

National Child Measurement Programme Qualitative Research July 2008

Department of Health
Department for Children, Schools and
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Background



- The **National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP)** was established in 2005 as a joint collaboration between the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Schools and Families
- The NCMP collects **large scale statistical data** on the height and weight of children in Reception (aged 4-5 years) and in Year 6 (aged 10-11 years)
- The **aim of the NCMP** is to:
 - inform local planning and delivery of services for children
 - gather population-level surveillance data to allow analysis of trends in growth patterns and obesity
 - help to increase public and professional understanding of weight issues in children

Research Objectives



- The **objectives for this research** were to:
 - understand how parents want the information about their child's weight **presented to them**
 - identify **concerns** parents may have about the information within the letters and leaflets
 - gauge understanding of the **content and meaning** of the information in terms of the NCMP programme, where to go for further information and the healthy living tips
 - determine if the **amount of information** provided to parents is appropriate
 - discover **what action** parents would take from reading the information
 - understand what **expectations** parents have as a result of receiving the letters

Method and Sample



- A total of **four focus group discussions** were conducted (duration 1.5 hours), with 8 respondents per group
- All respondents were **parents** and groups were recruited as follows:
 1. C2DE, with children in Reception
 2. C2DE, with children in Year 6
 3. ABC1, with children in Reception
 4. ABC1, with children in Year 6
- An equal mix of **male and female parents** was achieved in the sample
- There was a good **mix of ethnic backgrounds** within all groups

Summary of findings

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- There was a **positive response to the NCMP** and all respondents were happy to have their children measured
- It was seen as **important to disseminate information** about healthy lifestyle choices for children, even if much of this is regarded as common-sense
- There were **some questions** about the measurement process itself, the overall purpose of the NCMP and what will be done with data collected
- **Other issues** related to language, confidentiality and the perceived 'downgrading' of under-weight children as a problem (compared to those who are over-weight)
- Overall, **interest in the NCMP** was clear across the sample and support for its aims was consistently high

Main findings: context

Sample Comments: ABC1



- ➔ Typically, ABC1 parents strongly believed that their children are **both active and eating healthily**
- A majority of children in this sample segment were **taking part in organised club sports** such as rugby, gymnastics and diving. Participation in these sports was time consuming and expensive for parents - but considered worthwhile for their children
- ABC1 parents were very **aware of changing lifestyle trends** which mean that more parental effort is required to ensure that their child is active and healthy
- Parents **used their own judgement** to assess the health of their child, typically based on the child's level of activity and the perceived healthiness of their current diet

Sample Comments: C2DE

- Similarly, C2DE parents judged the health of their children on **their own assessment** of the healthiness of their child's diet and level of exercise
- In contrast to ABC1 parents, C2DE parents **reported more problems** with ensuring that their children take part in sports and eat healthily - because most find it hard to access organised sports, while the high cost of living was felt to be affecting choices in terms of a healthy diet
- Despite these concerns, C2DE parents typically believed that their children are **healthy and growing/developing in a normal manner**

Reactions to the NCMP



- ➔ Both ABC1 and C2DE parents were **interested** in the NCMP programme
- A majority of respondents were **not aware of the NCMP** and only a few had direct experience of the NCMP
- Two respondents remembered **receiving a pre-measurement letter** and another had received follow-up feedback from her local NHS because of her daughter's low weight
- Those who were not aware of the NCMP were **disappointed** that they had not been given information about the programme: *"Why don't I know about this?!...why don't they have this at my child's school?"*
- Some were concerned that the NCMP might be '**just another initiative**' intended to show the government 'in a good light'

The letters and leaflets

Pre-measurement letter



- **Initial reactions** to the pre-measurement letter were positive
- Respondents understood that the letter is about **collecting statistical data** related to the wider issue of obesity in society
- Respondents predominantly **felt that this is an information-gathering exercise** - and felt that this was clearly explained in the letter
- A minority **reacted negatively to the pre-measurement letter** - questioning the qualifications of those who might be interacting with, and assessing, their child
- Overall, however, there was a **good understanding of the NCMP** and its objectives

Pre-measurement letter (2)



- ➔ A majority were **extremely interested** in receiving regular feedback about their child's height and weight
- Respondents raised the **following issues**:
 - parents typically **already know** the height and weight of their children (measured by themselves or their GP)
 - why is their **address and postcode information being collected** - and what will this be used for?
 - all wanted to know more about **what has been done with the statistics collected thus far** by the programme
- Nevertheless, there was consistent **interest in being included** in the NCMP and to 'be the same as everyone else'

Pre-measurement letter (3)



- The **language used in the letter** was felt to be clear, friendly, engaging and very easy to understand
- Respondents suggested that the **tone of voice** could be more authoritative - in order to reassure parents and promote confidence in the validity of NCMP
- Upon receiving the letter **most would do nothing** and would simply allow their child to be measured
- A majority would **not consider 'opting out' of the programme** - despite the fact that some expressed scepticism about the overall necessity for such a programme

Pre-measurement letter (4)



- **Presentation of the pre-measurement letter** was seen as effective and what parents would expect from their PCT
- Most respondents were **satisfied with the overall level of information and guidance** provided in the text
- However, **some suggestions** were made:
 - a more **detailed opening paragraph** describing the NCMP and its purpose
 - further clarification about how the results will be kept **confidential**
- Overall, the letter seems to have fully served its purpose in terms of **informing and engaging parents** - with only a few suggested amendments or improvements

'Why Your Child's Weight Matters' Pre-measurement leaflet



- ➔ Respondents felt that the pre-measurement leaflet was generally telling them '**what they already know**' about exercise and eating healthily:
"this is basic common sense"
- Nevertheless, all found it a **useful and effective reminder** of the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle for their child
- The **language and tone** were regarded as clear and appropriate for a broad audience
- Parents did not feel that they would **significantly change their behaviour** as a result of receiving this pre-measurement leaflet
- Some, however, might **seek further information** by calling their local PCT or looking at the PCT website

'Why Your Child's Weight Matters' Pre-measurement leaflet (2)



- ➔ Most felt that there was **adequate information and guidance** offered in the leaflet text
- However a minority believed that the leaflet could be further condensed by **removing some (seen to be) irrelevant imagery** - on Page 7, for example - and thus making key information even clearer (as in pages 5 and 6)
- There was a perception that the leaflet may be **overly focused upon 'weight'** (with 'weight' interpreted as meaning 'overweight' and not necessarily including 'underweight')
- For example, **use of the term 'overweight'** at the top of Page 4 was disliked by many respondents, who wanted to point out that it is not only overweight children who are affected by issues of bullying and low self-esteem

Post-measurement results letter



- ➔ Parents were **happy about the idea of receiving a results letter** and all wanted to be included in the feedback process
- The main purpose of the letter was seen to be **informing parents about their children's results** and clarifying the meaning of that data
- The **'what do the results mean' section** was positively received - and seen to be offering a clear explanation of the benefits of being measured and how health can be improved with habits established in childhood
- One suggestion from ABC1 parents was to **further explain the BMI system** and link this to the 'what do the results mean' section
- Many ABC1 parents were aware of perceived **shortcomings** of the BMI system (for example, factors such as musculature can distort the results):
"George Clooney's overweight on that system isn't he?"

Post-measurement letter (2)



- ➔ Reactions to the categories '**underweight**' or '**very overweight**' were similar in terms of the alarm generated amongst parents
- Reactions to the idea of their child being classified as '**underweight**' were just as negative as those linked to the idea of being 'very overweight' - with all believing that they would go to their GP and seek advice on eating disorders and how to cope with fussy eaters
- Predominantly, '**overweight**' was dismissed as 'puppy fat' and something that children would typically grow out of - meaning that many parents would monitor their children's diet, but probably not take any drastic action
- Parents reported that if their child was **judged to be 'very overweight'** it would make them feel very guilty and probably seek professional help (from a GP, for example)

Post-measurement letter (3)



- ➔ Respondents **understood the NCMP process** and typically found the explanation of the programme clear and straightforward
- The **'here are your child's results' paragraph** received the most criticism for the **language and tone used**. For example, a number of parents found the 'well done' phrase in the definition of healthy weight **patronising**
- Moreover, a minority of parents felt that the **credibility of the results was undermined** by the use of unspecific phrases such as 'seems to be', 'looks like' in the definitions of each category
- Some respondents found the language of the post measurement letter **"too passive"** for what it is trying to achieve. This group felt that more authoritative language would be more likely to motivate parents

Post-measurement letter (4)



- ➔ The **results letter was seen as vital** - because all wanted to know the results of their child's measurements
- All admitted that they **liked being involved in the feedback process**: *"and it makes you feel like a good parent"*
- A majority preferred to **go to their GP if concerned about the results**: *"They would hold your child's medical records and will give a detailed diagnosis."*

Post-measurement letter (5)



- ➔ The **presentation of the post measurement letter** was very well received by all respondents: *"It looks like an official government letter."*
- There was felt to be an **appropriate amount of information and guidance** within the text
- The **sliding scale of risk** was seen as acceptable in black and white - however, there were questions about the fact that the healthy weight section is larger than the underweight and overweight areas
- There was an appetite to contextualize this information. Some respondents felt that the sliding scale of risk **did not provide them with sufficient information to be able to interpret their child's results**

What happens next



- ➔ **A follow up phone call from a health professional** was welcomed if a child has been judged to be in the underweight or very overweight categories
- Moreover, a follow up enquiry was felt to be essential for children who are in **high risk categories** to ensure that all parents are taking appropriate action for health of their child
- However, the idea of a follow up phone call was **queried on the basis of confidentiality** - and many respondents worried that neglectful parents might 'opt out' in order to avoid investigation
- Overall, parents felt that their **local NHS (PCT) does have a responsibility to 'act'** on their findings and not simply focus upon the collecting of statistical data

'Why Your Child's Weight Matters' Leaflet – results mailing



- The **results mailing leaflet** was very positively received
- Many respondents were **more inclined to read this leaflet than the pre-measurement leaflet** - because it was seen as quite specific about how to ensure your child lives a healthy and happy life
- Furthermore, this leaflet was felt to be **more obviously linked with the results mailing** and does not look as generic as the pre-measurement leaflet
- The **language and tone** used were positively received - however, some repetition of information from the pre-measurement leaflet was noted
- Some C2DE parents felt that the leaflet does not accurately reflect the **difficulties involved** in influencing your child's diet and activity level

'Why Your Child's Weight Matters' Leaflet – results mailings (2)



→ The **'what to do next' section received a very positive response**

- It was seen to reassure parents that diet and calorie counting are inappropriate for children, whilst also stressing the importance of family 'sit down' meals
- The 'what to do next' section was also believed to be **useful and informative** with the potential to positively change parent's behaviour as a result of reading it
- **The results leaflet** was felt to offer an appropriate amount of information and guidance

Not taking part letter



- ➔ A majority of respondents felt that the '**not taking part**' letter was **important** - especially in ensuring that all parents are aware of the programme
- However there were some **mixed views** about the purpose of the letter: some were in favour of sending a reminder letter, while others felt that the **decision to opt out was not being respected**
- The **content** was seen as short, simple, understandable and clear
- A **single page letter** was considered to be an appropriate amount of information and guidance for a reminder at this stage of the process
- Ideally, 'not taking part' letters should be sent to **all except those who have actively opted out of the process**

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions pre-measurement letter



- The pre-measurement letter clearly communicated the aims of the NCMP and a majority were more than happy for their child to take part
- A majority were extremely interested in receiving regular feedback about their child's height and weight
- More information about the uses to which the NCMP data will be put would be of interest to parents
- Further clarification about how the results will be kept confidential is required

Conclusions pre-measurement leaflet



- The pre-measurement leaflet effectively provided parents with advice about how to maintain a healthy lifestyle for their child
- Many felt that this advice was common sense and would not effect a great amount of change
- Presenting the information in a more condensed format (by reducing the amount of imagery) would give the leaflet a more streamlined appearance
- Parents had the impression that the booklet was focussing on overweight children. Be aware that parents feel that the content is not sufficiently balanced between advice about being overweight and underweight

Conclusions post measurement results letter



- The post measurement results letter was positively received. Parents had a good level of understanding of the programme and felt engaged with the feedback process – and would take action if concerned about their child's results
- There was an appetite for more information to set the results in context. More information to contextualise the 'sliding scale of risk' would aid parents in interpreting their child's results
- Consider using more active language to motivate parents to engage with the results
- Parents felt strongly that their local NHS should follow up children who are either very underweight or overweight

Conclusions post measurement results leaflet and not taking part letter



- The post measurement results leaflet was very well received by parents and was an improvement on the pre-measurement leaflet since it communicated more specific information which was relevant to the results letter
- Overall, there was a high degree of satisfaction with the content of the leaflet, particularly the 'what to do next' section, in terms of offering more specific advice on healthy living tips
- Parents felt that it was important to keep in touch with parents whose children had missed out on the measuring session. The content and presentation of the letter was well received
- The letter should not, however, be sent to parents who actively opted out of the measuring session - it may be seen to infringe this decision