

Involving children and young people – holiday hunger programmes in Scotland

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1. Introduction

This briefing paper¹ examines the complexities of involving children and young people in decision-making related to programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger in Scotland. Holiday hunger is defined as the increased levels of food insecurity felt by some children and their families during school holidays. Current initiatives in place to reduce holiday hunger in Scotland include programmes run by food banks, churches, community centres and schools.

Despite being the primary service users of these programmes, children's views are not always included in decision-making. Under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), State Parties are responsible for ensuring that children's views are respected and taken into account in issues that affect them. To uphold this right, it is crucial that children are provided opportunities to become stakeholders in the development of programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger.

Children's involvement in this issue is imperative for two overarching reasons. Firstly, involving children in decision-making is a necessary component of children's rights. To uphold this right, governments are responsible for providing opportunities for children's involvement in all issues that may affect them. Secondly, involving children allows programmes to be developed in ways that are relevant and fun for children, who are the main service users. Children are valuable resources in programme development, as they are experts in what other children may need or desire from a service.

¹ Boettger, Emilie, (2017) *Involving Children and Young People in Decision-Making surrounding Programmes that Aim to Reduce Holiday Hunger in Scotland*, MSc Childhood studies dissertation, University of Edinburgh

2. The research approach

The main approach of this research was to administer a survey to attendees at a Right to Food conference in Scotland. While this survey had a quantitative approach, the responses provided a mix of both qualitative and quantitative aspects. Respondents included adults across a variety of professional sectors as well as a group of pupils representing a local primary school. Respondents were asked a variety of questions related to if, and why, it is important to involve children in decision-making related to programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger in Scotland, what children's involvement could look like, and the potential challenges and opportunities related to children's involvement. In addition, a literature review provided an overview and useful context of some of the issues around food insecurity and holiday hunger during school holiday periods.

3. Involving children in decision-making: the opportunities

Involving children in decision-making surrounding programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger was met with enthusiasm by survey respondents, who provided numerous suggestions to encourage children's involvement and spread knowledge of children's rights to others.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that children's expertise is an invaluable tool for ensuring that programmes are relevant for other children experiencing holiday hunger. Adult respondents suggested that children may offer unique insights into the potential location of programmes, the activities offered and the food served.

“Involving children will ensure that programmes are relevant, it's all about what the young people want to do. They have to want to be there.”

“Programmes should be in friendly locations that families are confident to enter, and are at dates and hours that make it relevant for children and their families.”

Some of the young respondents further explained that children may be experts in deciding not only what types of activities and food options children would enjoy, but in dietary safety and nutritional health considerations as well. They described the necessity for children to be involved in decision-making to ensure that participants’ specific dietary needs are adequately met by programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger, especially menu planning.

“Being involved in the menu is the most important because some children might not like some things or might be vegetarian, vegan, pescatarian or might be allergic to some foods. It is important to be involved for diet needs and for health and nutrition.”

The young respondents also demonstrated a strong understanding of the overall goals of programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger as well as solutions to what could be done about food insecurity on a broader scale.

“The programmes should get enough funding to feed all of the children good meals that will fill them up when there is nothing to eat at home.”

“First give money and houses to the homeless and starving. You can get this money by getting people or companies to pay more taxes.”

These findings align with the report [Living is More Important Than Just Surviving](#), which revealed that children possess a strong interest and deep understanding of the economic context of food insecurity and are eager to contribute to future discussions.

In addition, both adult and young survey respondents stressed the importance of community support in cultivating an environment in which children are able to share their views in decision-making, one adult respondent observing that:

“It is necessary to find a common ground and understanding amongst a variety of stakeholders so that everyone has a clear understanding as to why children and young people should be involved in decision-making.”

Indeed, this common ground requires good relationships to be forged to encourage shared learning, knowledge, and experiences.

Respondents indicated that everyone has a unique role to play to make children’s involvement in decision-making a reality, and that existing organisations promoting children’s rights are strong resources to educate others.

4. Involving children in decision-making: the challenges

Along with the opportunities, respondents also discussed several challenges that may limit the extent to which children are involved in decision-making.

Unequal adult-child power relations were described as a significant barrier to children’s involvement in decision-making related to programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger. Some young respondents thought that adults’ lack of respect for children’s ideas may discourage or prevent their involvement in decision-making.

“Adults might not agree with children or respect their ideas.”

“Some adults do not think we should ask children and young people.”

Some adults expressed the view that a lack of resources and training for adults to learn how to appropriately involve children in decision-making contributes to the unequal power relations.

“The challenge is to listen effectively to the children and what decisions they would like to make.”

“It may be challenging for children to demonstrate and convey their ideas in the ways adults are used to.”

Both adult and young respondents described the need for children to feel that they can communicate their views in the ways that are most comfortable to them, though this may be different from how adults may communicate.

Finally, quite a few young respondents indicated that more needs to be done on a broader scale to promote existing programmes and educate entire communities about the severity of holiday hunger. Young respondents indicated that they do not see many programmes advertised and that parents do not always have the resources to learn about them.

“Children and parents have to know more about programmes.”

“It is necessary to run programmes well and let people know about them.”

“People need to know why holiday hunger is an issue, what goes on at programmes, and who is involved.”

By promoting existing programmes and educating communities about holiday hunger, more children and their families will benefit, and a greater awareness by the public will hold political leaders accountable for continued progress.

5. Next steps

Respondents provided several suggestions for ways to improve the involvement of children and young people in decision-making , which include:

- Asking children and young people directly how they wish to be involved in decision-making and what resources they need to be successful.
- Involving adults who are passionate about children's rights and working with children and young people as advocates to hold other adults accountable for including children's views in decision-making.
- Holding political leaders accountable for involving children and young people in decision-making not only in holiday hunger discussions, but in all issues that affect children and young people as outlined in Article 12 of the UNCRC.
- Continuing to spread knowledge of children's rights to the general public and all professionals that work either directly with children or on issues that affect children.
- Promoting existing programmes that aim to reduce holiday hunger and provide resources for families to access them.



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