

Gr wing Skills

Using nature to nurture, nourish and flourish!



Growing Skills an enthusing and enriching approach to learning which seeks to utilise food growing and cooking to improve educational and health and well-being outcomes for children both now and in the future.

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Introduction

The levels of childhood obesity have tripled over the last 30 years, carbon dioxide levels are at the highest level they have ever been and there is increasing concern that the knowledge and skills that children leave school with here in Wales will not be suitable to find them meaningful employment.

It was out of concern as to how best to address these global issues that the idea for *Growing Skills* scheme was born. The scheme aims to improve children's learning and health and well-being outcomes whilst also addressing the global issues of obesity, climate change and the employment skills deficit.



Why do we need Growing Skills?

The 2017-2018 findings from Public Health Wales Child Measurement Programme reveal that more than *one in four children, aged four to five,*

are overweight or obese - in fact research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2017 revealed that *Wales* is not only the *most obese country in Western Europe* but Southampton University (2016) have

Fruit and vegetables are an important source of dietary fibre, vitamins and minerals, but fewer than

ONE IN 10

children meet the five-a-day target

(Soil Association, 2018:3)

UK families consume the most 'ultra-processed' diet in Europe. 50.7% of family food purchased are ultra-processed, compared to 14.2% in France and 13.4% in Italy. (Monteiro et al., 2017:22)

found that Welsh children are some of the least active and most sedentary in the world!

Inchley et al. (2016) and Cohen et al. (2013) report that the effects of obesity are far reaching, affecting a child's physical and mental health whilst also impacting upon their educational attainments. Unfortunately, the WHO (2016) indicates that obese children are more likely to become obese adults which then has health and economic consequences for the individual and the community and country in which they live.

**Seven in 10 UK deaths attributable to diet and lifestyle choices
(Donnelly, 2016)**



The research and latest figures presented by the Public Health Wales Child Measurement Programme demonstrate that a failure to develop interventions and strategies to challenge these global issues is failing not only future generations but the nation and world in which we live.

'The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those look on and do nothing'
Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955) Physicist and Nobel Laureate



What is Growing Skills?

Growing Skills will utilise food growing - gardening, and practical cooking as the primary, cross- curricular, hands-on learning platform for:

- Delivering and improving learning across the whole curriculum.
- Developing life, entrepreneurial and employment skills.
- Nurturing health and well-being, with emphasis placed specifically upon physical activity, diet and nutrition,

The scheme will also raise environmental awareness and involve parents and community volunteers in order to maximise the schemes impact and opportunity for future sustainability (NFER, 2011; Ohly et al., 2016)

Benefits of Growing Skills for Children

In order to deliver its aims Growing Skills has drawn upon child development theories and current research. The scheme will enable schools to deliver the requirements of the Foundation Phase Curriculum and upon its introduction in 2022 the Successful Futures Curriculum.



Growing Skills uses nature and the environment to deliver the aims of the scheme and is inspired by and based upon the sound child development theories of Froebel, Montessori, Piaget and Steiner all of which advocate the importance of nature and outdoor learning for children. Froebel, in particular, upholds that nature enables children to experience life through their senses and maintains that fruitful learning occurs when children frequently interact with the world (Bruce, 2012).

The schemes use of food growing and cooking as a vehicle for learning is grounded in current research findings.

Food Growing/ Gardening Benefits

1. Supporting Learning

- 1.1 Raising achievement
- 1.2 Developing skills for life
- 1.3 Improving motivation and encouraging positive behaviours

2. Enhancing health and well-being

- 2.1 Improving diet and nutrition
- 2.2 Boosting psychological health and well-being
- 2.3 Encouraging physical activity

3. Developing and improving schools

- 3.1 Developing and delivering a whole school ethos
- 3.2 Promoting student voice
- 3.3 Involving parents
- 3.4 Engaging community support

4.1 Strengthening communities

- 4.1 Bringing the community together
- 4.2 Improving access to fresh produce
- 4.3 Creating opportunities
- 4.4 Delivering organisational objectives

Source: Paige (2012)



Park et al. (2013) importantly maintain that gardening promotes physically active lifestyles and improves a child's physical fitness outcomes. Stating that the health benefits derived from gardening interventions may have similar benefits to that of other types of physical activities.

Cooking Benefits

Drummond (2010) and Moodie (2017) provide that learning about cooking and nutrition in the early years can advantageously affects the quality of children's lives. It enables them to make healthy food choices, maintain a healthy weight, good dental health which positively contributes to their overall state of health and well-being.

Moodie (2017) highlights that cooking and nutrition has cross-curricular links and can be used to deliver and improve children's learning outcomes in numeracy, literacy, science and technology and health and well-being.

Whole School, Cross-Curricular Approach

Growing Skills cross-curricular and whole school ethos aims are supported by both Moodie (2017) and Nelson et al. (2011) who emphasise that cooking and gardening can be successfully incorporated across the curriculum. With Nelson et al. (2011) asserting that gardening and food growing are of most benefit to children when they are integrated into the whole school ethos, the curriculum and desired pupil outcomes.



Possible Barriers for Growing Skills

Now, whilst the idea of combining food growing and cooking to deliver learning here in Wales is unusual it is not unique - many early years settings and primary schools already have school gardening and cooking clubs, but the Food Growing in Schools Taskforce (2012:43) report they are often viewed as being a 'nice to do activity'.

Food Growing Barriers

The NFER (2011:74) found that the main barriers to food growing in early years settings and schools was a 'lack of time in the curriculum; lack of personnel to coordinate activity and a lack of personnel to supervise activities'.

Cooking Barriers

Research carried out by the Jamie Oliver Food Foundation in 2017 reported that lack of time, budget and facilities were the main barriers to cooking. Lack of professional development for teachers and practitioners was also cited as a further barrier. These barriers are not insurmountable. They are positive indicators that there is an interest and desire to participate in food growing and cooking and should a scheme provide a means of support from community volunteers and assistance in their integration into the curriculum and ethos of the setting or school then there would be a high level of interest, uptake and commitment.



Growing Skills Stakeholders

Welsh Government, local authorities within Wales

Schools, Governors, Headteachers, teachers, teaching assistants, parents and children

Early Years Settings, owners, directors, practitioners, parents and children

Growing Skills Creator

Growing Skills is the idea of Sarah James. Sarah is currently reading Early Years Education and Care at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Alongside her studies she is employed by the City and County of Swansea as an environmental and public health officer. A keen cook, gardener and environmentalist she has previously worked for Welsh Government as a community environmental improvements project manager. One of her most successful projects to date was that of a flat pack gardening kit for school gardening clubs. The kit was developed and implemented by working alongside the local authority Parks Department, local schools and businesses and though successful and well received austerity measures brought the project to an end. However, the seed to help children and young people learn had been planted! And now, as a passionate advocate for improving outcomes for children Sarah would like to combine her previous experience and newly attained knowledge of child development in order to implement the Growing Skills scheme in early years settings and schools in Swansea.



The Research Behind Growing Skills Scheme

Growing Skills Background

There is a close link between education and health. Those early years settings and schools that promote children's health and well-being have found that it has the capacity to improve children's educational and health and well-being outcomes (Bradley and Green, 2013; Suhrcke and de Paz Nieves, 2011).

The principle aim of the Growing Skills scheme is to improve the learning and health and well-being outcomes for children, so they are better equipped to meet with the global challenges of obesity, climate change and the foundations of employment skills that will enable them to meet with the ever-changing nature of the labour market.

In aiming to improve children's educational and health and well-being the scheme acknowledges article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which states that every child is entitled to have the best health and be provided with education on health and well-being (UNICEF, no date). It also supports the delivery of the 'Healthy and Active' and 'Ambitious and Learning' key themes of Prosperity for All: the national strategy (2017) of Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2017).

The schemes emphasis on providing experiences which will enthuse and enable children to learn and develop skills through fun hands-on learning experiences is complementary to the existing Foundation Phase curriculum. However, it will also support the new Successful Futures curriculum by using food growing and cooking to gain new skills and develop an understanding of food and its nutritional value. In doing so children will be able to implement behaviours that will keep them in a good state of health and well-being both during childhood and into adulthood (Drummond, 2010; Moodie, 2017; Welsh Government, 2019).

The Benefits of Growing Skills for Early Years Children

Delivering, Enriching and Enhancing the Curriculum

The schemes use of food growing and cooking as a vehicle for learning is grounded in current research findings. Passy (2014) and Moodie (2017) indicate that teachers have found that food growing, and cooking can deliver and enhance cross-curricular learning in a stimulating and fun manor both indoors and outdoors. However, in order to gain optimal benefit, it is important that all food growing and cooking is a fundamental element of the whole school ethos (Public Health England, 2014). It should also be fully embedded into the curriculum, supported by the community and senior leadership team, staff and governors alike (Ohly et al., 2016). When delivered in the manner the National Federation for Education Research (NFER) (2011) and Food Growing in Schools Taskforce (2012) found that gardening has the capacity to improve young children's:

- **scientific knowledge and understanding** – by growing and studying plants, indoors and out, children can conduct simple experiments (as depicted below) so that they gain an understanding of the necessary elements required to grow (sunlight, water and heat).



Source: Pinterest (2018)



Source: Klee (2019)

- **literacy and numeracy, including the use of a wider vocabulary and greater oracy skills** – discussing and naming different types of plants that can be grown and eaten. Counting seeds as they are planted

- **development of physical skills, including gross and fine motor skills** – helping to plant seeds in plant pots, using hands or child size hand tools and then using fingers to pick up seeds before planting.
- **life, enterprise and financial skills** – by using repurposed plastic drinks bottles to make a plant container that can be sold to raise funds to supplement growing activities.
- **employability skills, such as problem solving and teamwork** – discussing the seasons and the weather and which plants are suited to which weather conditions before deciding where and what plants to grow.

Health and Well-being Benefits

Opportunities to participate in food growing and cooking have been found to have a positive effect on children's attitudes towards food, diet and associated behaviours. In particular they increased the daily fruit and vegetable intake of children, the effects of which were found to remain in adulthood (Duncan et al., 2015; Matthew et al., 2019). The additional benefit of physical activity that gardening provides produces benefits to a child's physical health which subsequently has advantageous effects on children's behaviour in the classroom and has been shown to result in improved levels of educational attainment (Public Health England, 2014). Those children with additional learning needs thrive in the outdoor gardening environment (NFER, 2011; Ohly et al., 2016). Ohly et al. (2016) proposes that the nature of the environment enables them to feel at ease and express themselves better.

With food growing providing opportunities for outdoor learning, with fewer constraints, children can explore their learning in a more relaxed manner. The tranquillity of the outdoors aids children's concentration. Research evidence indicates that as a result the mental well-being of children benefits (Food Growing in Schools Taskforce, 2012). The Royal Horticultural Society states that gardening increases children's confidence, motivation and self-esteem. This they report is due to the variety of skills required to address tasks. Skills, such as common sense, physical strength and problem-solving act to address

classroom inequalities with research indicating that academic hierarchy quickly disappears.

Environmental Awareness

Ohly et al. (2016) and the Food Growing in Schools Taskforce (2012) report that by introducing children to the concepts of waste minimisation, repurposing, reusing, climate change and global warming through the hands-on experience of food growing and gardening children gain a greater contextual awareness of their environment. These positive childhood environmental habits remain and are then practised in adulthood.

Barriers

The main barriers to the introduction of cooking in early years settings and primary schools are those of time constraints and fitting in cooking lessons around the existing curriculum requirements (Segrott et al., 2014). Insufficient practitioner knowledge and training and inadequate funding and room to accommodate kitchen facilities and resources required for cooking are also problematic (Dicker et al., 2011). These issues have also been highlighted following the introduction of food education as part of the national curriculum in England. There are now measures in place to design and introduce a 'Cooking Cube' which would contain all of the equipment and resources required to deliver practical cooking lessons for children and young people (Jamie Oliver Food Foundation, 2017). Working alongside Public Health Wales could address the issue of training for practitioners. However, Islington Council have worked alongside Angela Moodie, a Health Improvement Adviser, Cooking and Nutrition, to develop an all-encompassing guidance document for financing, resourcing and delivering cooking and nutrition lessons in the early years and primary schools (Moodie, 2017).

Observations and Future Actions

Over the past two decades the importance of food, nutrition and exercise in maintaining a healthy weight has been acknowledge not only by Welsh Government but governments across the globe (Welsh Government, 2019). During this time obesity and non-communicable diseases have increased with Welsh Government putting in place legislation, policies and guidance in order to try and address these

issues. Despite doing so the situation has not improved, in fact it has deteriorated to a point that girls born in the UK today have the lowest life expectancy in Europe (Nuffield Trust, 2018).

The legislation, measures and schemes that are currently in place for early years setting and schools, such as the Welsh Network of Healthy Schools Scheme introduced in 2000 and the Healthy and Sustainable Pre-School Scheme introduced in 2011 are not having the desired effect. In the consultation document Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales issued in January 2019 it is questionable that the suggestion to strengthen these existing schemes would be sufficient (Welsh Government, 2019). In England in 2015 the new National Curriculum introduced food teaching for five to 16 year olds in an attempt to promote a whole school, 'pro-food ethos' which would raise the awareness of the food and the pivotal role it has with concern to children's educational outcomes and health and well-being (Department of Education, 2015: 4). However, research conducted by the Jamie Oliver Food Foundation in 2017 found that whilst most schools were implementing the new national curriculum there was a wide divide in the consistency and quality of the delivery of food education (Jamie Oliver Food Foundation, 2017)

Whilst the measures put in place in England are still in their infancy Welsh Government should be mindful of the situation and with the introduction of the new Successful Futures curriculum due to be implemented from nursery to year 7 in 2022 there is an ideal opportunity for a scheme such as Growing Skills to be introduced. The scheme could be used as a research project whose outcomes could be measured in order to determine the schemes effectiveness. If found to be successful in the delivery of its aims and improvement outcomes the scheme could then be introduced to schools throughout Wales and assist in addressing the global issues that threaten not only our nation but our planet today.

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