

**COI/Department of Health
LAZYTOWN STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH SUMMARY
REPORT**

Prepared for:

COI/Department of Health

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1. BACKGROUND

Department of Health's (DH) Obesity Prevention Programme aims to halt the rise of obesity in children under the age of 11 by 2010. DH has developed a Behaviour Change Strategy which has identified a key point of leverage in affecting behaviour change: the need to increase the level of trial and experimentation of healthy foods.

DH commissioned qualitative research to inform the development of an obesity prevention concept which would encourage trial and experimentation of healthy foods and resonate with the target audience: families with children under 11 years old from groups known to be most at risk of obesity.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Firstly, to develop a concept to encourage trial and experimentation of healthy foods by children aged under 11 years old who are at risk of obesity.
- Secondly, to evaluate whether the concept resonated with the target audience (families with children under 11 years old from groups known to be most at risk of obesity, as identified from previous cluster analysis conducted by TNS).

3. METHOD AND SAMPLE

The research employed a mixed methodology of focus groups, family interviews and pair depth discussions. The research was conducted between 29th March and 5th April 2005. The sample was composed of:

- **Four extended focus group discussions** with parents of children aged under 11 years old, 2 hours duration, mixed mothers and fathers.
- **Six family interviews**, of 1 hour duration, with families of children aged under 11 years old, all family members present.
- **Six friendship pair depth interviews**, of 1 hour duration, with mothers of children aged 6 years old.
- **One focus group with teachers**, 1.5 hours duration with teachers of Years 1 – 3.

The sample was based on cluster segmentation research conducted by TNS. The sample was composed of the following four segments - all families known to be at risk of childhood obesity:

- **Cluster 1:** SEG C2DE, aged 24 – 34 years old, rural location (Wrexham), included single parent households. Attitudinally: *"Poor household diet, resistant to healthy eating, perceived barriers to exercise expense and time."* One extended focus group, one family interview and one pair depth interview were conducted with respondents from Cluster 1.
- **Cluster 2:** SEG DE, aged 17 – 34 years old, included single parent households, urban location (Woolwich, South London). Attitudinally: *"Not worried about healthy eating because perceived as complicated and having fussy children."* One extended focus group, two family interviews and two pair depth interviews were conducted with respondents from Cluster 2.

- **Cluster 3:** SEG C1, aged 34 – 44 years old, included families with more than two children, conducted in York. Attitudinally: *"Often dieting and over-indulging, knowledgeable about healthy eating and believe they do enough exercise."* One extended focus group, two family interviews and two pair depth interviews were conducted with respondents from Cluster 3.
- **Cluster 5:** SEG C1C2DE, aged 17 – 60 years old, conducted in Liverpool. Attitudinally: *"Traditional parents with strong family values rejecting many of the healthy messages on grounds of price."* One extended focus group, one family interview and one pair depth interview were conducted with respondents from Cluster 5.

4. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Parents who were more and less motivated to encourage their kids to eat fruit and vegetables were found across the sample - within each of the Clusters 1, 2, 3 and 5. Whilst the attitudinal factors identified by the cluster analysis influenced levels of motivation, equally idiosyncratic factors (such as child personality, birth order and caring arrangements) clearly affected kids' fruit and vegetable consumption.

In future, Clusters biased towards socio demographic groups C2DE (i.e. Clusters 1, 2 and 5) are more likely to be difficult to motivate because cost is an additional barrier to encouraging parents to encourage their children to eat fruit and vegetables. Cost was a barrier not only in terms of price, but also wastage.

Encouraging children to eat vegetables was clearly perceived to be a bigger problem than encouraging children to eat fruit. Parents and teachers reported that fruit being supplied by schools has made a big impact on behaviour, with a majority of respondents' children now happy to tuck into a range of fruit items.

However, encouraging trial of vegetables remained a challenging issue for many parents.

LazyTown was extremely well recalled and included characters – Sportacus and Stephanie - to whom the younger audience (under 7 years old) aspired. The appeal and positive influence of LazyTown faded from 7 years old, and had the strongest appeal for the youngest audience (from 3 years old).

The wall chart was consistently the more popular of the two options discussed with parents, teachers and kids. It was a familiar technique (already used by many parents for encouraging behaviour change) which parents and teachers felt was both credible (i.e. might work) and simple.

The wall chart had broad appeal across all sample segments, regardless of cluster or SEG. Both parents and teachers felt that the wall chart idea was most suited to younger children (at an age when LazyTown also had most appeal – as demonstrated in the table below).

	Wall Chart	Energy Book	LazyTown
3-4 years old	✓	x	✓
5-6 years old	✓	x	✓
7-8 years old	✓	✓	?
9-10 years old	?✓	?✓	x
11+ years old	x	x	x

The main barriers to the success of the wall chart were fussy kids, cost and parental inconsistency. In future development, the wall chart instructions need to show parents where they can be flexible and where they need to be strict.

A minority of parents supported the Energy Book as a more sophisticated exercise for older children. It appealed to a more niche audience of motivated parents with older, motivated children. Both parents and teachers felt that the Energy Book idea was most suited to older children (at an age when LazyTown appeal has faded - as demonstrated in the table above).

A majority felt that the Energy Book was too much like hard work: lengthy and time-consuming, as well as logistically complicated for those with several children or several care settings. Importantly, the Energy Book was largely perceived as a diary exercise: it failed to encourage thought about how to increase trial of fruit and vegetables.

There was little enthusiasm for the 'contract' (an agreement signed by both parents and kids in which they commit to fulfilling either the wall chart or Energy Book exercises). Parents did not feel that the contract would contribute to the potential success of either exercise.

For the wall chart, small rewards were considered acceptable, although older children were considered more likely to need larger rewards tailored to their personal preferences. Similarly, the Energy Book was felt to require a larger reward of direct appeal to the individual child.

More generally, consistent LazyTown branding (from the wall chart, to the food choices offered, to the rewards given) was not considered imperative. LazyTown *endorsed* (i.e. 'stickered' produce) was acceptable and potentially motivating, although parents were wary about increased prices. LazyTown *products* were largely rejected on price grounds since they were assumed to be more expensive than non-branded versions.

Parents were comfortable with either the wall chart or Energy Book exercises being delivered via a 'tie-in' mechanism, i.e. incorporating a pack as part of a purchase from their routine shopping basket. Many expected the resources to be available via schools, given the current emphasis on healthy eating. Introducing the exercises via familiar channels (e.g. supermarket or school) was a more accessible introduction to the task than ordering materials from the website or telephone line which would require a certain level of independent motivation.

Although LazyTown was expected to be the dominant partner brand, Department of Health branding added legitimacy to the initiative (which was particularly important for teachers). More generally, DH branding also had the ability to address any latent concerns about either the wall chart or Energy Book exercises being a money-making opportunity for LazyTown.

5. MAIN FINDINGS

5.1 Sample Comments

Parents were experiencing a whole spectrum of eating behaviour: from (reportedly) good to patchy fruit and vegetable consumption; to a generally chronic, ongoing lack of fruit and veg consumption; to – at its most extreme - vomiting when eating vegetables and constipation.

Parental attitudes also ranged across a spectrum – from more to less motivated - in terms of encouraging their kids to eat fruit and vegetables:

- **Cluster 1** respondents tended to have '*poor household diets*'. These DE respondents were struggling to get their children to eat, let alone eat more fruit and vegetables.

- Most **Cluster 2** respondents were not particularly motivated to encourage their kids to eat fruit and vegetables, due to busy lifestyles and fussy children.
- **Cluster 3** respondents were a much more up-market segment who tended to feel a little self-satisfied that they were *'doing all right'* in terms of encouraging their children to eat fruit and vegetables.
- **Cluster 5** respondents fitted the *'traditionalist'* criteria. They tended to resist too much intervention in their family lives and were generally fairly unconcerned about healthy eating.

It should be noted that parents were likely to have overstated both the amount of fruit and vegetables their kids were consuming *and* the extent to which they encouraged their kids to eat fruit and vegetables. Admitting to being a less than perfect parent with less than perfect children was difficult for some to report, given the recent emphasis on healthy eating (as publicised by Jamie Oliver).

That said, those having most difficulty were the most open about the problems they were facing:

"She's a nightmare. My husband won't eat with us any more because it upsets him too much."

Understandably, social class influenced the importance placed on the cost of 'healthy' food. Cost was clearly an overarching consideration for clusters biased towards the lower income C2DE audiences (Clusters 1, 2 and 5). For these groups the price of food was an issue, particularly for Cluster 1 who were most vocal about the cost of fruit and vegetables compared to 'junk food'.

Cost was also an issue in terms of *wastage* for C2DE households where parents with poor diets were unlikely to finish any leftover fruit and vegetables. Cost also affected repertoire: C2DE parents tended to cook a more limited variety of meals, sticking to tried and tested, value-for-money favourites. Lack of experimentation was also partly due to a lack of enthusiasm for cooking.

The research also revealed that idiosyncratic factors influenced individual households' eating patterns and disrupted a sense of a consistent response based on cluster attitudes or even class:

- **Birth order or preference:** parents sometimes treated younger children different to older children, having either learned from experience (or given up from past experiences): *"I'm soft on Harvey. I know I am."*
- **Personality:** many parents reported widely differing eating behaviour between siblings, with 'picky eaters' and 'good eaters' commonly found within one family.
- **Multiple carers** with differing attitudes towards encouraging children to eat healthily: *"I'm a single parent and their dad likes to get take-outs. It wouldn't even be worth me passing this type of thing on to him."*

The level of fruit and vegetable consumption within individual households was therefore affected by a mix of factors, not least of which was the child's personality. Some were simply reported as naturally more 'difficult' to influence than others.

5.2 Attitudes towards eating fruit and vegetables

Clearly, some children were copying their parents' eating behaviour. The influence of fathers, particularly over sons, was perhaps surprisingly strong (given their relative lack of culinary input):

"I didn't eat veg until I was 17. Didn't do me any harm."

In some households, parents were ready to admit that they were not particularly good role models and actually sympathised with their kids' preference for not eating vegetables. Sometimes kids themselves were the role models, having been educated at school to make different and independent choices:

"She eats healthier than us. If you take her to McDonalds and it's straight on to the carrot sticks!"

Parents also noticed that kids copied the behaviour of their peers:

"It only takes one kid at a party to say 'yuk', then the whole lot of them are at it."

Overall, teachers and parents showed little concern about encouraging children to eat fruit, largely feeling that this battle has been won. Both parents and teachers reported that children were usually happy to eat fruit (although clearly there were exceptions). Eating fruit at school (which was first piloted in 2000) has clearly made an impact. Teachers reported that most children tucked in to different types of fruit on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, vegetables were clearly an entirely different proposition:

"I have a son who will suck fruit and then spit it out and he picks out all his vegetables. He only eats baked beans."

"My twelve year old used to throw up if I tried to force him to eat vegetables so now I just push the fruit."

It appears that vegetables have not been tackled as comprehensively as fruit at school. Teachers reported that four out of five days' deliveries tended to be composed of fruit, with only one 'vegetable day' out of five. Teachers felt that the format of vegetables was important in encouraging trial, with 'bite-size' portions (e.g. mange tout and cherry tomatoes) more likely to succeed.

Parents *claimed* that they encouraged their children to try more vegetables. However, in reality, these attempts sounded rather lacklustre. Typically, this involved 'putting things on their plate' time and time again - largely without success. This encouraged parents to think that they were not letting their kids 'get away with' not eating vegetables. Another more labour-intensive ruse for more motivated parents was to 'hide' vegetables in stews or pasta sauces (a technique which parents claimed was more likely to result in success).

There were some concerns about 'food fascism' within schools, with some parents (notably 'traditionalists' from Cluster 5) feeling that the whole issue had been taken rather too far, and resenting the overall level of intervention in family mealtimes. However, broadly speaking, parents supported the idea of encouraging their children to eat more fruit and vegetables.

Unfortunately, the strength of this positive response on a theoretical level tended to be qualified by the effect that certain parenting 'truisms' had in reality:

- Badgering' kids known to be counterproductive:

"I can't force him or there will be a tantrum and that gives me a headache. As long as he puts something in his stomach."

- Kids are fickle and are known to go through 'phases':

"Last week she didn't like raisins and this week she likes eating them out of boxes."

The extent to which parents were likely to challenge these barriers was largely a matter of their own motivation. There were examples of motivated parents across the clusters. More motivated parents were happy to make an effort:

"We involve her in growing our own veg and she helps prepare the meal too...and she STILL won't eat it."

For the less motivated, an 'it'll do' approach was evident:

"He eats the some things and not others. Let's face it, there's lots of things I don't like either."

Whilst many parents may have good intentions, the extent to which they were prepared to challenge their kids' eating behaviour varied across the sample, regardless of Cluster or class.

5.3 LazyTown

LazyTown was extremely well recalled throughout the sample. Very few actually needed prompting by the video clip. It tended to be parents of older children (9 – 11) who tended not to have heard of the programme. Parents of younger children (aged under 7 years old) and younger children themselves were able to talk about the characters confidently.

Currently, the programme was perceived to be about exercise rather than healthy eating. The healthy eating theme was eclipsed by the perceived focus on exercise (driven by Sportacus' 'bouncy' persona). In addition, neither parents nor children seemed to have picked up on the role of 'sports candy'. If 'sports candy' is to be part of future initiatives, awareness and understanding of its role needs to be developed. Moreover, the appeal and usefulness of the term 'sports candy' should be explored - a few commented that it did not sound very 'English'.

The extent to which LazyTown could act as a positive influence over kids' eating habits was felt to be dependent on level of enthusiasm for the programme. For younger boys and girls (aged 3 - 6 years old), Sportacus and Stephanie were perceived as role models. Although they might still be watching the programme at 7 years old, kids were less likely to perceive the characters as role models:

"I watched it when I was little [now 7], but I wouldn't want my friends to see that [the LazyTown branded wall chart] in the kitchen."

"My 6 year old is so over LazyTown, but my 3 year old loves it."

5.4 Reactions to the wall chart

The wall chart was clearly and consistently the most popular of the two options, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, familiarity: many parents across the sample (both C1 and C2DE) had used wall charts in the past to facilitate behaviour change or simply encourage good behaviour. Parents already knew how to use wall charts and wall charts were already in kitchens, in full view of members of the household. Overall, there was an existing sense of goodwill towards wall charts which formed a positive context for future development. A wall chart encouraging different eating behaviour was, however, a new idea.

Secondly, credibility: the wall chart was also a credible approach. Whilst not expecting miracles, parents believed that the wall chart approach might well encourage their kids to eat more fruit and vegetables. Many who had tried wall charts in the past had found them successful – at least to some extent. Importantly, wall charts were also credible for kids themselves. Parents and teachers both reported that children tended to find wall charts motivating and actively enjoyed sticking on stickers and watching their progress.

Thirdly, simplicity: the wall chart was a technique which parents across the sample felt they could manage. Completing the wall chart entries was not expected to be time-consuming (unlike the Energy Book). The wall chart was also considered easy for parents with several children to manage. Overall, most parents felt that they would be willing to try repeated trial, with the support of the wall chart.

Both parents and teachers felt that children were likely to understand the wall chart mechanic. The fact that kids themselves could get involved in completing the wall chart entries – choosing their stickers and sticking them on themselves – was perceived as a positive attribute.

From a parents' point of view, the major barrier to success was their kids' fussiness and non-cooperation. Those with the fussiest kids were adamant that their kids would not eat anything they did not want to, regardless of the techniques employed. This group of parents envisaged that children would either flatly refuse to cooperate, or spit the food out. Interestingly, despite doubts about the efficacy of repeated trial (in theory), parents became more optimistic about trying the idea when the practical support of the wall chart was introduced.

For C2DE audiences, cost was also an issue (but less so for more motivated parents), as discussed in section 5.1.

From an outsiders' point of view, the major barrier to success was variable parental commitment and consistency. At the least motivated end of the spectrum, parents lacked commitment to the idea:

"In reality, who has the time to prepare all this? Dinner time is hard enough as it is, without having to introduce new vegetables."

For the more motivated, strictness and consistency were the major issues (i.e. maintaining the principle that rewards are only given for proper trial). Teachers felt that repeated trial was much more likely to work in the school environment. They were much less hopeful about the chances of parents maintaining discipline in the home environment.

Happily, teachers were comfortable with the wall chart approach. For them the wall chart approach was also familiar, credible and relatively straightforward. Teachers felt that the props for the exercise would need to be provided for them (i.e. ready prepared vegetables), otherwise perceived difficulties proliferated quickly (e.g. no time to prepare veg, hygiene factors).

Teachers immediately started to think of creative ways of using the wall chart as a basis for other activities e.g. using the data for maths activities or working together as a class towards a class reward, or using the LazyTown theme through to a major reward e.g. a sports day.

In the future, instructions for the wall chart will need to specify where flexibility is acceptable and where strictness is required. Amongst this group of parents, it was not just the kids who were inconsistent about eating:

"Sometimes we give them a meal of vegetables and if they eat it we take them to McDonalds to fill them up."

- Parents wanted flexibility in meeting their child's needs and abilities. For some children, getting veg to their lips will be a triumph.
- Parents also wanted flexibility in their choice of vegetables, feeling that trying to encourage a child to eat something they hated would be pointless and counterproductive.
- Clarity was required regarding the amount of food that constituted a portion. This was very important to kids!
- The 'non-negotiables' need to be clearly stated e.g. 'Does it really need to be 15 days?' 'Do the 15 days need to be consecutive?'

Ultimately, a certain amount of flexibility needs to be built into the exercise or parents will adapt the routine beyond recognition (and presumably, effectiveness).

5.5 Reactions to the Energy Book

The Energy Book failed to generate a similar groundswell of positive feeling amongst parents. A motivated minority felt that this exercise would be useful for older children (7 years old and over). Both teachers and parents felt that the relative sophistication of the exercise was likely to be suited to an older audience who were also more likely to have the patience required to complete the exercise.

A number of positive attributes were identified. Parents and teachers acknowledged that older children would actively enjoy completing their sticker books. A minority of parents also acknowledged that the exercise would help them keep note of what their child was eating.

Initial reactions suggested that the Energy Book has a more 'niche' target audience than the wall chart. For these families, the Energy Book could work either as a standalone exercise for those already eating well or as a follow on from a successful wall chart exercise. Overall, the Energy Book was more likely to be successful in families with older children and/or motivated kids and/or motivated parents.

For a majority, staying power was the main barrier raised. First impressions were that the booklet looked quite lengthy and the daily entries were expected to be time-consuming:

"It looks more like homework." (Parent)

"It's very heavy." (Teacher)

In short, a 28 day exercise seemed like an awful long time – particularly for younger children. Parents found it more difficult to imagine sitting their kids down with their Energy Books (particularly for those who were 'time poor' or those with five children!) Overall, respondents wondered how long the enthusiasm would last – both theirs and their kids.

Practically speaking, the Energy Book was also perceived as logistically complicated to manage. Given the diary entry format, both parents and teachers raised the issue of how the Energy Book exercise would combine the school and home settings:

"If they went home from school they'd never come back again."

This raised the prospect of children lying about what they've eaten (either to their parents at home or to their teachers at school). Close liaison between parents and teachers to prevent this eventuality was considered unlikely.

Similarly, given the diary entry format, parents raised the issue of how the Energy Book exercise would combine multiple home settings or multiple carers. Liaison between different carers was also considered relatively unlikely and therefore ambitious:

"My mum's the weak link in these things and lets my child eat anything."

Parents and teachers tended to feel that the Energy Book would need to be *either* a school *or* home based activity. Less motivated parents (from Clusters 1

and 5 in particular) suggested that the Energy Book should be a school-based activity.

When comparing the Energy Book with the wall chart, it was clear that parents were viewing the two exercises very differently:

- Unlike the wall chart (which was a very familiar approach), there was limited familiarity with the diary format (for example associations with diet diaries).
- Unlike the wall chart approach, the effectiveness of the Energy Book approach has not yet been established. (Reports of success in Iceland did not convince).
- Both parents and teachers were able to perceive what they felt was the helpful competitive aspect of the wall chart much more clearly than the potential competitive aspect of the Energy Book.
- The Energy Book felt like a much bigger commitment and more difficult to manage for both parents and teachers: "*The chart's more workable really.*" (Teacher)

Importantly, parents' response to the Energy Book did not stretch to include thinking about *applying* the learning from the diary entries i.e. encouraging their kids to eat more vegetables.

5.6 Reactions to contract

Across the sample, there was very little enthusiasm for the contract. Parents generally did not expect that the contract would add anything to their verbal agreement with their children.

It was only a minority of C1 respondents who felt that this formal prop would act as a 'conversation opener'. For younger children, parents and teachers felt the 'contract' approach was rather too serious and a bit difficult to understand.

Overall, parents did not feel that a 'contract' would affect their chances of success – either positively or negatively - with either the wall chart or Energy Book exercises.

5.7 Rewards

For the wall chart, small rewards – as in the examples used in the research - were perceived as appropriate and effective. For younger children (up to 7 years old), the prospect of getting a LazyTown sticker daily was a reward in itself:

"Never underestimate the impact a sticker can have!"

At the end of the 15 day process, small rewards were perceived as appropriate for younger children. The puzzle and LazyTown magazine were particularly popular.

Parents and teachers felt that smaller rewards or LazyTown branded rewards would be less likely to satisfy older children (over 7 years old). For this age group, rewards tailored to personal preferences or larger rewards were considered more motivating.

For the Energy Book, a larger reward was considered appropriate and acceptable. Whether kids could be rewarded *during* the process was raised. Some parents worried that the final reward could be forgotten about during the 28 day exercise.

More generally, parents did not feel that the rewards offered would necessarily need to be LazyTown branded rewards. Parents did not necessarily feel that their children would require a consistent LazyTown theme to keep them motivated and were happy to tailor the rewards according to their child's personal preferences e.g. Bratz, Barbie, football.

5.8 Fruit and vegetable options

Parents across the socio economic spectrum were very wary about food prices increasing as a result of LazyTown endorsement or branding. Most felt that they would not be prepared to pay more for a LazyTown endorsed or branded product.

It was only a minority of motivated parents who admitted that they would 'try anything' and therefore be prepared to pay extra in order to encourage their kids to make healthier choices. It should be noted that parents were probably already paying extra to buy 'kiddie friendly' options e.g. small packets of sultanas, pre-prepared 'bite-sized' vegetables.

Parents were happier with the idea of LazyTown *endorsement*, rather than LazyTown branding. Endorsing foods via stickers, without incurring additional expense was considered acceptable. Parents were cautiously optimistic that their children might be drawn to LazyTown stickered produce.

However, parents were uncomfortable with LazyTown branded products since this immediately suggested increased cost and LazyTown profit making which was unacceptable in this context.

5.9 Delivery mechanism

Parents were comfortable with either the wall chart or Energy Book being delivered by a 'tie in' mechanism (e.g. including the materials with a purchase of another item). Making the wall chart and Energy Book available within supermarkets was perceived as appropriate – and accessible.

Parents did not expect to pay for either the wall chart or Energy Book *in addition* to their current shopping, but incorporating a pack with other items as part of their routine shopping basket was acceptable. Collecting vouchers was much less appealing since this process was perceived as 'a bit of a hassle' and therefore less likely to work. Many parents expected a tie-in with schools (given the current emphasis on healthy eating in this setting).

5.10 Provenance

Parents expected that DH would endorse the exercise, although they expected LazyTown would be the dominant brand. In reality, few parents were actively concerned about DH's involvement. However, when asked, parents felt that the DH stamp of approval would give the exercise a sense of credibility and legitimacy. Official branding would also communicate that the scheme was motivated by a sense of social responsibility, counteracting any latent worries about LazyTown making money from the exercise. DH endorsement was important for teachers:

“Otherwise every Tom, Dick and Harry can come to us with their gimmick!”
(Teacher)