

Introduction to the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) food Choice research programmes and to the report of the FSA seminar on peer-led approaches to dietary change held in July 2006

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Abstract

Objective: To describe the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) Food Acceptability & Choice and Food Choice Inequalities research programmes and the context for the FSA seminar on peer-led approaches to dietary change held in July 2006.

Results: The aims of the FSA's food choice research programmes are to identify the social, psychological and physical barriers to achieving a healthier diet and how they might be addressed. Results of the research provide the scientific basis for some FSA advice on healthy eating. An important element of both programmes is the output of practical tools and resources that can be used by health professionals, nutritionists, teachers and others to encourage people to eat a healthy diet. The FSA held a seminar in July 2006 in order to identify the specific and general learning points from three peer-led intervention studies and to discuss how these could best be communicated to various audiences, including practitioners, researchers and policy-makers.

Conclusions: The seminar provided a useful forum for discussion. The FSA will ensure that lessons learned from these peer-led intervention studies are taken account of in the planning, appraisal and management of future research projects, in the communication of project results and in the dissemination of resources.

Keywords

Peer-led dietary change
Food Standards Agency seminar
Food Standards Agency research
Food Acceptability & Choice
research programme
Food Choice Inequalities research
programme
Food choice research programmes
Researchers
Policy-makers
Health promotion practitioners
Health professionals
Nutritionists
Teachers
Learning points

The factors that influence food choices are many and varied and include sensory, physiological, psychological, economic, social, cultural and environmental determinants. Understanding these factors is an important part of constructing effective dietary interventions.

The Food Standards Agency's (FSA) core values are to put the consumer first, to be open and accessible, and to be an independent voice. In *Putting Consumers First*, the Agency's strategic plan for 2005–2010, a key aim is to 'make it easier for all consumers to choose a healthy diet, and thereby improve quality of life by reducing diet related disease'. The Agency bases its policies on the best available evidence and, to this end, commissions research to provide the scientific basis for its advice.

Therefore the Agency runs the Food Acceptability & Choice and the Food Choice Inequalities research programmes in order to inform its advice to consumers on how to achieve a healthy, balanced diet.

The aims of the Food Acceptability & Choice research programme are:

- to understand the physiological and psychological basis upon which consumers make food choices;
- to quantify the influence of these factors on the determination of food choice; and

- to determine the factors that may inhibit sensible dietary choices and how these barriers may be overcome.

The aims of the Food Choice Inequalities research programme are:

- to understand the basis upon which specific target groups of the population (particularly minority communities and low-income groups) make food choices; and
- to determine how barriers to making healthy choices may be overcome in these target groups.

An important element of both programmes is the output of practical tools and resources that can be used by health professionals, nutritionists, teachers and others to encourage people to eat a healthy diet.

Since its establishment in 2000, the FSA has commissioned research projects in key settings such as schools (e.g. *Five a day the Bash Street Way*, *Fruit Tuck Shops*, *Be Smart, Dish it Up!*, *Smart lunchbox template*) and families (e.g. *Family Food and Health*) and concerning disadvantaged population groups (e.g. *Cookwell*, *Understanding food deserts*)¹. However, interventions that are effective in encouraging healthy eating may need to be located in more than one setting (see Fig. 1 in the report of the

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seminar²) and involve more than one strand of activity^{3,4}; and in recognition of this the Agency has recently commissioned two 'healthy living challenges' – a large project set in the community and a smaller, pilot study set in schools.

More information about projects commissioned under the Food Acceptability & Choice and the Food Choice Inequalities research programmes can be found on the FSA website (www.food.gov.uk) under *Science and Research*.

In July 2006, the Agency held a seminar to discuss the findings of three recently completed projects which aimed to encourage dietary change through the use of peer educators:

- *Promoting recommended infant feeding practices in a low-income sample: randomised controlled trial of a peer education intervention.*
- *Can peer educators influence healthy eating in people with diabetes?*
- *Design and evaluation of peer-led community based food clubs: a means to improve the diets of older people from socially deprived backgrounds.*

The seminar was attended by members of the research groups who had carried out the projects, other academics, health professionals and nutritionists, representatives of charities, staff from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, and FSA officials.

The report that follows in the accompanying paper² is a short account of the proceedings of that seminar including a summary of learning points for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. The FSA will ensure that lessons learned are taken account of in the planning, appraisal and management of future research projects, and in the communication of the outcomes of the three peer education projects discussed here as well as of future projects.

In the course of these projects, the researchers used and developed a wide range of resources including

questionnaires, training materials, recipes and lists of important information sources. These are available on a CD which can be obtained, free of charge, from the FSA (by contacting the corresponding author; vivien.lund@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk) in the hope that they will be widely used as appropriate.

The information in these resources was correct at the time of production. They were developed specifically for use with the particular population groups in these research projects; anyone using them in future should check that they are appropriate for use with the groups or individuals concerned.

Acknowledgements

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References

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