

Title of article

Evaluating Holiday Kitchen: Capturing children's perspectives on a summer holiday food and activities programme.

This should be no longer than 15 words, and give a good idea of the subject.

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Date submitted:**Abstract**

This paper examines the use of a range of innovative methods used to collect children's responses as part of a wider evaluation of a summer holiday food and activity programme in the West Midlands. The issues of children's voice and children's participation were central to the research evaluation design and the article critically reflects on the creative techniques which were utilized to achieve this. The article concludes that although difficulties were encountered in the evaluation, the use of multiple, creative methods in researching children's experiences is a valuable approach that allows the collection of rich data and offers complementary insights and understandings that may be difficult to access through reliance on more traditional methods of data collection.

We require a concise and factual abstract. It should summarise your article as clearly as possible, without jargon, abbreviations, links or references. It should be no longer than 150 words.

Funding acknowledgement

If you are writing about funded research, please give the name of the funders.

The evaluation methods reported here were part of a wider evaluation of the Holiday Kitchen project by Birmingham City University in 2014 and 2015 which was funded by Ashram Moseley Housing Association (now part of the Accord Group). Planning for Real took the lead in designing the evaluation materials.

The full evaluation report: 'O'Connor, J., Wolhuter, C. and Every, S. (2014) An evaluation of Holiday Kitchen 2014: Learning, food and play for families who need it most in the West Midlands' is at: www.family-action.org.uk

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Introduction

Consistent with the paradigm of childhood as a social construction (James and Prout, 2014) and drawing on the theoretical traditions of children's rights (Jones & Welch, 2010) and children's agency (Christensen, 2008) it is now widely accepted that children should be given the opportunity to participate in research that involves them and be given a voice.

This article is a contribution to the growing resource of critical accounts of data collection tools that have been devised to facilitate participatory research with young children (for example Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Street et al, 2016; Lipponen, 2016) and reports on a range of innovative methods which were used as part of an evaluation to collect the views of children aged eight and under who attended a summer holiday food and activities programme in the West Midlands in 2014.

Background to the Project

Holiday Kitchen aims to provide 'Holiday learning, food and play for families who need it most' in recognition that for many vulnerable and low-income families, nursery and school holiday periods are a time of stress and indebtedness. It has the following core objectives:

1. Improve family nutrition and wellbeing
2. Improve social inclusion and aspiration
3. Reduce financial and emotional strain

For the purposes of the evaluation, these objectives were related to a series of outcomes identified within a Theory of Change model whereby multiple short, medium and long term outcomes and related indicators were identified for key stakeholder groups including families, staff, volunteers and funders. These indicators then informed the design and development of the data collection methods used in the evaluation. The short, medium and long term aims for children participating in Holiday Kitchen are shown below:

Table 1. Short, medium and long term aims for children in Holiday Kitchen from Theory of Change model

Short term aims for children	Medium term aims for children	Long term aims for children
Increased physical activity	Improved well-being	Reduced obesity amongst children
Improved opportunities for family bonding and learning outside the home	Raised aspirations (through diversity of experience)	Reduced health and education inequalities
Improved nutrition/improved family knowledge of nutrition.	Safeguarding – avoidance of crisis point/increased safety of children.	Improved educational outcomes

The programme required families to commit to eight half-days of Holiday Kitchen activities spread across two to four weeks of the summer holidays. In all 302 families participated in the 2014 Holiday Kitchen, spread over twelve community settings including nine Children's Centres and one Domestic Violence Refuge. In line with the project aim of supporting those most in need, the evaluation data gathered from the adult participants showed that all of the participants were unemployed, all but one were receiving at least one type of state benefit, 45% of participants came from ethnic minority backgrounds, 67% said that their school aged child/ren accessed free school meals and 34% said their family had accessed food bank support in the last 12 months.

In order to ensure further funding was available for the project it was necessary for an independent evaluation of Holiday Kitchen to be carried out in terms of whether or not it met its objectives and the extent to which there was evidence for the Theory of Change which underpinned the programme.

Methodology

The Holiday Kitchen evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to draw out both the child voice and the adult voice of families, staff, volunteers and commissioners/funders, but only the methods relating to the children will be discussed here. Capturing children's perspectives was essential to the evaluation programme in order to verify the accuracy of the Theory of Change model and also to gather robust data to provide evidence of the impact of the Holiday Kitchen programme from the viewpoint of the primary beneficiaries.

Across the evaluation activities there was a focus on understanding what children 'usually' eat in the holidays and on gathering data about whether they were eating more healthily whilst attending Holiday Kitchen and whether they anticipated that there would be any ongoing change after having completed the programme.

Designing the evaluation materials

Bespoke evaluation tools and materials were designed to use with the children and families with the underlying ethos that all techniques should be visual, inclusive, participatory and community-led. The aim was that there should be no dominant voices across the evaluation activities and that there would be many and varied opportunities for all voices to be heard. The evaluation tools were originally piloted and developed by Planning for Real, an organisation with expertise in community engagement and a track record of engaging with all sections (and ages) of communities. The tools used were informed by techniques Planning for Real had used successfully with children as part of community engagement projects and these were refined to be appropriate for the age range at Holiday Kitchen.

Given that most of the children attending were aged under eight, the intention was to develop clear, effective and fun evaluation materials which could fit into the daily activities as opposed to being time consuming and confusing 'add-ons'. The intention was that each activity should take no longer than five to ten minutes and that where possible it should be incorporated into the activity so it felt less like a stand-alone exercise. There was some feedback from staff that the evaluation on the first day in particular was quite time intensive and this was taken into account in later iterations of Holiday Kitchen in which the initial evaluations were explained and undertaken more quickly. The aim was for the older children within the age range to engage in the evaluation activities independently, and for younger children to be able to voice their ideas and thoughts and to be supported by an adult to record their views.

In all, five evaluation activities were designed for and used with the children, and 238 children aged under eight contributed to at least one of the evaluation activities. As evident in the table below, two of them, Tree of Hope and Washing Line, were used on day one at the start of Holiday Kitchen, with data from Thought & Speech Bubbles, Weather Map and Food Evaluation being collected every day.

Table 2. Schedule of daily themes and evaluation activities

Day	Daily Theme	Children's Evaluation Activity
1	Adventure stories, drama and craft	Tree of Hope Washing Line
2	Change for life – get active day	Thought and Speech Bubbles Weather Map Food Evaluation
3	Money fun and games	Thought and Speech Bubbles Weather Map Food Evaluation
4	Field to fork	Thought and Speech Bubbles Weather Map Food Evaluation

5	Local trip	Thought and Speech Bubbles Weather Map Food Evaluation
6	Make and taste	Thought and Speech Bubbles Weather Map Food Evaluation
7	Forest school fun	Thought and Speech Bubbles Weather Map Food Evaluation
8	Music, Dance and Celebration	Thought and Speech Bubbles Weather Map Food Evaluation

The intention behind using the same evaluation tools on a daily basis was that the children would become familiar with the activities and hopefully more confident about expressing their views. This is in line with recommendations from researchers who use the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) in gathering the views of young children. For example, Street et al (2016) highlight the importance of multiple visits in their fieldwork with under-fives in order to build rapport and maximise children's engagement in research activities. Using the same tools on a daily basis also made the evaluation programme more manageable for the delivery staff who were on site and tasked with organising the evaluation activities and collecting the data following a pre-project training session. The data collected was both quantitative and qualitative and was analysed from both these perspectives. For example, the amount of unhappy rainclouds and happy suns from the Weather Maps was counted after a day's activities and any written or reported comments were recorded, coded and collated. In this way it was possible to gather an overall picture of children's responses to an activity and also to explore and try and understand the reasons behind these views.

Tree of hope



This evaluation activity was designed for both children and parents/carers. At the start of the first day all participants were asked about their hopes and expectations of the Holiday Kitchen and specifically for their views on what they would like to get out of attending. The 'Tree of Hope' was a piece of cloth attached to the wall with a freehand outline of a tree drawn onto it. Children were asked to write, or be supported by a parent/ carer or staff member who could write for them, their responses/thoughts on the fruit symbols and stick them to the Tree. Adults were asked to write their responses on leaves and stick them to the Tree.

The action of sticking the symbol to the tree enabled all children, irrespective of their age, to get involved in the activity and it was particularly successful at engaging the very youngest children. Although many children were unable to write independently, their parents/carers and staff supported them to contribute their thoughts. The brightly coloured fruit symbols were vibrant and easily identifiable with the intention of attracting children and making them feel included and central to the activity.

For the children the main aims as collected via the Tree were to make new friends, to do new activities and above all to have fun. Comments included 'Having fun with food, running round and getting messy', 'I like to do adventures', 'I like to meet some people and I do some games', 'I would like to do drawing and colouring', 'Going to the park, colouring, play' and 'I would like to bake chocolate cake'.

Children appreciated the creative and interactive elements of this evaluation activity. They were able to understand and respond to the question posed (particularly the older children) and children across the age range enjoyed physically sticking the templates to the trees.

Washing line



The Washing line activity was designed specifically for children with the aim of gathering their views about school holidays and trying to understand more about their own experiences of holiday times. Participating children were asked to write down (or be supported to record their thoughts by a parent/carer or member of staff) on brightly coloured 'pants' and 'tops' symbols their views on what they considered to be 'tops' (great) or 'pants' (horrible, not good) about school holidays. As with the Tree of Hope and all other children's evaluation activities, participants were not required to put their name on their responses as the evaluation team felt that participants would feel more comfortable with the activity and would contribute greater depth of response if they were anonymous. All centres were provided with string for the washing line and pegs so the children could physically hang up the completed symbols on the washing line.

The aim of this activity was to gain a sense of children's views about holidays prior to them attending the Holiday Kitchen programme and to gather information on their 'usual' experience of holidays. The intention was for the Washing Line to be filled during the first day of the programme and for the 'full' washing line to remain on display in the delivery setting for the duration.

The responses were mixed, as is to be expected when negative options are made available to respondents, and also reflecting the varied experiences the children had had of school holiday periods. Some children said they liked holidays because they liked spending time with family and friends, playing with toys and not having to go to school ('I like holidays because I don't have to learn', 'I like school holidays because I get to spend time with mum') with others feeling bored and missing school and their friends with nothing to do ('I hate staying home', 'I miss school a little').

This activity generated a great deal of information on children's typical experiences of holidays providing a baseline so the evaluation team could better understand the 'starting point' of participants' journeys.

Thought and speech bubbles

Each day of the Holiday Kitchen programme included a different 'Keep Learning & Take Notice Activity' which were chosen based on their value in supporting Holiday Kitchen's three core objectives.

For each daily 'Keep Learning & Take Notice' session the activity leader asked children for their thoughts before and after the activity. The aim was to gain an understanding of what children already knew about each topic before the session began and to gauge whether and what children had learnt during the session. The speech and thought bubbles were designed to capture evidence on the extent to which children had increased exposure to reading and language development (school readiness). The indicator used to measure the achievement of this outcome was the number of children reporting learning and new words/concepts from the daily activities.

As part of the introduction to the session the activity leader prompted the children for their views on the topic, asking, for example: What do you know about making a healthy lunch? Immediately after the session children were asked: 'What new words and ideas have you learnt today?' Responses at the beginning and end of the session were noted down by children on post-it notes (and parents/carers or staff where support was required) and stuck on to the large speech and thought bubbles which were displayed on the wall.

Unsurprisingly this evaluation activity was notably more successful for the older children in the age range. This was due to a number of factors including: the inability of the majority of pre-school children to write independently, the level of speech development of younger participants, the language difficulties faced by some of the children and their parents/carers, and the lack of a dual language facility. However, this evaluation activity generated a great deal of data which provided evidence of the achievement of the outcome for each activity. Children involved in the 'Make & Taste' activities reported learning new words such as 'tangerine', 'avocado', 'kiwi', new knowledge such as 'blueberries are different to blackberries' and new skills such as 'how to core and cut a pineapple'. The 'Field to Fork' activity enabled the children to learn and try new things about food and nutrition including, 'Carrots grow under the ground', 'Tried green beans they nice', 'Some food grows on trees and some in ground', 'Basil smells minty' and 'You have to plant a seed to get a flower and then it grows into food'. The learning from the 'Money, Fun & Games' session included the difference between a want and a need, 'Needs and wants are different. Look at what you have then see what you need', that 'Money is kept safe in a bank' and 'How to spend money better'. These activities were intended to lead to engagement with wider social support services where needed and to provide information about where advice about money could be accessed by families.

This activity worked best where facilitators and front line staff had attended the evaluation training or been fully briefed about the evaluation programme in advance of delivery. Prior to the delivery of the Holiday Kitchen programme, staff (including front line staff and managers/facilitators) were invited to a session about the evaluation resources so they could understand the premise for the approach, see and experiment with the resources/tools and become familiar with how to incorporate each of the activities into the daily sessions. It was evident in the feedback from staff that those who attended the evaluation session were more positive about the evaluation approach and tools than those who did not attend and were more aware of the wider context and the purpose for gathering the detailed data. The initial 'thought' bubble was intended to be part of the introduction and the 'speech' bubble as part of the 'rounding up' of the session. Taking just a couple of minutes to explore these questions generated a great deal of information and asking children directly about their knowledge and encouraging them to actively take part by sticking their responses on to the bubbles was a successful approach.

As the speech and thought bubbles activity took place daily, most participating children became increasingly familiar and enthusiastic with what they were being asked to do, although some complained that the repetition of this evaluation method was boring.

Weather maps



The Weather Map is an evaluation tool which can be used across age ranges to review how people are feeling or how much progress has been made. This is a tool developed by Planning for Real and used with both adults and children. For the

Holiday Kitchen this was simplified to involve only the sun and raincloud symbols. At the end of each day participating children were asked to record how they felt about the day by choosing rainclouds or sun symbols (or both), writing (or being supported to do so) their comments and sticking them to the weather map. Children chose sun symbols for aspects they liked and raincloud symbols for aspects they were not so keen on.

Where children could write independently this evaluation activity was successful. For younger children, parents/carers and staff were on hand to note down their likes and dislikes. All children were able to get involved by choosing their symbols and sticking them to the maps.

A large amount of data relating to many aspects of the Holiday Kitchen programme was gathered through this evaluation activity. Children were given free range to provide feedback on any part of the day. Adopting this 'unprompted' approach was beneficial in terms of the quality of data gathered, and in enabling the evaluation team to gain a better understanding about the children's true perceptions of the best and worst parts of each day of the programme.

Staff commented on how participating children quickly grasped this daily evaluation activity, how they liked the materials and how irrespective of their age they enjoyed getting involved in sticking the weather symbols onto the cloth. For pre-verbal children, this was the activity about which they were most enthusiastic, picking up on the difference between sun and raincloud symbols and showing a keenness to engage, demonstrating how even very young children can engage with research and articulate their feelings to researchers in a meaningful manner when data collection tools are sympathetically designed.

Comments on the sun symbols included 'I really liked that breakfast this morning', 'I liked eating my healthy pizza'. Raincloud comments included, 'How hot the day was to exercise' and 'We didn't like the rain' and 'I didn't like to get covered in mud' on the Forest School day.

Findings

All delivery venues were responsible for gathering their own data and then submitting it to Accord and Birmingham City University at the end of the programme for analysis. The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data was collated and coded in relation to the key themes of the evaluation.

In light of the findings from the evaluation materials it was clear that Holiday Kitchen met the following short term aims for children which stemmed from the three core objectives of the Theory of Change model:

- Increased physical activity;
- Improved opportunities for family bonding and learning outside the home;
- Improved nutrition.

Evidence from the children's voices, parents and staff, indicated that the medium term goals for children of 'Improved well-being' and 'Raised aspirations (through

diversity of experience)' were achieved, particularly through the outdoor activities and the local trip. The medium term aim of 'Safeguarding – avoidance of crisis point/increased safety of children' was harder to evaluate, although there was strong evidence that Holiday Kitchen helped to reduce parental stress.

In relation to the longer term goals of 'Reduced obesity amongst children', 'Reduced health and education inequalities' and 'Improved educational outcomes', evidence from the evaluation was certainly positive, particularly in terms of children's reported learning about healthy food, exercise and the enriching and stimulating activities in which they engaged.

Staff and managers undoubtedly understood the value and importance of the programme and were willing, if given the opportunity, to run future Holiday Kitchens. This was reinforced by the fact 95% of the parents/carers sample said they would recommend Holiday Kitchen to friends and family.

A revised delivery model was introduced based on the 2014 evaluation and Holiday Kitchen was rolled out to a larger group of settings in the summer of 2015. It continued to run with Children in Need funding in 2016 and 2017.

Discussion and conclusions

Understanding and demonstrating the social impact of Holiday Kitchen was critical to its sustainability and future funding. However, achieving an appropriate and proportionate balance of evaluation in relation to the time participants spent at Holiday Kitchen proved to be a challenge. Feedback from children, adults and delivery staff indicated that they felt the amount of evaluation was excessive, particularly on the first day of the programme and an important lesson was learnt here that although gathering evidence of impact is crucial it must not distract from the programme itself. Effective evaluation training for staff and volunteers, integrating evaluation activities into the sessions and using creative and innovative methods which can be delivered quickly and capture the imaginations of children can all help achieve this equilibrium.

Evaluating the effectiveness not only of Holiday Kitchen, but of the evaluation programme itself (through gathering feedback from all relevant groups) was beneficial and this learning has informed the adaptation of materials and tools for future programmes. The key challenges identified with the evaluation methods used with children included the language barriers to participation (for parents/carers with limited English language and pre-school children with limited speech) and the requirement to cater for such a diverse age range (0-8 years) whilst ensuring that across this age range the child's voice was captured. Although all of the evaluation activities were visual, interactive and inclusive, participation levels were still adversely affected by the written and spoken skills of parents/carers who were supporting the younger children. Taking steps to overcome this barrier in future programmes, possibly by recruiting student volunteers from local universities to offer support in completing the activities, may further improve the success and accessibility of the evaluation programme.

The Holiday Kitchen evaluation demonstrates the importance of striving to devise child friendly methods of data collection, especially when future funding for a social project depends on empirical evidence of its effectiveness. By ensuring that the children's thoughts and opinions were included through a variety of creative and fun means throughout Holiday Kitchen a body of triangulated data was collected which indicated the strengths and weaknesses of the programme from the children's perspective. The most successful methods across the under eight age group were visual, especially the Weather Maps and the Tree of Hope, indicating the importance of approaches which by-pass the barrier of written language. Such methods also have potential for use with children with learning difficulties and those with English as an additional language. Interestingly, where there was crossover of adult and child based data collection methods (for example, the Tree of Hope), the 'child' ones worked well with the adults, again suggesting that innovative, visual methods can be more effective in certain circumstances than traditional methods, even with adults. Ideally, children would have been involved in every stage of the design and interpretation of the evaluation methods and materials used in Holiday Kitchen, but time and resource constraints meant this was not a possibility with this project. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the participatory, child centered methods outlined in this article will be of use to researchers and evaluators in other professional and practice based contexts, and that those involved in such work continue to share their findings with the wider research community. Ensuring children are at the heart of the research process is an important project which demands much careful attention and thought. This importance is even more pronounced when the stakes are as high as the continuation of a charitable programme designed to support families in need such as Holiday Kitchen.

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References

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