

Food is the fuel to play



About this booklet

This booklet is the result of an action research project carried out with and by children and young people at Felix Road Adventure Playground. The playground is part of Eastside Community Trust, a community anchor organisation working in Easton, Bristol.

Felix Road is an open-access adventure playground, which means children over 7 are able to attend without their parents and come and go as they please. There are currently over 2,400 children and young people aged 4-16 on the register. The playground is highly diverse, with, at the last count, over 28 different ethnicities regularly attending; 92% of all children are black or minority ethnic. The research was carried out with all children after school, at weekends and on holidays.

The focus of the research was on what children like to eat and drink when they play after school, on weekends, and during their holidays at Felix Road.

The research was commissioned by Quartet Community Foundation, working in partnership with Feeding Bristol, with an aim of improving access to nutritious and appropriate food after school.

This research aligns with several other initiatives in Bristol that aim to support children, young people, and families in accessing food and education.

Why?

The campaigning of footballer Marcus Rashford about what children on 'free school meals' are eating during holidays, weekends and after school and the Bristol's One City Food Equality Strategy has opened up a national debate on how to best tackle food insecurity in childhood.

Food provision after school can be varied for children living in Bristol. Yet after school is when children have the best opportunities to play. After-school clubs rarely provide hot food for children, and though clubs based in schools are obliged to follow 'School Food Standards', they often don't.

There are, however, examples of excellent after-school provision in Bristol. Felix Road Adventure Playground provides a free hot meal to all children every day they are open, which is 6 days a week. Situated in an area of high deprivation, Eastside Community Trust firmly believe that the combination of a highly energetic adventure playground and a free food offer for children is a community health solution with multiple outcomes for children, families and the community.

However, this is not the case throughout Bristol. There are concerns that after-school children are consuming high levels of ultra-processed food from shops and fast-food

takeaways, as healthier alternatives are often unavailable. Fundamentally there is a need to better understand:

- what matters to children when they eat and play after school
- what food services work for children
- what children would like to see in their after-school food environment

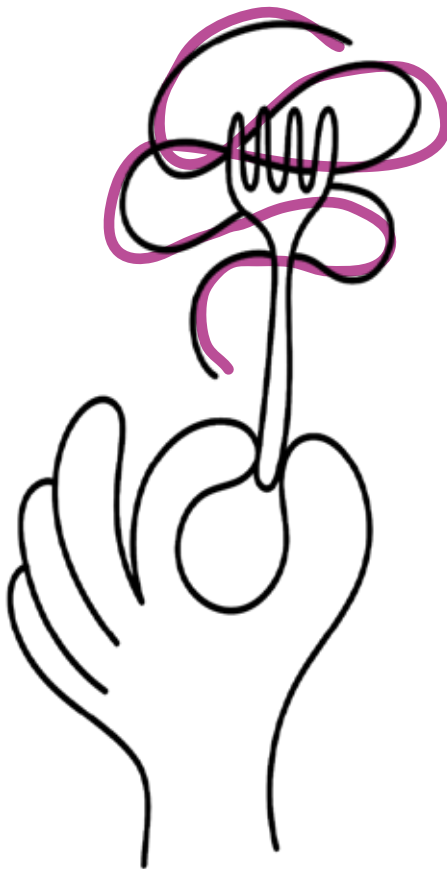


Children - seen and heard

We often talk as a society about the importance of listening to children. But the reality is that children rarely get the opportunity to give their views. At Eastside we believe the number of children we see is a sign of a healthy neighbourhood. Worryingly children are spending less time out and about in their local community and more time in front of screens at home..

Made by the children at Felix Road, the award-winning Freedom Kids Podcast episode 'What we eat after school' (available on Spotify) has opened up a discussion around after-school food practices, however this is still a relatively unexplored area.

The children have made a number of short podcasts about food and related issues. The podcast is a great way to amplify children's voices on the issues that matter most to them. The podcast is always playful, the children are highly articulate and also refreshingly honest.



The research questions

The research had some simple aims and objectives:

- To be fun and playful in our research methodologies.
- For children to be researchers as well as 'the researched'.
- To use an action research methodology 'we did, we learnt, we tried, we decided'.
- To better understand what impact food after school has on children's health and their opportunities to play.
- To improve children's access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food after school.
- To share best practice on playful research with children.
- To celebrate food as a 'fuel for play'.

To start the research, the children voted on the three areas they would like to explore. These were:

1. FOOD IS THE FUEL TO PLAY

Exploring what that idea can mean for children with the following questions.

- Why do we play? How does it make us feel?
- What do we eat? What do we like? How does it help or hinder our play?
- How can food and play be a community health solution?

2. STAY HYDRATED WHEN YOU PLAY

Investigating what children like to drink when they are playing after school.

- What are the health benefits of drinking regularly while playing?

- What to do if children don't like water?
- Diluting juice - what natural fruit flavours do children prefer?
- What are the negative effects on the playground of drinks that are too sugary?

3. SNACKS AND CHILDHOOD TREATS

Understanding the balance between healthy snacks and childhood treats.

- How much is childhood determined by the food that we eat?
- Do children have rights when it comes to what they eat?
- How do playworkers manage unhealthy snacks in an after-school setting?



A person wearing a white lab coat is pouring a dark substance from a jar into a black pan. The pan contains a mixture of red and dark ingredients, possibly tomatoes and lentils. The background is a kitchen setting with various equipment.

PLAYFUL ACTION RESEARCH

**What we did, what we learnt, what we
tried, what we decided.**

fuel * *

ACTION 1: Why do we play, how does it make us feel?

HAPPY CALM
HUNGRY
FRIENDLY
EXCITED
SILLY THIRSTY
BRAVE TIRED
ENERGY
CLEVER
FUNNY
CREATIVE
SAD STRONG
RELAXED

What we learnt: Play is the most important part of childhood. It means everything to children. But they feel like they never have enough time to play.

ACTION 2: What is your favourite after school meal at Felix Road?

Chicken curry, rice and salad	30%
Beans on toast	3%
Dahl, rice and salad	10%
Spaghetti bolognaise and salad	14%
Fish, chips and peas	26%
Pizza and salad	17%

What we learnt: Children like the same food repeated. They do not like variety or flavours they do not know. At Felix, multi-cultural food creates belonging and familiarity.

ACTION 3: What food is the best fuel to play?

The children wanted to do a scientific food trial! Every day after school for four days Akmal (a very active nine year old who loves to play football) would eat afternoon tea at Felix Road. The researcher would then ask Akmal the same questions each day about how the food was helping or hindering his play.





PROFILE

Name: Akmal Mohammed

Age: 9 years

How often do you come to Felix?

5 days a week

Favourite food at home: Noodles

Favourite food at Felix: Pasta

Favourite way to play: Football

Favourite time to play: Weekends

What we learnt: Akmal loves playing football. He burns a lot of calories when he is playing. Carbs like pasta and pizza seemed to suit and sustain his high energy play. Better than slower carbs like beans or more processed fish fingers. Akmal was a great participant!

FOOD TRIAL	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4
Questions before each play session at 3.30pm				
How are you feeling today?	Ok but a bit sick	Tip top! Not sick	Happy, ready to play	Good and excited
What have you eaten today, so far?	Cereal, Tuna sandwich	Coco pops, rice and chicken	Croissant, roast chicken	Bread, noodles and crisps
Energy levels 1 - 10, right now?	5 because I'm feeling sick	10	9	10
What's for tea at Felix today?	Beans on Toast Fruit	Pasta bolognaise and salad	Pizza, wedges and salad	Fish fingers, chips and salad
Questions mid way through the session at 4.30pm				
How are you feeling right now?	OK a bit better than earlier	Good, having fun	Intense and excited	Feeling happier than ever
What have you been doing for the last hour?	Playing football	Football training	Football	Football
Energy levels 1 - 10, right now?	6	10	10	8
Is the food helping your play? Yes or No	No, don't feel any different	Yes definitely	Yes definitely	No better than before I eat
Questions at the end of the session at 5.30pm				
How are you feeling right now?	Tired, I've been playing for 2 hours	Feeling full of energy	Very good, full of energy	Ok, I'm a bit tired
What have you been doing for the last hour?	More football	Cooking, hide and seek	Playing and football	Champ and chase games
Energy levels 1 - 10, right now?	7	7	9	6
Did today's meal at Felix fuel your play? Yes or NO	Yes, kind of	Yes, I had more pasta	Yes, I played well and the food was very good	No, I ran out of energy to play football

ACTION 4: What is your favourite vegetable?

Carrots	4%
Potatoes	12%
Peas	4%
Broccoli	49%
Spinach	4%
Pepper	4%
Sweet potato	0%
Don't like vegetables!	23%

What we learnt: Broccoli is children's favourite vegetable. They liked its plainness and taste and texture. Although a fairly high percentage said they didn't like vegetables, when served alongside their favourite meal children will eat vegetables and salad.



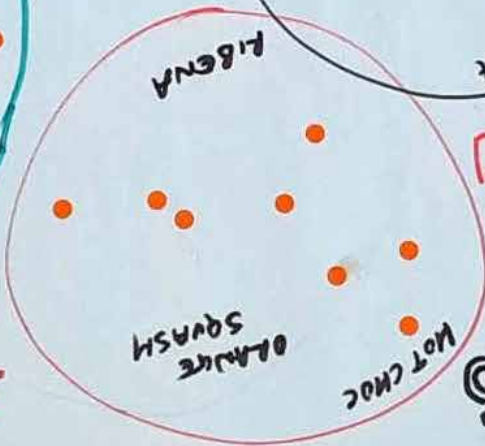
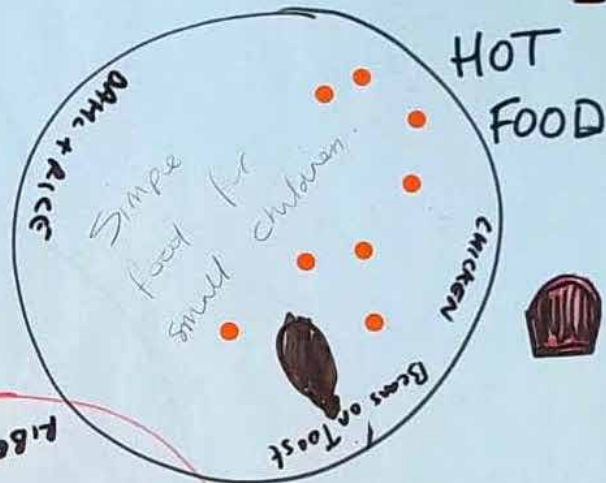
LET'S TALK ABOUT

SNACKS



~~DATE~~

VOTE FOR
YOUR FAVOURITE



DRINKS

FOOD
AT
FELIX



drink

ACTION 5: Why it's important to stay hydrated when playing?

Fluids keep your body hydrated when you're playing. Without them your body won't function at its best.

If you don't drink enough fluid:

- Your body temperature and heart rate may rise.
- Your body can't properly regulate heat.
- You may feel more tired and irritable than usual.
- You may not be able to think clearly and concentrate.
- Your body's functions may slow down, you may feel uncomfortable in your stomach.
- The impact is even worse when you're active and dehydrated in hot conditions.

What we learnt: The simple solution is that children need to drink fluids when they are playing. If they don't, they can become irritable and grumpy, which can lead to other problems.

However, there are many reasons why children don't like drinking plain water.

- The taste and marketing of sweet drinks make them addictive.
- Children don't always recognise the early signs of thirst.
- Some children may have sensory sensitivities to water, fountains or cups.
- Children may have a fear of water from past experiences.
- Medical or physical issues can make it difficult or painful to drink water.
- If parents or playworkers don't model drinking water.

What we learnt: With increasingly hot weather how do we hydrate children when they are playing? Sugary drinks are bad for children and not allowed on the playground. Pure fruit juice also contains a lot of sugar. Sugar highs and sugar lows affect children's behaviour but so does dehydration!



ACTION 6 What's your favourite diluting juice?



In Scotland, they call squash 'diluting juice'. While squash is full of sugar and other additives, a 20/80 mix of fruit juice and water is a healthier alternative. We conducted some tasting sessions and asked the children to rate each juice on a scale of 1 to 10.

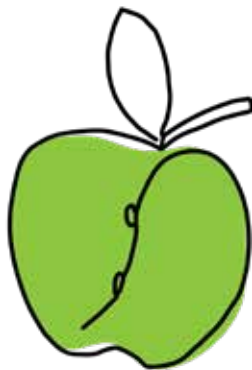
Here are the scores:

Peach	6.96
Cranberry	6.92
Pineapple	5.96
Orange	5.48
Apple	8.04

And the winner, by a country mile was apple, closely followed by peach and cranberry. Surprisingly orange came last!

We also asked the children if they could guess what flavour the juices were. Here are their answers.

Peach- Mango, Kiwi, Guava, Passion Fruit, Tropical,
Pineapple
Cranberry - Raspberry, Summer Fruits, Strawberry,
Blackcurrant, Blueberry
Pineapple- Peach
Orange - Grapefruit, Lemon
Apple - That's definitely apple!



What we learnt: Children really liked diluted apple juice, even better if you put ice in it! They also tasted juice by colour and wanted more exotic colours and flavours, such as peach and cranberry. Orange juice, the most popular flavour with adults, was the least popular with children.

snacks



ACTION 7: Discovering new snacks from around the world.

Araceli is a playworker at Felix Road from Chile in South America. She has been doing cooking sessions with children and young people from Roma, Somali and African Caribbean communities. The idea was to cook from scratch and taste different snacks from around the world chosen by the young people.



What we learnt: The children and young people really enjoyed these sessions with Araceli. Chimichanga from Mexico were an absolute favourite that they wanted to make again and again. The Roma girls and boys making pancakes was another highlight. The young people were good at prepping the food but less confident about cooking on the stove. For most, cracking and separating eggs was a completely new experience! For older children and young people at Felix Road, a new selection of snacks has been discovered that they can prepare for themselves.



ACTION 8: Children's cheeky chip survey.

The children wanted to do a survey on chips at the playground because they are very popular, but they are also aware that they are not very healthy. They devised their own questionnaire.

Children's cheeky chip survey		YES	SOMETIMES	NO
	Do you like chips?	90%		10%
	Are chips good for you?	14%	22%	64%
	Do you like salt on your chips?	72%		28%
	Do you like ketchup on your chips?	79%		21%
	Do chips make you happy?	60%	5%	35%
	Do chips give you energy?	47%	2%	51%
	Do you like fish and chips?	88%	2%	10%
	Do chips help you play?	51%	2%	47%
	Are chips a...?	Main meal? 8%	Side? 46%	Snack? 46%
	How often should you eat chips?	Every day 9%	Once a week 56%	A treat 5%
	Do you prefer chips or fries?	Chips 22%	Fries 78%	
	Guess the calories in one portion of chips	140 calories 26%	280 calories 50%	350 calories 24%
	What should children eat instead of chips?	Vegetables (4) Fruit (4) Potato (4) Pizza (2) Salad (2) Healthy things (1) Mango (1) Crisps (1) Oreo's (1) KFC (1)		



What we learnt: The children said that chips made them happy. In moderation, chips are an important part of a happy childhood alongside other non-healthy foods like crisps, chocolate, sweets and ice cream. A portion of chips has fewer calories than people think, and at the playground, it was a quick way of replacing calories after playing physically for several hours. But children recognised that chips were not good for you and should only be a treat once a week at the playground.





what we concluded

Felix Road has been mixing food, play and community for over 50 years. We know we are well set up with a good on-site kitchen and our amazing kitchen coordinator Nirmal, who cooked a staggering 17,000 free meals for children in 2024. This research was about improving what we do and sharing what we know with others.

**Here are our suggestions for
after school food and play**





See food as ‘the fuel to play’. The better the food, the happier the children, the better their play.

Create your own narrative around food. Clear messages that challenge global food marketing but still celebrate a good childhood full of joy.

Stick to a simple menu, made with fresh ingredients. Children like their food favourites and it makes it easier to order and budget.



Small portions are good. Children are not overwhelmed, and hungry children can always ask for more and this reduces food waste as well

Understand the importance of nutrition. Reduce salt, fats and sugar.

Stay hydrated when playing. Offer diluted juice (with ice) as a regular alternative to water, particularly on hot days.

Do not allow sugary drinks or energy drinks. Explain to children and adults that they have a negative effect on behaviour.

Find time to teach children to cook. A healthy interest in food and new flavours stems from the control you have when cooking for yourself.

Children have a right to be happy. Some foods, although unhealthy, make children happy and give them energy to play. In moderation, they can be part of an active happy childhood.



Thanks to ...

Akmal for testing

**Nirmal Singh, Kitchen Coordinator (pictured)
for making delicious after school teas.**

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**Researchers: Children at Felix Road
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