

Better Care



Sandfield Close primary school: eating and cooking with grandmothers

About

The school

Sandfield Close is a primary school in the outskirts of Leicester City, in a mostly Gujarati neighbourhood. The school reports high levels of obesity as well as a number of children who are underweight. The school staff believes that many of the children have a difficult relationship with food and that they would benefit from having a better understanding of where their food comes from.

The nannies

The starting group of 3 nannies includes 2 ladies whose grandchildren are pupils at Sandfield Close primary school. They are interested in handing down traditional cooking skills to young people. It also includes one lady whose daughter was looking for something to keep her occupied after her husband passed away. The Headteacher saw an opportunity to get them involved in food-related activities to make the most of their skills and knowledge.

The project

Food for Life is working with grandmothers from the community to help improve the food culture in the school through:



Supporting
eating at
lunchtime

The nannies, as they have been nicknamed, come in at lunchtime and help children at Reception level to eat with knives and forks. In the space of a few weeks, their support has already made a visible difference. When they started school, only 6 out of 38 children seemed confident with their cutlery. After a handful of sessions, this now amounts to 15 children.



Cookery
classes

After attending training from Food For Life, the nannies have started delivering cooking classes to Year 5 pupils. Those classes are an opportunity for the children to connect to their own cultural heritage, develop cooking skills and try new types of food.



Gardening

The nannies are also planning some gardening activities to show the children where food comes from. They would like to use some of the food they grow in the recipes they teach.



Impact of supporting reception children with knives and forks skills

Nannies

The nannies join lunchtimes once a week, and help the Reception children to use their knives and forks properly.



Socialising with each other

The nannies who are currently involved did not know each other before and list having met each other as one of the benefits of the project.



Not all the nannies have grandchildren in the school. For them, it's an opportunity to socialise with children on a regular basis.

"They remember your name. 'Nanny Rose! I finished, come and have a look!' I feel so... Last week when they said 'We love you Nanny Rose', I nearly cried!"

"Oh, I just love children! I shouldn't say it at my age, but if I could have one more, I would! I just forget who I am, where I am, what I'm doing, when I'm with the children." Saroj (nanny)



The nannies feel a sense of purpose and accomplishment from seeing the progress children are making.

"It's the satisfaction in yourself. You see the children eating their dinner, you feel you've done something. The child is happy, I'm happy, the food is happy because it's being eaten! That's my enjoyment!" Saroj (nanny)



Being able to be of help gives the nannies a sense of pride and positive self-image

"Another thing is also that you feel very proud when the children are looking at you. You know, when they say: 'Please help me.'" Saroj (nanny)

Reception Children



With the help of the nannies, the children are able to remain focused on their food, and **eat more and better.**

"They just find it a burden to try to cut and if they can't cut they don't eat it, they just leave it. If we are not there they don't eat! The first week, they just took the plate back and put it on the side, they didn't want to eat." **Jayshree (nanny)**

"They are now showing the grandma's their clean plates and are proud at how much they had eaten." **Lisa, Food For Life Local Programme Manager**



Children feel more **confident** at lunchtimes and are willing to try different types of food.

Lunchtimes are busy and may not feel as structured as time in the classroom. This can be overwhelming for children who are new to the school and were used to one-to-one attention at nursery. One particular child had not eaten anything. Taking her to the front of the queue, showing her the options and sitting with her for a bit helped to ease her anxiety.

"All it took was just a few minutes of your times, and a few days later it's made a huge difference to how she's eating." **Jody (school cook)**

Older children



The nannies also interact with the older children, which contributes to a **more relaxed atmosphere** in the dining room.

"It's calmer when the nannies are around!" **Jody (school cook)**

Teachers



Learning how to hold and use knives and forks helps children to develop the necessary **motor skills for writing**

"I've spoken to the teachers and she said she noticed an improvement with their pencil holding. So it's helping there as well. Because obviously, they need the basics. They need their strength and their motor skills to learn how to write." **Jody (school cook)**



Impact of cooking classes

Nannies

The nannies, who have been trained by Food For Life, deliver regular cooking classes as part of the curriculum.



Passing on skills

For the nannies, the aim of this project is to pass on skills and recipes that are at risk of getting lost because family structures have changed, and young people are moving away earlier and for longer.

“At the time, the children were very busy with their studies, moved away... That’s the basic thing they just move away. They are not at home. But in India we are always together. You know, mum, dad, grandma, aunty, altogether. Until they are not married, they stay together. But here, when you are 18 you move away from home. So you don’t learn how to cook, and you don’t pas it on to your children...”

Sharda (nanny)



Year 5 Children

A small group of 9 pupils attended the first session, and learned how to make chickpea curry.



Learning about their heritage

"With this project we are hoping to get the children interested in where their food comes from. Because they don't know what's inside their food. It's important because the skill is dying. The kids have got no skills of cooking or anything. It's going away." **Sharda (nanny)**



Learning while having fun

The children thoroughly enjoyed both the cooking and storytelling. Some comments from the children were; "Can we do this every week?" "We love doing this" "Can we come back another time?", "Will the ladies be here again?" "When are they coming back?" -

School staff



Easing the workload of teachers and kitchen staff

Teaching cooking would normally be the responsibility of teachers, or of the cook. However, both teachers and kitchen staff have a heavy workload, and the school has recently suffered budget cuts that prevent staff from taking additional responsibilities. The nannies therefore add value to the school while doing something they are passionate about.



Learning new vocabulary

While they were chopping and prepping, the nannies went through the names of the vegetables in English and Gujrati.

Whilst the pot was cooking, the children were supposed to go back to the classroom and then come and collect their pot of curry to take with them and eat at home. However, they had enjoyed themselves so much, that they didn't want to go back to class. So they sat down, did a recap of the recipe and listened to a story by one of the nannies.

What does it take?

Top Tips

Invest time in co-design and planning

Before starting working with the children, the nannies and the Food for Life Local Programme Manager had regular meetings over a few weeks. Together, they discussed childhood obesity and children's relationship to food in the local community. Based on these discussions, they generated some ideas about how they might support the school. Spending this time together enabled the nannies to get to know each other, familiarise themselves with the school, and feel confident about their ideas.

"I think what was important was all those weeks up to June where we weren't doing anything with the children, we were just planning and prepping, and every week a new idea comes up."

Lisa, Local Programme Manager

Start slowly, build confidence and raise ambitions progressively

Initially, the group intended to go into the school to deliver cooking classes to Year 5 children. However, the headteacher raised that a lot of the younger children were struggling to use knives and forks at lunchtime. This had an impact on their food intake and consequently on their level of energy. So supporting Reception level children at lunchtime became a focus for the beginning of the school year. Starting with this relatively easy and contained task helped the nannies to get to know the children and the kitchen staff. Their confidence has grown and they now feel more ready to deliver the cooking classes, which felt intimidating at the start.

"My impression is that the ladies themselves have become more confident as well. We've started with knives and fork skills, then it's moved on to cooking, then from last week we've started talking about gardening as well." *Lisa, Local Programme Manager*

Be responsive to the challenges that emerge as you go

The group meets after each lunchtime session to debrief and discuss any emerging challenges or new ideas. This helps them to work in an agile way and to be responsive to the children's needs. For example, observing the children struggle to cut their food one week gave them the idea to run a practice session with play-doh before lunch the following week. The group is aware that the needs of children will evolve through the year as they get more confident, and remaining open to changing their approach based on observation and reflection is key.

"You know we had an idea that the ladies would sit at the table and the children would sit nicely around, and the ladies would model how to hold knives and forks: 'this is how we do it children!' And that's gone out of the window in the first week! Just because we realised that they needed so much attention!"

Lisa, Local Programme Manager

Build on people's skills

At the core of the project is the recognition that the community has skills, knowledge and resources that can contribute positively to children's education. Through this project, the nannies are able to reconnect with skills that they might not otherwise make use of. One of the nannies, for example, used to be a teacher and the time and care she puts into researching and preparing activities is a clear indication that her involvement in the project is enabling her to reconnect with her passion for children and education.



Challenges

Recruiting new nannies to have more impact both on the school and in the community

Currently, 4 nannies are involved. However, lunchtimes are busy, and even when they only focus on Reception year children, they struggle to find the time for the one-on-one support they would like to offer. A larger group of nannies would enable them to fulfil their ambitions for quality time at lunchtime.

It would also ensure that the project does not rely so heavily on a few dedicated individuals. Currently, there is a risk that the group might lose its energy if any personal event was to prevent anyone from contributing.

Finally, the nannies involved are already active and well connected to the community. The group recognises that other more isolated older people might benefit from taking part. They feel the need to better promote the opportunity in the community.

“Because they are a lot of grandmothers who will be at home all day watching TV. So if they can come out, I think it’s better for them.” **Jayshree (nanny)**

However, they are also aware of the barriers someone looking to get involved might face. Beyond the practical considerations such as transport, language and confidence can get in the way of taking the first step.

“You see the thing is that some of them don’t speak the language, so they are not sure about getting involved. But I said to them I can translate.” **Sarda (nanny)**

“I think it’s the fear! To come out and suddenly be in a big school like that with that responsibility. We need to just introduce them, come, have a look, before you get involved. Let them watch. Do a little introduction. Tell them ‘it’s good for your children and your grandchildren.’” **Saroj (nanny)**



Opportunities

Influencing the whole school community

The nannies have pointed out that the impact they are having on the children stops when they are not around. So far, they only join in once a week for a couple of hours. They would like their actions to trickle down to the rest of the school community. For example, they have spotted opportunities to pass on the responsibility of supporting Reception year children at lunchtime to some of the older children as well as the teachers. Ultimately, they see their work as modelling behaviours that contribute to a good food culture.

“My vision is that I want to see this coming from the teachers and from the parents. Because we are only here for a couple of hours. To see if it comes through. My vision stops here because I go home after that.”
Saroj (nanny)

To find out more
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