

Consultation response from the
National Heart Forum

Consultation: Getting to grips with grub

Consulting body: Food Standards Agency
and department for
education and skills

Date: September 2003

**NATIONAL HEART FORUM
RESPONSE TO:
GETTING TO GRIPS WITH GRUB. FOOD AND NUTRITION COMPETENCIES OF 14-16
YEAR OLDS**

October 2003

The National Heart Forum

The National Heart Forum (NHF) is the leading alliance of over 45 organisations working to reduce the risk of CHD in the UK. Member organisations represent the medical and health services, professional bodies, consumer groups and voluntary organisations. Members also include many individual experts in cardiovascular research. Government departments have observer status. The purpose of the NHF is to work with and through its members to reduce disability and death from CHD. Our four main objectives are:

- To provide a forum for members for the exchange of information, ideas and initiatives on coronary heart disease prevention;
- To identify and address areas of consensus and controversy;
- To develop policy based on evidence and on the views of member organisations;
- To stimulate and promote effective action.

The NHF embraces professional, scientific and policy opinion in current issues on CHD prevention. It co-ordinates action to reduce heart disease risk through information, education, research, policy development and advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

The NHF welcomes the opportunity to comment on the consultation document and would like to commend the Food Standards Agency and Department for Education and skills for developing minimum standards of food-related knowledge and skills for young people.

Getting to grips with grub rightly identifies that unhealthy eating patterns established in infancy may remain through adolescence and beyond and that children's diets have an important influence on their growth and development, and on the risk of chronic disease including coronary heart disease in later life. These are key issues highlighted in the NHF's [young@heart](#) reports.^{1, 2}

NHF wishes to stress the fact that if young people are to transfer knowledge from the school environment to their lives, this knowledge must first be acquired and strengthened within the school environment. The critical age for development of healthy food preferences and habits has been identified as 2-7 years. It is therefore essential that in the school environment, this process is started in primary school and maintained throughout the child's time at school².

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FOR WHICH VIEWS WERE SOUGHT

1. Do the competencies outlined in paragraph 11 reflect the key knowledge and skills young people need at this age for the establishment of a healthier diet as part of a healthy lifestyle now and in the future?

NHF is pleased that the competencies outlined in paragraph 11 reflect the key knowledge and skills young people need by the age of 14-16 for the establishment of a healthier diet.

1.1 NHF would like to stress the importance that children obtain a sound understanding of the link between diet and health, as clearly outlined in *Getting to Grips with Grub*.

1.2 NHF wishes to stress the importance of teaching children to become critical consumers with a good understanding of food advertising, promotion and labelling². At present media literacy packages are provided by industry – eg Media Smart. However, it should not be left to industry to provide resources for media literacy.

1.3 The consultation document rightly identifies food preparation and handling skills and food hygiene and safety as a competencies that young people should be expected to meet. NHF would also like to highlight the need for young people to obtain food budgeting skills³ as part of their food preparation skills.

2 What approaches can assist young people to transfer knowledge from school environment to their lives?

National Heart Forum recommends the following measures to ensure that nutrition knowledge and skills are acquired by all young people prior to leaving school:

2.1 Make health promoting school policies a statutory requirement

The government should introduce a statutory requirement for all schools to develop and implement health-promoting school policies under the education acts. To support this,

- Schools should be required to provide information about all health policies in information prepared for parents, such as prospectuses and annual reports.

2.2 Strengthen the National Healthy School Standard

The requirements of the National Healthy School Standard should be strengthened so that all schools will be able to meet a new national standard. In addition,

- The healthy eating theme within the National Healthy School Standard should be made compulsory.
- Meeting the new standard should be included within the statutory inspection remit of Her Majesty's Inspectorates for Schools.

2.3 Provide a healthy food culture in schools

Food culture in schools should be altered to support a more balanced diet which can be adopted whilst children are at schools and continued throughout life. In order to assist this,

- The National Healthy School Standard should develop its own code of practice to help schools determine the implications of promotional activities of food manufacturers and retailers for the ethos of the health-promoting school. This should include issues such as catering provision, the use of vending machines, or where they are in use – the balance of goods available from commercial vending machines.

2.4 Accredited food-related education materials

In order to ensure that accurate and consistent healthy eating messages are provided to school children, NHF recommends the establishment of an independent accreditation system for providers of educational materials from all sources. This will help teachers assess the quality, reliability and impartiality of their content. Educational materials featuring food or branded food products should be reviewed in particular to ensure that they are able to remain free from undue influence during the crucial stages when young people are developing their

nutrition knowledge and skills. The criteria for the educational materials could be based on the National Consumer Council guidelines⁴.

2.5 Involve young people in decisions

NHF recommends that children and young people should be routinely involved in planning improvements to school food services. This could be done through School Nutrition Action Groups or other school food committee structures.

2.6 Increase opportunities to practice cooking

The FSA-led evaluation of food and nutrition competencies identified lack of practice as a key factor in the absence of practical cooking skills among 14-16 year olds. NHF recommends that in order to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to practice and develop the skills and confidence to cook meals:

- Compulsory practical lessons including nutrition education and cooking for all children should be incorporated into the school curriculum. PHSE should be made a mandatory subject within the curriculum, and should incorporate the teaching of these skills.
- Food technology which incorporates practical cooking skills should be a compulsory component of design and technology at all stages of the curriculum

3 If gaps in opportunities for young people to achieve these competencies are identified for this age group, what options are there for local action to address the gaps based on effective, evaluated and sustainable initiatives?

3.1 Public health training for those working with children

Public health training, standards and recruitment and retention initiatives should be developed to support all those working with children and young people to fulfil a core responsibility for protecting health. In particular,

- School nurses should be involved in referring young people to services in the community eg the Connexions service;
- Guidance and training should be provided for school governors, senior managers, head teachers and non-teaching staff in health improvement, food and nutrition and participatory learning methods;
- Child physical and emotional development and Personal Social and Health Education (PHSE) should be made mandatory subjects in the core teacher training syllabus.

3.2 Mentoring roles to include a focus on health and well-being

In order to assist young people to transfer knowledge from the school environment to their lives, there should also be national provision of support and mentoring services which incorporate a health and well-being element. In support of this

- The Connexions service in England should be expanded;
- Training for Connexions youth workers should be focused and inter-disciplinary, covering areas such as behaviour change.

3.3 Improve the cooking skills of families

Getting to grips with grub identifies the home environment as an a place where children can have the opportunity to learn and experience positive approaches to food and nutrition. However, in some cases, parents may not have the skills and/or confidence to cook for their children³ – or where resources are limited, they may be reluctant to allow children to experiment with food in the home due to fear of wasting food⁵. NHF therefore recommends that FSA/DFES support initiatives which provide lessons for all the family to improve their confidence and cooking skills and offer information on cheap sources of important nutrients.

¹ National Heart Forum 2003. A lifecourse approach to coronary heart disease prevention. Scientific and policy review. London: The Stationery Office

² National Heart Forum. 2002. Towards a generation free from coronary heart disease. Policy action for children's and young people's health and well-being. London: National Heart Forum

³ National Heart Forum. 1998. Social inequalities in coronary heart disease: Opportunities for action. London: The Stationery Office

⁴ National Consumer Council. 1996. Sponsorship in schools: A checklist for teachers, governors, school boards and parents. London: National Consumer Council.

⁵ National Heart Forum. 1999. Looking to the future: Making coronary heart disease an epidemic of the past. London: The Stationery Office