweight and they regarded their child’s involvement in a weight loss programme as the catalyst to make changes across the family. Several parents reported that they had joined a commercial weight management programme, such as Slimming World with the aim of losing weight themselves and also encouraging their child.

“I didn’t want them to end up looking like me and I don’t want them to be teased like I was”. Parent, MEND Dewsbury

At the MEND session, parents were generally unaware that they would be required to stay and would become very much part of the programme. They had not understood that the programme also incorporates sessions for the parents.

Several children said they had not told any of their peers that they were attending the sessions, as they did not believe other people would understand - if questioned by others about their programme, they would tend to say that it was an exercise class or after school club. Parents, on the other hand, appeared to have no issue in telling people their child was attending a weight management programme and subsequently recommending it to other parents.

Experiences

The young people who had attended COBWEBS were generally positive about the programme. Positive comments were made about the one-to-one counselling they had received, the COBWEBS director and the new friends they had made. They were, however, also quick to criticise other aspects of the programme. Criticisms were particularly aimed at some of the other people who had attended the programme and the trips that had been organised for participants.

Young people pointed to specific issues on the COBWEBS programme in terms of the wide range of ages involved. They said the age groups had failed to mix during sessions, resulting in *“bitchiness”* and *“loads of arguments”* between participants. Suggestions were made for such programmes to divide age ranges between 13-15 and 16-18 to ensure that participants felt comfortable with each other.

These young people also criticised the trips that were organised a part of the COBWEBS programme, as they believed they were inappropriate for “fat people”.

“Who wants to go sailing when they’re fat. I’d be scared I’d break the boat!”. Young Person, aged 15, COBWEBS

The COBWEBS participants were very aware of the lack of funding for the programme and commented that this was a drawback, as some struggled to pay for the trips which were a key component of the programme.

Very few criticisms of either MEND or Young PALS were made by either children or their parents and, where they were, these tended to relate to specific instructors who children had not got along with. Opinions were split as to whether more time should be spent learning, or taking part in the activities. The majority of parents and children concluded that the split between these activities was “about right”.

Children taking part in Young PALS and MEND were asked what aspects of the programme they liked best. The majority of children spontaneously reported that “making friends” had been the best aspect of the programme. Following this were “getting fit” and thirdly, “losing weight”.

The children taking part in MEND specifically pinpointed the swimming they had done as part of the programme as the most enjoyable activity. They were also positive about the trip they had been on to Sainsbury’s where they had been given the opportunity to try new food and look at food labelling. The rewards systems and achievement certificates provided on both the MEND and Young PALS programmes were also well-received by both parents and children. Young PALS liked the variety of activities they had been given the opportunity to try – on the evening of the research session in Huddersfield they had all tried parachuting.

Children alluded to the fact that they had enjoyed the weight management programmes because they had been able to fit in with other children and take part in the activities without worrying about their size or how others saw them. This ease in fitting in was a vital part of the programme, and something which the majority of children had not experienced before.

Some parents of children on the Young PALS programme reported that their children had done very little group exercise prior to enrolling on Young PALS. This in part was due to the child’s ability to bypass any sporting activity with excuses such as injury or ill-health. The staff of Young PALS were commended by parents for ensuring every child took part in exercise.

“The kids come out of themselves – there’s nobody sulking and everyone’s involved”. Parent, MEND Dewsbury

The MEND recipes which participants were given were particularly popular with both children and parents. As a result of learning about food and nutrition, children used the expressed ‘MEND friendly’ to describe foods which were considered to be healthy. Parents were often keen to emphasise that no foods were banned, but children were encouraged to eat ‘junk food’ in moderation.

Both parents and children taking part in the MEND programme reported some difficulties in ensuring a healthy lifestyle was adopted by all family members. Particular issues were reported with siblings at home who were not involved in the programme and, therefore, continued to eat foods which were not ‘MEND friendly’. This problem was compounded if the sibling was not also overweight. This scenario often proved very demotivating for the child who was involved in the programme.

Some children commented that they would like to attend one more weight management session at week, preferably at the weekend, when they are often at a loss for activities to be involved in. Similarly, parents observed that children can sometimes be tired when they attend activities after school and, therefore, it might make better sense for activities, particularly the learning aspect of programmes to take place at weekends.

The Huddersfield Young PALS group contained approximately three children who had learning difficulties. Parents of these children spoke very highly of the inclusivity of the Young PALS programme, particularly as they had struggled to find any other young people’s clubs that were willing to take children with learning difficulties, or could provide staff who would understand the needs of their child.

Benefits of the Weight Management Programmes

Weight loss is generally not the main benefit of the weight management programmes for children and young people; rather it is an ‘added extra’ benefit. Improved confidence and raised self-esteem as a result of making friends are the primary benefits of the programme and, therefore, should be strongly conveyed in marketing messages.

Across the board, the main benefit which parents, children and young people said they had gained from the various weight management programmes was confidence and increased self-esteem. This new found confidence was usually a result of the ease with which children had made friends on the programmes.

“Making friends – it’s the one thing he never had before he came here. He’s never had the chance to fit in before”. Parent, Young PALS Huddersfield

“She wouldn’t speak to people before, but now she does”. Parent, Young PALS, Huddersfield

Across both age and gender, one of the greatest rewards of losing weight for parents, children and young people was ‘fitting in’. At a smaller size, children and young people were now able to go shopping for clothes with friends, and buy items from shops they would not have been able to previously.

“I can now fit into my school clothes and I don’t have to have special ones from the shops”. Female aged 10, MEND, Dewsbury

“We can go shopping without the tears now. She used to say ‘nothing fits me. I’m too fat!’”. Parent, MEND

The majority of children we spoke to said they had become significantly more active since being involved with either Young PALS or MEND. Examples were given of *“playing out more”*, *“taking the dog for a walk”* and *“walking to school”*.

Several children commented that their general behaviour had improved considerably since being involved with Young PALS. They attributed their better behaviour to the increased amount of exercise. Better behaviour had, in turn, resulted in better grades at school.

“When I used to not do any exercise, I was really naughty but now I’m really good and my levels at school have all gone up”. Male, aged 10, Young PAL, Dewsbury,

Related to this, some children commented that they were no longer tired at school as a result of being fitter and following a healthier diet. This meant they were better able to concentrate at school, and some had seen an improvement in their grades. Similarly, some children had experienced pain in various areas of their bodies as a result of their weight, which they reported to have lessened as a result of being involved with a weight management programme.

Children who had undertaken the MEND programme reported that they were now taking a greater interest in cooking, and were starting to help their parents prepare fresh food and cook meals. They also now have a greater awareness of how to look at labels on food. Indeed, some parents now reported that their children were telling them what they should and should not buy in the supermarket.

“Before [MEND] I just cooked easier things but now I can do fresh vegetables and stuff like that”. Female, aged 15, MEND, Dewsbury

Parents on the MEND programme reported having benefited greatly from their involvement. The main benefit for many parents was the opportunity to meet other parents in a similar situation.

“I thought what have I done [to make my child overweight]? When I came here I saw there were other mums with kids who were exactly the same, and they hadn’t done anything wrong. I didn’t look at them in a bad way; they weren’t bad families”. Parent MEND Dewsbury

Another important benefit for parents was improved knowledge about healthy eating and nutrition. For example, the programme had made some parents realise that the portion sizes they were giving their children were actually adult sizes. Furthermore, parents said their own diets had benefited greatly from what they had learnt during their time on the MEND programme. In some cases, more so than they had done via commercial weight management programmes.

“It’s been really helpful. I’ve done WeightWatchers and I’ve done Slimming World, and I’ve never learnt what I’ve learnt on MEND”. Parent, MEND, Dewsbury

“Coming to this [Young PALS] has made me realise that we were eating all the wrong things”. Parent, Young PALS, Dewsbury

Information

There is an apparent dearth of information about weight management programmes for young people in Kirklees. The three ways in which people are currently getting information about programmes are: referral via a school nurse or GP, proactively seeking information via the Internet and recommendation from family or friends. People are rarely proactively seeking information about weight management programmes for young people, however, once people are aware of the programmes they are effectively ‘selling themselves’. The key messages about weight management programmes which respondents thought should be conveyed to people were around making friends, getting fit and having fun.

Parents bemoaned the lack of information available regarding weight management programmes for children and young people. Many parents thought that representatives from both Young PALS and MEND should be visiting schools throughout Kirklees both to provide information about weight management programmes and to help parents and young people alike to better understand the importance of weight management. It was often the parents who had spoken to someone about the weight management programme prior to attending who had a better idea as to what to expect than parents who had merely read about the programme.

Parents who had sought information via the Internet commented that they had only come across the weight management programmes *“by chance”*. Similar to the adult service users, if we Google “weight loss children Kirklees”, the first three things we find are the Kirklees Children and Young People Plan available for download as a PDF; the Kirklees Talkback newsletter and an article from the BBC website about a teacher wearing a veil being suspended. Scrolling down further, there is still no information about any of the weight loss programmes which have been the subject of this research. Taking this into consideration, it is easy to understand parents’ frustration at the lack of information available!

The young people from the COBWEBS group thought that information regarding weight management should be specifically targeted at parents, given that they are the ones who generally provide food for children and dictate what activities take place.

“They’re [parents] the ones who let their kids stay in the house all day”.
Young person, COBWEBS

Younger children taking part in Young PALS and MEND thought that messages relating to weight management programmes for young people should emphasise getting fit and making friends as the primary motive to join. They described losing weight as an added bonus to their enjoyment of the activities on offer.

“My mate cried and said she was the fattest one in school, when she wasn’t...so I told her to come to PALS but she didn’t know what it was. She thought it might be exercise, so I said you play games, make more friends and get healthy. She wouldn’t need to worry about being the fattest here because she’s not”. Female, aged 10, Young Pal Dewsbury

Playing games and taking part in activities were believed to be the primary aspects of both MEND and Young PALS, and young people thought that these, rather than weight loss, should be emphasised as the main focus of the programmes.

“We play games and then we go into a room for 15 minutes and learn about healthy eating”. Young PAL Dewsbury, Female aged 9

“It’s so enjoyable. You don’t really realise you’re losing weight because you’re having so much fun”. MEND participants Dewsbury, Male aged 12

Young people thought that information about weight management programmes should be clear about the ethos and values of the programme, clearly emphasising that regardless of their weight all children would be treated equally. They thought this would prevent children and young people who were thinking about undertaking a weight management programme from worrying about fitting in to the programmes.

“They won’t take the mickey out of you and you will make new friends and when you see the results it will boost your confidence”. MEND participant Dewsbury, Male aged 12

During the workshop sessions, children and young people were asked to design posters to encourage other young people and families to attend weight management programmes. Some examples of posters designed by **Young PALS** are shown in **Figure 2** overleaf.

The main messages that children and young people conveyed via these posters were around making friends, having fun and eating healthily. Children were keen to convey that the programme could include activities for all of the family, not just young people. Interestingly, losing weight was rarely mentioned as a key attraction of the weight management programmes.

Figure 2
Young PALS–Advertisements for Weight Management Programmes



Several parents thought any information about weight management programmes should include role model examples of children who had been on weight management programmes. They thought this would encourage other parents and children to enrol on the programmes by reassuring them of the benefits of the programme.

“It might give people the kick up the backside they need if they see someone else has done it”. Parent MEND Dewsbury

Once they felt they had benefited from a weight management programme, children were often willing to show others what they had achieved. As such, they are excellent role models for joining weight management programmes, such as MEND and Young PALS.

The Future

Weight loss gains for children and young people need to be translated into tangible benefits that they can understand in order to motivate them to become involved with weight management programmes.

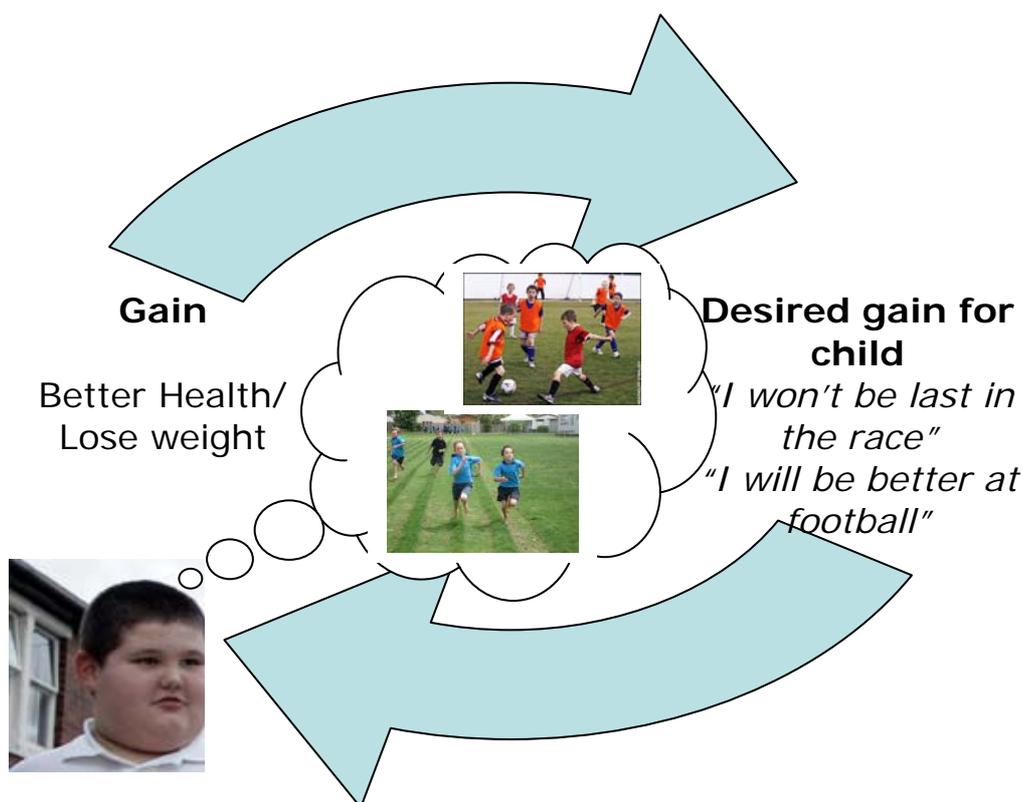
Issues exist around maintaining the levels of activity and commitment to healthy eating which many participants have become accustomed to as a result of their involvement in weight management programmes. If gains from the weight management programmes for children and young people cannot be maintained people are likely to lose faith in them, in much the same way that some adult service users reported losing confidence in commercial weight management programmes.

Weight Loss Gains

Respondents in the research sessions were asked what would be different for either them or their children should they achieve their weight management goals.

For the majority of children and young people, achieving their weight loss goals would result in them being able to take part in social activities with their friends, such as shopping for clothes in shops that do not stock clothes in their present size. For some parents, it meant not having to have school uniforms custom made due to the fact that uniforms were not made in their child’s size. Several parents also mentioned their child would be in better health and, therefore, less likely to develop conditions such as diabetes. Improved health was not a ‘stand-alone’ gain which children mentioned as being a benefit of weight loss. Where health was mentioned this was in relation to what this translated into in reality. For example, being fitter meant being a better football player. In social marketing terms, gains of losing weight need to be translated into everyday benefits which can be easily understood by children as demonstrated in **Figure 3** overleaf.

Figure 3
Child’s Motivation for Weight Loss



Where there are tangible outcomes for children in their everyday life, the gains of weight loss can be understood more easily.

Young people aged 13-15 were also able to understand the concept of potential 'losses' should they lose weight. Fears were expressed by these young people that losing weight might make them change as a person. The COBWEBS group in particular thought there would be some loss in street credibility should they lose weight. One participant who said she had lost four stone on the COBWEBS programme commented;

"When I was fatter, people probably thought I was more hard and wouldn't mess with me". Young Person, aged 15, COBWEBS

For these young people to 'buy into' weight management programmes, they need to see evidence that the gains as a result of the programmes outweigh the losses.

Aspirations

In all of the sessions, children and young people were asked to express their hopes for the future in relation to health and body image. To help with this process, we used a technique involving ‘wish trees’ and asked respondents to post their hopes on a branch of the tree.

It is worth noting that children’s hopes were related to many aspects of their lives, perhaps illustrating the immense impact which they believed weight loss would have.

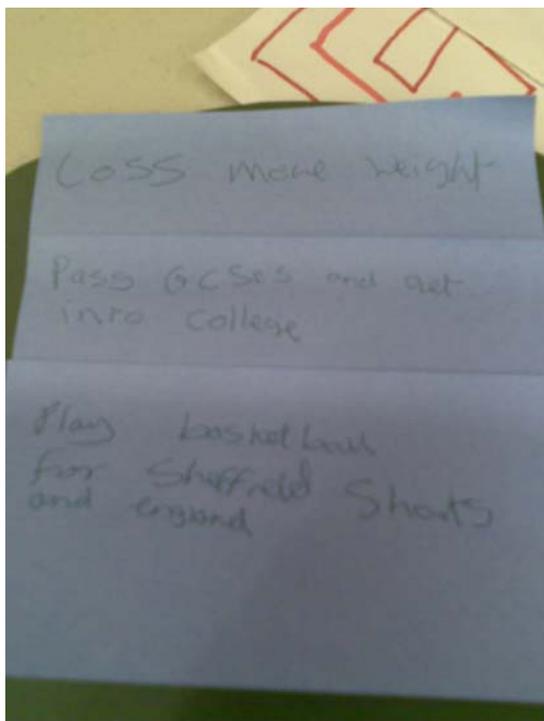
Examples of hopes and aspirations for the future from the various weight management programmes are shown below.



COBWEBS – Future Aspirations

- Let feelings of anger out
- Meet someone and have children
- To be treated equally
- To make the right choices in life
- To get rid of my spots
- Wear nice clothes
- Finish school.

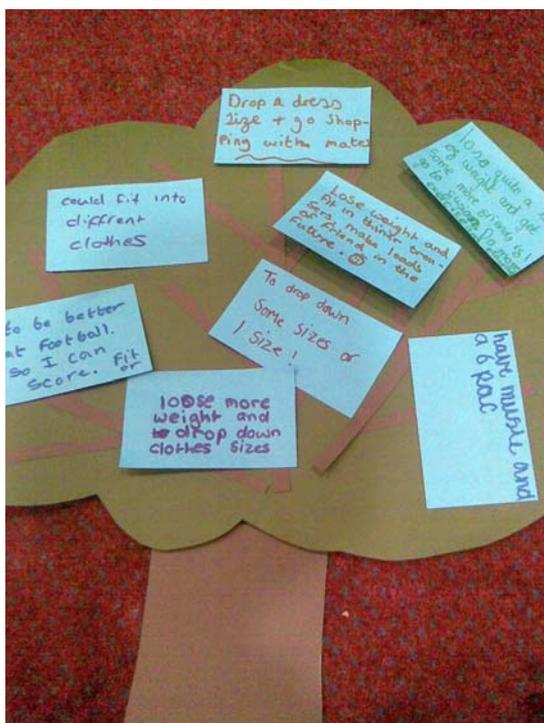
Aspirations of COBWEBS respondents focussed on dealing with both emotional and visual problems, as well as achieving in life (both through doing well at school and having a family).



Aspirations of Young PALS:

- Lose more weight
- Pass GCSEs and get into College
- Play basketball for Sheffield Sharks and England
- To lose some weight
- My parents don't argue
- To be a famous footballer
- To have clothes that fit
- People don't call me names
- My family to do more sport with me.

Young PALS' aspirations focussed on the benefits weight loss would provide. These were interlinked with achieving at school, success in sport and putting a stop to being bullied. Some Young PALS also wanted to involve their families in physical activities.



Aspirations of MEND participants:

- Drop a dress size and go shopping with mates
- Lose weight and fit in thinner trousers and make loads of friends in the future
- To drop down some sizes or one size
- Lose more weight and drop down clothes sizes
- To be better at football so I can score
- Fit into different clothes
- Lose quite a lot of weight and get some more friends
- Do more exercise and play out.

MEND respondents were very clear as to their future aspirations, and again, these were related to the tangible benefits of losing weight, such as fitting to a certain item of clothing or being better at football. Younger children also aspired to 'play out' more than they did thus keeping fit.

Maintenance

In the majority of cases of families we spoke to, particularly those involved with MEND, parents were very much ‘on board’ with the weight management programme, and were keen to ensure, therefore, that their child continued with the good habits they had learnt once the programme was over. For some children, however, the situation was reversed and it was the children themselves who thought they might struggle to encourage their parents to buy healthy food and take them swimming, for example.

Many parents admitted that they would feel ‘lost’ once they and their children finished the various weight management programmes. This was not only on behalf of their child, but for themselves, as many parents said they had enjoyed interacting socially with other parents in the same position.

“We’re gutted it’s [MEND] finished”. Parent, MEND Dewsbury

Parents of children on the Young PALS programme did not seem sure as to when, if at all, the programme would end and most assumed they could continue to bring their child to the sessions indefinitely. Parents of children on MEND, were often going to continue taking their child to Young PALS sessions (if they attended already), but other than that, were sometimes at a loss as to how they would help their child to maintain the benefits they had gained from MEND.

Some parents were concerned about the cost of maintaining the level of exercise which their children had become accustomed to undertaking on the weight management programmes. Cost was a particular barrier to some parents, particular those on low incomes and/or in single parent families.

“It’s a dear do to take them every week, whereas with MEND it hasn’t cost anything”. Parent, MEND Dewsbury

Families had been made aware of the MORE Leisure Card, which entitled them to discounts at sports centres but even with these discounts they were sceptical as to whether they would be able to take more than one child to activities.

Appendix 1

Case Studies

In the preceding commentary we have focussed on the common themes present in the research sessions with children and their parents. It is also important to remember that each respondent has their own unique set of personal circumstances that influenced their approach to and feeling towards weight management. This section, therefore, focuses on the narratives of a selection of Children’s Service users’ lives. The aim is to illustrate the typologies, which Enventure believes have emerged from this element of the obesity insight research, and to avoid a reductionist interpretation of the data. The case studies shown below are composites of the sessions that took place and have been categorised as different typologies, the criteria for each is shown in the table below.

In order to retain confidentiality, names and any identifying aspects of respondents have been changed

Children’s Service User Typologies

Type 1 The Reluctant Teen	Type 2 The Aspiring Child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entire family are overweight • Gained weight in teens • Experiencing bullying at school • Sceptical of what a weight management programme can achieve • Unsure as to whether weight loss will provide benefits • Main benefit related to fitting in with peers, eg wearing fashionable clothes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing weight issue • Referred to weight management programme by school nurse • Has benefited greatly from weight management programme • Influencing parents to change habits • Motivation to lose weight is fuelled by a desire to have more friends and be better at sport.
Type 3 The Mortified Parent	Type 4 The Passive Parent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unaware of psychological and social effects weight gain is having on child • Struggling to help child lose weight and feels a ‘bad parent’ as a result • Proactively seeks help for child • Sceptical of what a weight management programme can achieve • Weight management programme has been beneficial to both parent and child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles with own weight • Working long hours • Cannot find time to cook fresh food • Child referred to weight management programme by school • Sees the benefits of the weight management programme on child • Needs practical guidance on how to support child in weight loss.

Type 1 - The Reluctant Teen

Chelsea is 15 and lives on a housing estate in Huddersfield with her mum, older sister and younger brother. All of Chelsea’s family are overweight, with the exception of her older sister who Chelsea claims eats exactly the same as her but never gains any weight.

Chelsea says she only began to put on weight when she started high school aged 11. Prior to that, she ate whatever she liked and never put on any weight, though she concedes that she was probably quite a lot more active when she was younger.

For the past three years, Chelsea has been bullied at school as a result of her weight. She was referred to the COBWEBS weight management programme by her school.

Chelsea doesn’t think she has lost much weight since being involved with COBWEBS but says she does feel much happier in herself and her confidence has soared. Chelsea says that in all honesty, she’s not really sure whether losing weight will be beneficial to her. She has seen her friend lose three stone on a weight management programme, but thinks she doesn’t get as much respect from her peers now she is smaller. The only advantage Chelsea can think of if she loses weight is that she will be able to buy fashionable clothes from the shops she likes. This means she will be able to go shopping with friends at the weekend rather than staying in on her own.

The Aspiring Child

Liam is 11 years old and has been attending the MEND weight management programme in Dewsbury for the past nine weeks. Liam’s not sure how he came to be on the MEND programme but thinks the school nurse sent his mum some information about it.

Liam thought MEND was going to be about getting fitter, he didn’t expect there to be “*so much talking*” about what to eat and what not to eat. Liam says that since being on MEND, the family have stopped eating “junk food”. For example, they now have fresh meat rather than processed burgers. They also eat much more fruit and vegetables. Liam’s mum doesn’t look on food labels, but Liam does. He likes to go shopping at the supermarket now with his mum, and he checks that everything she buys has less than five grams of sugar and fat. He learnt to do this on MEND.

He has made a lot of friends on the programme, which he is pleased about because he doesn’t have many friends at school. Liam says he feels much happier since being involved with MEND, but he hasn’t actually lost any weight on the programme. He thinks he would feel even better if he could lose some weight, as the children at school might stop calling him “*fatty*”.

Liam thinks the programme has made him more active generally and he comments that he is now *“faster at running”* and goes out on his bike more at home. He would like to carry on swimming every Monday, as he has at MEND but is not sure whether his mum will be able to bring him every week.

Liam thinks if he was to lose weight girls would like him more and he might even be able to get a girlfriend. He would also have bigger muscles and would be better at football.

The Mortified Parent

Karen is married and lives in Dewsbury. She has one son, Callum aged 12. Callum has always been a *“larger”* child, but Karen did not realise how his weight was affecting him socially until one night when she found him crying because other children at school were calling him *“fatty”*. The following day she went on the Internet to look for help for her son, which is when she came across MEND.

Karen has also struggled with her weight in the past, and had recently lost a considerable amount of weight via self-help weight management. Prior to attending MEND with her son, she struggled to see why he was unable to do the same. Karen says she’s pretty ‘clued up’ about health, but now realises she wasn’t conveying this effectively to her son.

Karen attributes the family’s weight gain to the fact that they have recently moved away from their family, and boredom had led to them eating out fairly regularly – *“whenever we were bored, we’d go for a meal; usually a pizza”*.

Karen didn’t know what to expect from MEND, and she was sceptical that the programme would achieve all that it said it would at first. She struggled to see how Callum would take on board all that the programme was teaching him, but after several weeks she saw such a great change in her son, her confidence in the programme grew.

Karen liked the fact that MEND made her realise she wasn’t the only parent with an overweight child. Prior to attending the programme, she felt a failure as a mother and couldn’t understand how she had made her son so overweight. Being with other parents in the same position was hugely beneficial to her, as she could see that other parents were not *“bad families”*, so neither was she.

The Passive Parent

Louise lives in Huddersfield and has a daughter, Jade aged 10. Louise’s daughter has attended Young PALS for the last few months. She was referred to the programme by the school nurse after she was weighed at school.

Louise herself says she has always struggled with her weight, and the problem has worsened in recent years since she and her husband separated. Louise works full time, and often does not arrive home until six o’clock in the evening by which time she says she has neither the time nor inclination to cook “*a proper meat a vegetable meal*”.

Louise was not optimistic about what the Young PALS programme could achieve. Her daughter has always found it difficult to make friends as she is very shy, and has never been involved in any type of club or programme before. Louise is very complimentary about how the staff of Young PALS have brought her daughter “*out of herself*” and comments that Jade’s confidence is now much greater than it was before. Jade is enjoying all of the activities on offer at Young PALS and had made friends with the other children on the programme.

During the Young PALS session, Louise normally waits in the coffee bar of the sports centre and chats to other mums. She says she has enjoyed meeting other mums in similar situations to her.

Louise says she hasn’t really learnt anything as a result of her daughter being on the programme, but she thinks it has brought to mind the importance of exercising. She also now tries to buy lower fat food, but admits she is not really sure what she should look at on food labels. Jade has not lost any weight while being on Young PALS, but she has not gained any either. Louise thinks the main benefit of Jade being on the programme has been her increased confidence.

Appendix 2

Discussion Guides

Young People Workshop & Triads Guide

Introduction

Usual explanations

- Anonymity
- All points of view valid -- no right answers
- Encourage a ‘free thinking’ environment where all ideas are valid

Plan for next hour

Participants introduce themselves, name, age (and school).

Key warm up question – what one benefit do they/did they hope to gain by attending a weight management programme.

Weight Gain

In your experience, what types of things do you think contribute towards weight gain? *Moderator or group member write on cards*

Go through cards and discuss why someone would stop/start doing each of the contributing factors?

What types of things do you think might encourage someone to change their lifestyle, eg become involved in a weight loss programme?

What might discourage someone? How could this be overcome?

All participants to provide ideas

Thinking back to when you decided to come on the weight management programme, what were your hopes/fears?

In twos/threes participants to list hopes and fears and then feedback

Workshops only: participants to swap fears and devise ways of overcoming fears for people embarking on weight management programmes.

Weight Management Programmes

What words would you use to describe the weight management programme that you have followed/are following (*write on flip chart*).

Why do you use those words?

What’s good/bad about the programme?

What do you think should be included in weight management programmes such as MEND/Young PALS & COBWEBS to improve it? *In twos, participants to write down three things they think should stay the same and three improvements then report back to the rest of the group.*

To what extent do you think you will be able to maintain any weight loss achieved via the programme(s) once you stop attending?

How do you think other young people & their families could be encouraged to become involved in weight management programmes such as MEND/Young PALS & COBWEBS?

How would they sell a weight management programme to other young people and their families?

Participants to break up into friendship groups and create a presentation/poster showing their ideas, then present back to the rest of the group.

Body Image

Thinking about television programmes, advertisements on television and in magazines etc, what do you think the media tells us is ‘normal’ in terms of body weight? *Group to brainstorm on flip chart*

How does this image of ‘normal’ fit in with people you know?

What effect does this have on people, in your experience?

How could more positive messages be conveyed by the media?

Brainstorm possible messages

The Future

What are your goals for the future in the following areas?

Participants to write down three goals for each

Education

Health

Family

How do these goals relate to your body image/weight?

All to write on post it notes hopes and wishes for health & body image in the next year and stick them onto wish trees.

How do you think you might go about achieving your goals?

What would stay the same?

What would change?

Thank you and close

Participants to make any final comments

Thank participants on behalf of Enventure and the PCT

Parents’ Mini Group Guide

Introduction

Introduce moderator/Eventure – independent, confidential etc

Explanation of research

Plan for session

Respondents introduce themselves:

- First name
- Family composition, eg married, co-habiting, single and number & ages of children
- Area they live in
- Length of time involved with weight management programme

Key Warm-up Question How would you describe the weight management programme (you and) your child attend in one word?

Health

Moderator to take extreme care in this section to ensure parent does not feel they are being judged. Ask questions only if it seems appropriate.

How would you describe your family’s current state of health?

Why do you say that?

Do you think your family’s health is better or worse than other people you know?

In what ways?

How would you describe your feelings towards the physical appearance of your child/your own body image?

Probe: positive/negative? Why is this?

Who in the family is responsible for shopping for and cooking food?

Why is this?

How do you feel about this person being responsible for this?

Can you describe your diet in terms of the types of food you and your family tend to eat regularly?

Do you think this is a healthy diet?

What is a healthy diet to you?

What would you say are the advantages/disadvantages of a healthy diet?
probe barriers to healthy diet.

How aware or unaware would you say you [and your family] are of healthy eating, eg do you look at labels on food etc? Why? Why not?

Attitude to exercise?

Would you say some family members are more unaware/aware than others?

Why do you think this is?

What do you think the contributing factors to weight gain are generally?

Probe beyond responses such as ‘eating too much’.

Weight Management Programme

Thinking back to when your child (and you) decided to come on the weight management programme, what did you think it is was going to be like?

What made you think that? *Prompt: friends, family, school, information available.*

What were your worries about joining?

What were your hopes for the programme?

How do you think people’s worries about joining a weight management programme can be overcome?

What’s good/bad about the programme?

Which elements have you enjoyed most?

What do you think should be included in weight management programmes such as MEND/Young PALS & COBWEBS to improve it?

How easy/difficult do you think it will be for both of you to maintain any weight loss achieved via the programme(s) once you stop attending?

Why is this?

How do you think other children & their families could be encouraged to become involved in weight management programmes?

How would you sell them to other families?

Motivations for Weight Loss

What are you hoping to achieve through the programme both for yourself and your child?

If you woke up tomorrow and had achieved all of your weight loss goals for (you and) your child, in what ways do you think life would be different?

What would (you and) your child gain?

What would (you and) and you child lose?

Moderator to write gains and losses on index cards (if relevant different ones for parent and child gain and losses)

If you had to get rid of one gain, what would it be, and what would you lose as a result?

For what reasons do you think people, especially children, sometimes fail to achieve their goals?

Why do you think people sometimes struggle to sustain weight loss?

In what ways do you think people, especially children, could be encouraged to maintain weight loss?

Thank you and close

Respondents to make any final comments

Thank respondents on behalf of Enventure and the PCT

Parent/Child Sessions

Introduction

Introduce moderator/Eventure – independent, confidential etc

Explanation of research

Plan for session

Respondents introduce themselves:

- First name
- Family composition, eg married, co-habiting, single and number & ages of children
- Area they live in

Health

Moderator to take extreme care in this section to ensure parent does not feel they are being judged. Ask questions only if it seems appropriate.

How would you describe your family’s current state of health?

Why do you say that?

[Child will be asked to draw a picture of the family and a face (happy, sad, indifferent) to indicate feelings towards the health of his/her family]

Who in the family is responsible for shopping for and cooking food?

Why is this?

How do you feel about this person being responsible for this?

Can you describe your diet in terms of the types of food you and your family tend to eat regularly?

[Child to describe a typical day’s food, and will then be set the task of drawing the food].

Both

Do you think this is a healthy diet?

What is a healthy diet to you?

What would you say are the advantages/disadvantages of a healthy diet?

Probe barriers to healthy diet.

How aware or unaware would you say you [and your family] are of healthy eating, eg do you look at labels on food etc? Why? Why not?

Attitude to exercise?

Would you say some family members are more unaware/aware than others?

Why do you think this is?

What do you think the contributing factors to weight gain are generally?

Probe beyond responses such as ‘eating too much’.

Weight Management Programme

Thinking back to when you (both) decided to come on the weight management programme, what did you think it is was going to be like?
What made you think that? *Prompt: friends, family, school, information available.*

What were your worries about joining?

What were your hopes for the programme?

How do you think people’s worries about joining a weight management programme can be overcome?

What’s good/bad about the programme?

Which elements have you enjoyed most?

What do you think should be included in weight management programmes such as MEND/Young PALS & COBWEBS to improve it?

How easy/difficult do you think it will be for both of you to maintain any weight loss achieved via the programme(s) once you stop attending?

Why is this?

How do you think other young people & their families could be encouraged to become involved in weight management programmes?

How would you sell them to other families?

[Child to devise a poster encouraging other children to attend a weight management programme and when complete talk parent through what the poster is intended to show]

Motivations for Weight Loss

What are you hoping to achieve through the programme both for yourself and your child?

If you woke up tomorrow and had achieved all of your weight loss goals, in what ways do you think your life would be different?

What would you gain?

What would you lose?

For what reasons do you think people sometimes fail to achieve their goals?

Why do you think people sometimes struggle to sustain weight loss?

In what ways do you think people could be encouraged to maintain weight loss?

Thank you and close

Respondents to make any final comments

Thank respondents on behalf of Enventure and the PCT