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Throughout her career Alison has worked in a variety of settings, including hospitals, charities and, currently, within the community. Her expertise lies in the area of health promotion, with a particular interest in paediatric nutrition.

INTRODUCING SOLID FOODS: SUPPORTING PARENTS THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED COMMUNITY SESSIONS

The Early Start Wellbeing and Nutrition Team supports families in the London Borough of Newham through their work with children's centres and nurseries.

With approximately 25% of reception aged children overweight or obese and 23% of three-year-olds experiencing dental decay in Newham, the team plays a key role in health promotion within the borough.^{1,2} Understanding the association between unhealthy lifestyle choices and increased risk of related chronic disease, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and diabetes,^{3,4} the service aims to promote healthy behaviours and lifestyles from an early age.

MY ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

As a Registered Dietitian working within the community, I have experience of supporting a wide range of pro-fessionals through delivery of training to early years' staff, teachers, health visitors, school nurses and other healthcare professionals.

Through delivery of a health award scheme to children centres and nurseries, I have supported staff to develop and implement best nutrition practice within these early years' settings.

I have provided evidence-based nutrition support to families through a variety of practical cooking classes and group education sessions, in particular focusing on the introduction of solid foods.



EARLY LIFE AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Overweight and obese children are more likely to become obese adults.⁵ Currently, one in five children at reception age in England are overweight or obese,¹ which highlights the importance of promoting a healthy weight and lifestyle from birth, long before a child reaches reception.

A child's experience in early life can often determine future lifestyle factors, such as food preference and physical activity.^{3,4} Parents play a key role in providing these experiences during infancy and early childhood. The appropriate introduction of solid foods is a key aspect of this, as it is the beginning of a child's relationship with food. Parents make the important decision of when to start and what to offer their child and, at times, these practices may not reflect national guidance.

Table 1: Age at which parents introduced solid foods to their infant⁶

	Introduced solids by 6 weeks	Introduced solids by 3 months	Introduced solids by 4 months	Introduced solids by 5 months
Mothers under 20yrs of age	6%	15%	57%	85%
All	2%	5%	30%	75%

The most recent Infant Feeding Survey (IFS) in 2010⁶ revealed that approximately 75% of parents had introduced solid foods before the Department of Health’s recommended age of around six months (Table 1). Offering fresh whole family foods at this influential time is recognised as a key priority during the introduction of solid foods. The IFS highlighted, however, that approximately 38% of Stage 2 infants and 44% of Stage 3 infants had been offered ready-made baby food, the day before the survey was completed. Similarly, the survey reported that 46% of parents had not introduced their baby to a cup at six months, as recommended by the Department of Health.⁷

Data collected at Introducing Solid foods groups delivered by the team across children’s centres in Newham, from 2013 to 2015 (Figures 1 and 2) continued to identify an ongoing need for parental education around the introduction of solid foods.

It is clear that parents play a significant role in shaping a child’s diet and lifestyle behaviours, but where can they go for reliable knowledge, tips and advice?

INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE AVAILABLE TO FAMILIES

Parents are encouraged to speak to their Health Visitor, GP or other appropriate healthcare professionals about introducing solid foods. In today’s society, however, there is a strong



Resources provided to parents when attending Introducing Solid Foods Stage 1 and 2/3 groups.

culture of ‘going online’ to find answers to any queries or questions. While an increasing amount of information is available online, parents can often receive mixed messages about when to start introducing solid foods and which foods to offer. It can be difficult to navigate through forums and online message boards and distinguish evidence-based information from opinion. Advice from family members and other parents can also influence a parent’s choice or decision around weaning and, at times, create more confusion.

For these reasons, group education sessions delivered by trained professionals are a useful forum to support families to introduce solid foods in a safe and enjoyable way, in line with Department of Health guidance.⁷ The groups serve as a way of bringing evidence-based

Table 2: Introducing solid foods, Stage 1 and Stage 2/3

Introducing solid foods Stage 1	Introducing solid foods Stage 2/3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of breastfeeding • Tips if a parent is formula feeding • Age to introduce solid foods • Risks of early weaning • Signs baby is ready for solid food • First foods to offer • Importance of iron rich foods • Information on appropriate textures • Dealing with food refusal • Useful equipment • Food safety • Shop bought v homemade baby food • Food allergies • Drinks, cups and oral health • Vitamin drops and the Healthy Start Scheme • Many other helpful tips 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of breastfeeding • Tips if a parent is formula feeding • Moving on to lumps and thicker foods • Finger foods • Achieving a balanced diet • Importance of iron rich foods • Moving onto family foods • Shop bought v homemade baby food • Food allergies • Drinks, cup and oral health • Vitamin drops and the Healthy Start Scheme • Many other helpful tips



Figure 1: Pre- and post-evaluations completed by parents attending an Introducing Solid Foods Stage 1 group between 2013 and 2015

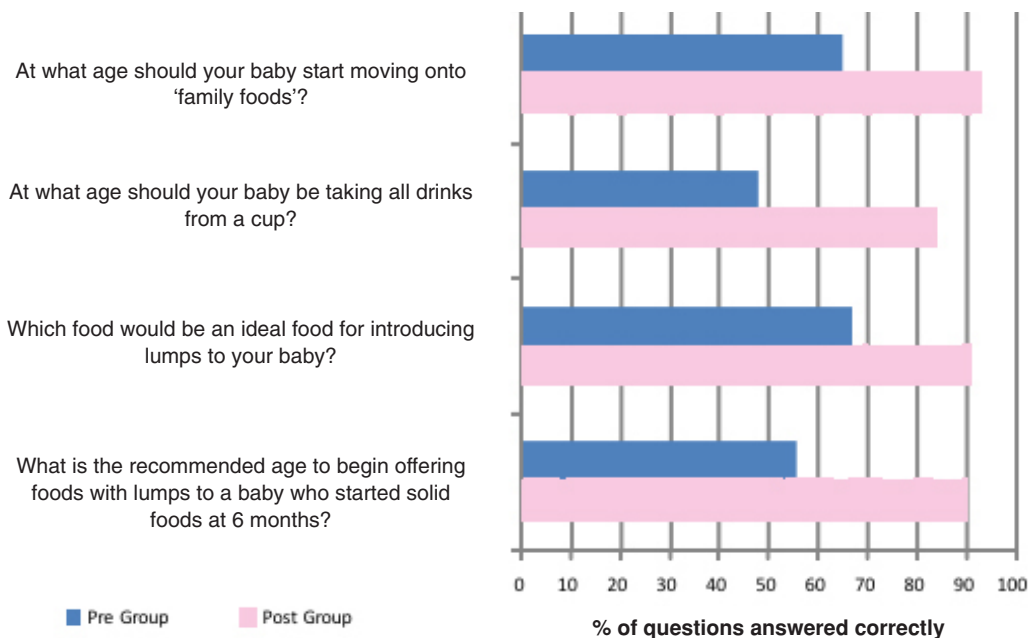
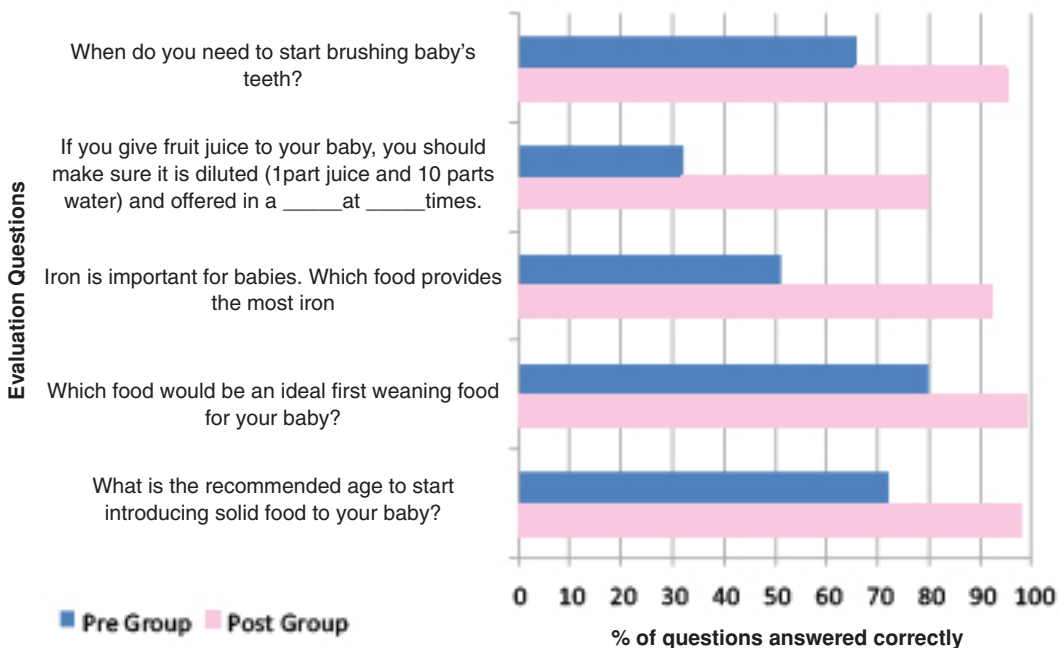


Figure 2: Pre and post-evaluations completed by parents attending an Introducing Solid Foods Stage 2/3 group between 2013 and 2015



Overall, we found parent's knowledge increased by 29% and 34%, following attendance at Introducing Solid Food Stage 1 and 2/3 groups, respectively.

advice to families' attention, while dispelling myths and common misconceptions.

INTRODUCING SOLID FOOD GROUPS

Educational groups delivered by the Newham team during 2013-2015 included Introducing Solid Foods Stage 1 (for infants aged four to six months) and Introducing Solid Foods Stage 2/3 (for infants aged seven to 12 months). Parents received age-appropriate, evidence-based advice and support through interactive group sessions. Topics covered are included in Table 2.

To support parents to put guidance into practice at home, during these group sessions parents were provided with recipe booklets, an open topped cup, a toothbrush pack and further supportive information (see picture p44). The sessions were an ideal opportunity for parents and carers to raise any other concerns around feeding or development, allowing the facilitator to signpost families onto appropriate healthcare professionals.

As part of the sessions, parents were encouraged to complete a pre- and post-evaluation to demonstrate their change in knowledge following attendance. Questions asked were focused on behaviours and knowledge that would support their child's long-term health and development.

RESULTS

Results accumulated over a two-year period from 2013-2015 found that sessions increased families' knowledge of a number of key principles around introducing solid foods and promoting oral health (Figures 1 and 2).

CONCLUSION

Results collected between 2013 and 2015 highlight the positive impact that culturally tailored, interactive nutritional education sessions within the community can have on a parent's knowledge and confidence in introducing solid foods to their child. Overall, we found parent's knowledge increased by 29% and 34%, following attendance at Introducing Solid Food Stage 1 and 2/3 groups, respectively.

The need for ongoing support for parents and carers through interactive workshops and sessions is clear. Despite widely available information on weaning and healthy eating online, our experience has found that parents often remain unsure of many key health messages, or where to find this information. These sessions can also act as a useful way of bringing online evidence-based sources of information to parent's attention, with the hope that they will continue to refer to these reliable sources as their child grows and develops.

The Early Start Wellbeing and Nutrition team currently delivers training to staff within early years' settings, supporting them to impart clear health messages around nutrition for the under 5s, with a focus on the introduction of solid foods. By training front line staff who have contact with parents on a daily basis, we hope that evidence-based advice will be widely shared, both among families and throughout the community, ensuring ongoing support around the introduction of solid foods.

References

- 1 National Child Measurement Programme - England, 2014-15
- 2 Dental public health epidemiology programme, 2013. Oral health survey of three-year-old children.
- 3 Department of Health (2011). Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries
- 4 Foresight (2007). Tackling Obesities: Future Choices - Project report
- 5 National Obesity Observatory (2016). Health Risks. www.noo.org.uk/NOO_about_obesity/child_obesity/Health_risks
- 6 Infant Feeding Survey UK (2010)
- 7 Department of Health (2011). Introducing Solid Foods