

# A CHILDREN'S VIEW of the Food4families gardening programme



Food4Families, August 2018

# Children's view of the Food4Families gardening programme

## 1. Background information

### 1.1 Introduction

'Food4Families' is an urban community gardening project that has been running since 2009. Professional horticulturalists engage with community members, both young and old, to help them manage food growing spaces within their own neighbourhoods. The aims of the project are to promote a better understanding of the process of food production; to promote sustainable food production methods; and to promote healthier food consumption patterns along with a healthier lifestyle.

This report evaluates the project from the viewpoint of *children*. It looks at what the children think of the project, at what motivates them to attend and at the impact the project has on their lives and learning. The evaluation was written independently of Food4Families and the findings are based on 95 questionnaire responses (the questionnaire may be found in the appendix).

The responses were collected from children by their school teachers and by Whitley Researchers. The children either filled the questionnaire in themselves, or had their responses recorded during one-to-one interviews. The analysis not only summarises how the children responded to the questionnaire, it also uses quantitative techniques to reveal any differences in the way different groups of children responded to the questionnaire, and to discover any linkages between one kind of response and another.

The data was collected mostly in October 2018, with just a few observations taken in November and December 2018. 84% of the data was collected at three primary schools: 'New Christ Church' (NCC) and 'Whitley Park' in South Reading, plus 'New Town' in Central Reading. 12% of the data was collected from 'JMA,' the main secondary school in South Reading. The remaining 4% came from three further primary schools which yielded just one or two observations each. Whitley Park hosted an after-school club for aspiring gardeners, but the rest of the clubs were run in school time. Whilst this data does not represent the full range of schools which Food4Families works at, it does bring in data from diverse sources and should offer some credible insight into child opinion.

### 1.2 Respondent profile

- 95 children were interviewed in total, almost half of whom were boys and just over half girls.
- The children were nearly all from schools where community deprivation levels were rather higher than average.

- 12% of the children interviewed were in school years 10 and 11. The majority (76%) were in school years five and six. The rest of the interviewees were mostly younger, with the youngest participants of all being in school year two.
- 65% had done some gardening before joining the school club and only for 35% of children was this something entirely new.

### 1.3 The gardening clubs

- One garden club was in a secondary school, the rest were in primary schools.
- Most of the clubs were run during school time, with just a couple of primary school clubs operating after school.
- 43% of respondents attended these clubs weekly, 16% every other week, 15% monthly and 26% termly.
- Some of the respondents were only attending for the first time when interviewed and 15% had attended for a month or less. At the other extreme, 19% had been attending for over two years. Around 6 months of attendance was the mode and median average.

## 2. Findings

### 2.1 Child experience of gardening

Children were asked to rate how happy they were doing gardening on a scale of 1 (least happy) to 5 (most happy) and this is how they responded:

<b>How happy are you doing gardening?</b>	
1=not at all happy	8%
2	4%
3	22%
4	34%
5=most happy	32%

There was no obvious correlation between enjoyment of gardening and length of time involved or prior experience, although gardening particularly appealed to children who loved being outdoors and in nature. Boys were more likely to mention a love of the outdoors than girls, but because of other aspects of the gardening clubs that girls enjoyed, girls expressed more positivity about gardening overall.

Primary school children who did the gardening after school generally had a more positive attitude to gardening than those who did gardening in school time – perhaps because they were there with parental encouragement (which also bore some correlation to greater enjoyment and was essential to staying after school) or perhaps because there was a greater element of choice involved (rather than just working out the school day).

Having said that, children who claimed that they did gardening ‘because it was part of school lessons’ were no more or less happy doing the job than children in school-time who named other reasons for getting involved. Linked to learning, children who felt that the gardening positively

contributed to their learning at school tended to be happier doing gardening than those who felt that the gardening sessions were of no value to their school learning.

Children attending the gardening group at NCC met most infrequently (often only once a term) and these also expressed the least appreciation for gardening. Providing the opportunity for regular and frequent involvement therefore appears to add to satisfaction and certainly came up as a suggestion in the “what could be improved” question.

## **2.2 Motivation for attendance**

When asked why they started attending the gardening club in the first place, the most common response was having been encouraged by family. Moreover, the majority of attendees had already done gardening before, and this variable was likewise correlated to family encouragement to get involved. The next most common reason for attendance was interest in the subject – particularly amongst children who had grown things before and knew they liked it. These findings suggest that the project is particularly attractive to children and to families who are *already* into gardening and it could be that special effort needs to be made to attract members from *outside* of gardening circles.

As for other reasons to garden, around 20% of respondents opted for the response that they got involved with gardening because it was ‘something to do’ and not for any more positive reason. These people were less likely to have gardened before. They were the least happy of gardeners compared to those involved because of other motivations, but the differences in happiness were not statistically significant.

A smaller number of participants volunteered the information that they took part because gardening was part of a school lesson or activity, or said that they were encouraged to get involved by teachers. These respondents liked gardening none the less for that, although not all of the ones who got involved stayed for longer than they had to (those motivated in this way tended not to have been in the club for very long). Finally, around 8% of the respondents said they got involved mainly because they had friends who were involved.

The children who stayed in the programme the longest were especially the ones who were motivated by their own enjoyment of growing things (rather than being persuaded to attend by adults). Peer friendships was another factor which tended to keep people engaged over time.

## **2.3 Best thing about the gardening club**

Children were asked in an open question to name the best thing about their gardening club. They were also asked what they thought could be better. In order of mentions, these are the things the children said were best (note that the percentages do not add up to 100% because some people could not stop themselves from mentioning more than one thing!):

- 57% of the children mentioned that they enjoyed the actual process of gardening. They liked to see the plants grown and they liked being involved with the process of making it happen. Weeding, watering, digging, pruning, planting and harvesting were all mentioned by one or another of the children as enjoyable operations in this process. Some children specifically

mentioned an enjoyment in growing flowers, and others vegetables, along with the satisfaction of being able to pick what you had grown yourself. The nurture element (caring for and helping plants grow) was an enjoyable and satisfying part of the experience for these children (and especially for *younger* children).

- 20% of children specifically mentioned that they liked learning new things, and some felt they were gaining a new interest in plants.
- 14% highlighted their enjoyment of harvesting, taking home and eating the vegetables that are grown.
- 11% mentioned the social element – that they enjoyed spending time with friends or other people. Although not directly featuring in the Food4Family mission statement, the social/community building impact of the garden clearly has some importance.
- 7% just liked being outdoors and in nature. They liked having a big garden, finding little animals or seeing chickens. One said it was good because they got time off TV! Children who opted for this response (loving to be outdoors) were the ones who most correlated to happiness in terms of how much they enjoyed the gardening project. None of the other positive features in this list stood out above the others with a statistically significant link to happiness.
- Finally, there were a few mentions of it all being good. The whole thing was fun and/or made the children feel happy.

## 2.4 What could be better

Children were also asked what could be better in their club. There was no majority answer to this one – different people felt different things and 16% of respondents could not think of anything to improve. However, the answers that *were* given are listed below, again in order of the number of mentions. No group of people mentioning one or another of these issues felt significantly less happy than all the others:

- 26% mentioned wanting to plant *more* things or *different* things to the range of plants currently on offer. Clearly children, and especially boys, appreciate having some *choice* about what is grown – with many different specific ideas coming through. Some wanted more edible stuff, some wanted more flowers, some wanted things that grow fast. Requests to grow pineapples or mangos suggest that discussions about what things can and cannot grow in England could be a useful learning experience! Any possibility to learn about the varying needs of different plants is a positive.
- Secondly, 19% of respondents said they wanted to do the gardening more often or have longer sessions. This was not only requested by people who met infrequently – even some of the frequent attenders were keen for more.
- 13% of respondents wished they had a bigger garden to work with.
- 12% mentioned issues to do with the people. Most said it would be good to have more people involved, both to do the work and to instruct. One child wanted to break into smaller groups. One wanted better teamwork.
- 11% mentioned problems with the equipment, such as having a longer hose and/or better gloves. Having more watering cans and fixing the greenhouse were also mentioned.
- Besides all these things,

- Five children wanted more things to do in the lesson and/or more chances to learn something new.
- Three mentioned wanting the gardens to be better kept (tidier/better looking).
- Three wanted more fun (including refreshments!). A fourth wanted more chance to eat the fruit, and a fifth wanted more chickens.

## 2.5 The effects of gardening on other aspects of life

Children were asked whether going to the gardening club had any impact on their eating habits, their fitness, the feel of their community and their school work. It cannot be assumed that because a child responds positively to the question that the project *actually* makes a statistically significant difference, but looking at the relative differences in response is an indicator of where the lesser and greater effects of the project are perceived to lie.

In order of perceived impact, the number of children answering positively to the four questions is as follows:

- Do you think gardening makes the community a nicer place to live? 97% answered yes.
- Do you think doing gardening helps with school work? 71% answered yes.
- Since you started gardening, are you eating more vegetables? 34% answered yes.
- Since you started gardening, are you feeling fitter? 24% answered yes.

Children were the least convinced about the effect of gardening on their fitness. They were slightly more positive about its effect on their eating habits but the majority still doubted any impact. There was a majority who felt that the gardening groups had some impact on their learning and nearly everyone felt that the gardens improved their community. Younger children tended to be more enthusiastic than older children, particularly about the effect of the gardens on learning.

### 3.5.1 Impact on learning

Regarding the impact on learning, further questioning revealed that children were very taken with the idea of finding out how to survive in a disaster situation where there are no more shops. This idea was put forward many times: *someone* needs to know how to actually grow food. Secondary to this, some children linked their gardening experiences to what they were learning about the environment and in their science lessons. Some said it helped them to remember or learn specific details. There were a few mentions of the sessions also having a calming influence, which helps with learning.

On the side of the 29% who felt that gardening did *not* help with school work, most of the responses centred around gardening work not being the same thing as school work (you do not learn things that contribute to grades), and even *detracting* from school work if it meant that regular lessons are being missed or that your attention is distracted.

### 3.5.2 Impact on the community

Nearly all children were positive about the effect of the gardens on their community. The ways in which they thought that the gardens made a difference can be classified under five headings (listed here in order of the number of mentions):

- Appearance: Children said that green spaces are peaceful and nice places to be. They look good and are pretty. Note here the huge importance of aesthetic appearance –

'flowers', 'beauty' and 'brightness' had multiple mentions. 41% of children mentioned the look factor of gardens overall.

- Life satisfaction: Gardening 'helps people to have a better life'. It is 'fun', and provides a 'nice outdoor activity'. They said it provides the opportunity to 'do something/ learn something new'. Some children noted that the opportunity to work with plants in the community garden is especially good for those who do not have their *own* gardens. 31% of children mentioned the effect of the gardens on how people feel.
- Environment: Keeping gardens was seen to be good for the environment and for animals (20% children mentioned this).
- Produce: 11% of children said gardens improved the community because you get fruit and vegetables out of them, and some said that these products are healthier than the things you might buy in the supermarket.
- Social aspect: 8% of children said that the community is improved because the gardens bring people together. It was older children who particularly picked up on this point, and it may be noted that amongst adults, the social aspect is considered to be one of the key attractions.

Only three children did not feel that the garden improved their community in any way, and the two who gave reasons for their response implied that the gardens were unnecessary: 'you can just go to Morisons!'

## **2.6 Lessons remembered by the children**

Finally, children were asked about what they had been taught in the gardening sessions. This was to find out about what children were actually picking up/getting out of the programme.

The most common response, mentioned by 87% of respondents had to do with the practical aspects of caring for plants. How to weed, plant, pot-on, space the plants correctly, water and harvest were all mentioned. Watering (not too much, not too little and how) came up especially. Closely linked to this, 38% of children mentioned lessons of a scientific nature. These children were aware that different things had to be done at different times for each plant, and they mentioned having learnt different plant names and needs. The *time* it takes for plants to grow was mentioned multiple times. Some children mentioned growing in appreciation and respect for plants and for the environment. They learned about the nutrients in the soil and the importance of insects and other small creatures. Altogether, 95% of children mentioned something that they had learned about plants and/or the environment.

Rather less mentions were made with respect to healthy eating (less than 10% of children mentioned this). Those who did mention healthy eating spoke of how to eat/cook different fruit and vegetables, and how likeable and valuable fruit and veg are. A few more mentioned learning connected with working with others. Also that work pays off, and that gardening can be fun.

These findings suggest that some of the key educational aims of the project are being met; less so with the promotion of healthy eating and lifestyle, but more when it comes to understanding and appreciating the food growing process.



### 3. Summary and conclusions

95 children were interviewed in order to find out what they think of the Food4Families project, to discover what motivates them to attend and to determine the impact of the project on their lives and learning. These are the findings by research question:

#### *What children think about the gardens*

About two thirds of the participants really liked the gardening clubs. Things that correlated to happier children in gardening were a personal love of the outdoors, parental encouragement and a sense of value in what is being learned. Moreover, girls tended to be happier than boys.

Since family encouragement is an important to the enthusiasm of young people, getting children involved *together with* their parents may have value. Likewise, emphasising the value of what is being learned may increase positivity. Attention needs to be given to how the interest of boys can be better captured (for example, being out of doors is an appeal factor that tends to apply more to boys than girls, and boys were particularly likely to want more freedom of choice in what they grow).

#### *Motivations for attendance*

The garden club mostly attracted children who already had some experience with gardening. Extra effort may be needed to attract people outside of this group.

Getting children interested by making gardening part of the school day could be one possibility, but sufficient time and regularity of involvement is necessary in order for children to capture an interest in gardening for its own sake. Younger children are particularly keen to engage with the practical work, and capturing their interest whilst they are young may be a good strategy.

Helping children to work together and build peer friendships is also motivating for club attendance. So is helping children to make the connection between what they learn in the garden and their school work. Children (especially boys) may be motivated by having more choice in what is grown.

Many children of both genders discover that they enjoy nurturing plants from planting through to harvest, but this takes time. Children need to be kept engaged, busy and learning along the way.

#### *The effect of gardening on other aspects of life*

Questioning children on what they learned from the project revealed that the project aims of promoting an understanding of and appreciation for the food growing process were being met. The aims to promote healthier eating and lifestyles, less so.

Children were very positive about the difference the gardens made to their community. Especially important to children is the *appearance* of the garden: they value a pleasant and environmentally friendly green space for *people to enjoy* and in which they can engage with one another. Co-creating beautiful and productive green spaces is almost universally seen by children to have value.



## Appendix: FOOD4FAMILIES EVALUATION 2018 Children’s Interview Schedule

Date..... Interviewer..... Location.....			
Gender	M	F	Ethnicity
			Year

**1 Why did you start gardening?**

**Options:** Encouraged by friends    Encouraged by family    Encouraged by teachers  
 Did it at home    Like growing things    Something to do    Other.....

**2 How long have you been doing gardening in the school club?**

**Options:**    Years.....Months.....

**2a. Did you do gardening before the gardening school club Yes No**

**3. How often do you do your gardening?**

**Options:** Every week    Monthly    Termly

**4. How happy are you doing gardening (Rating scale 1 not at all happy, 5 most happy)**

1	2	3	4	5
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**5. What’s the best thing about your gardening club?**

**5a What could be better in your gardening club?**

**6. Since you started doing the gardening club are you:**

Eating more fruit and vegetables Yes    No    Same  
 Feeling fitter than you did before attending the gardening club Yes    No    Same

**7. Do you think gardening might make your community a nicer place to live?**

Yes    If Yes how  
 No    If No why not

**8. Do you think doing gardening helps with your school work?**

Yes    If Yes how  
 No    If No why not

**9. Can you tell us some things you have been taught about gardening?**

- 1
- 2
- 3