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Finding the fun in healthy living

Rachel Linfield explores where a healthy lifestyle and fun can go hand in hand



Figure 1 Swimming as part of the healthy lifestyle suggested by Alex

When asked in science to define what is meant by 'a force', it is relatively easy to respond with a clear answer such as 'a push or a pull'. Indeed, many areas of science have neat definitions and are commonly understood. The same, however, cannot always be said for 'healthy lifestyle' or 'healthy eating', for which a vast array of ideas, and sometimes misconceptions, exist. For teachers, the words 'healthy lifestyle' may evoke a feeling of guilt, particularly at the start of a new year, as we look at what we eat and drink and consider whether we take enough exercise, spend too long on our laptops and fail to go to bed the same day as when we woke up. Children offer a range of views when they begin to discuss healthy lifestyles, often connected to things they believe people should or should not do and foods to avoid. What follows is a reflection of recent conversations with six children who were asked to consider what people do and what they eat to have a healthy lifestyle.

What do people do who have a healthy lifestyle?

Here are some of the children's responses:

They swim and run. They walk

everywhere and don't drive. They eat lots of fruit. (Alex, age 6, Figure 1)

They don't smoke. They drink lots of water. They don't eat sweets and always remember to clean their teeth. (Emma, age 7)

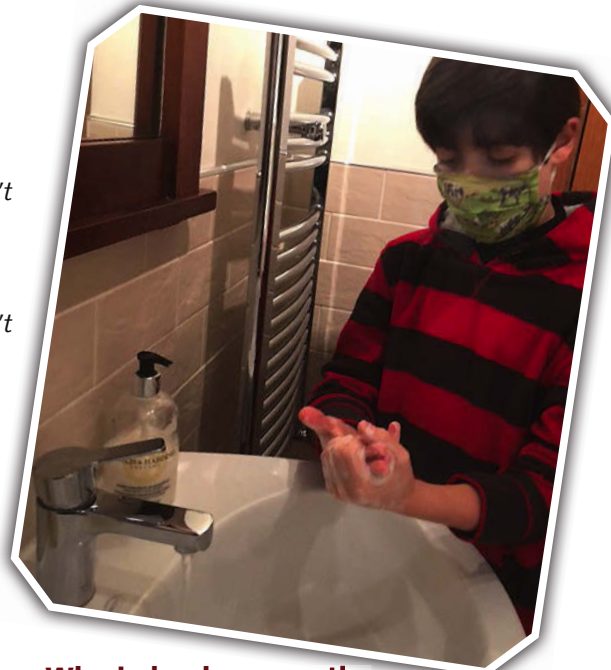
They do lots of exercise, eat healthy meals, brush their teeth properly, don't smoke, have fun and dress properly – not too hot and not too cold. (Matthew, age 8)

Healthy people are healthy. They don't get ill. They're sensible when they go outside, and wear masks and wash their hands. (Ben, age 9, Figure 2)

They take care to do the right things like playing sport and eating sensible foods. They get enough sleep and don't use their phones and computers all the time. (Bronwen, age 10)

People with a healthy lifestyle make sure they eat five a day of fruit and vegetables. They drink milk and don't eat lots of chocolate. They do exercise and walk a lot. I think people with a healthy lifestyle shouldn't be on their phones too much and, if they have a job where they have to sit at a desk, they should find ways to take breaks or have a tall desk so they can stand. (My dad is always on his computer, sitting at the table. That's not healthy!) (Rosie, age 11)

Figure 2 Ben quoted mask-wearing and handwashing as part of a staying healthy



Who in books, or on the television, do you think have healthy diets?

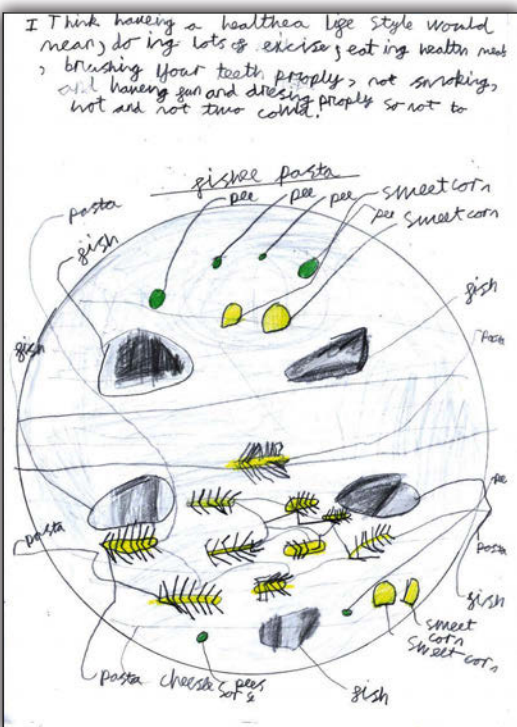
Discussion of healthy diets began by asking for suggestions of characters within fiction, and famous people, who the children thought had healthy diets. (This seemed safer than seeking opinions about people known personally by the children, or



Figure 3 Rosie said taking exercise was important

Figure 4 (right) Ben understood the need for a healthy diet

Figure 5 Matthew's drawing of his healthy 'fishee pasta' meal



themselves, when comments might have become too personal!!) It did though cause some confusion as the word 'diet', for Emma and Bronwen, meant a way to lose weight.

The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle) was deemed to have an unhealthy diet because it ate, among other foods, cakes and sweets. Ben,

however, felt that the caterpillar perhaps had a need for the sweet foods to have energy for the chrysalis stage and also reminded the group that it had eaten several portions of fruit. Bronwen thought J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* was a healthy boy because he took lots of exercise and was 'a sensible size'. Several footballers were mentioned as 'being good at keeping fit'. Book characters and

famous people, whom the children thought were overweight, were seen to be unhealthy.

In addition, however, Rosie felt a number of pop stars were unhealthy because they were 'too thin and you can see their bones'. Michael Bond's *Paddington Bear* was not

viewed as healthy because of his love of marmalade sandwiches. Fillings such as cheese, humus, tomato and egg were suggested as being healthier alternatives.

What do you like to eat for a healthy meal?

The final question invited children to describe or draw what they liked to eat for a healthy meal. Rosie said she loved tuna and apple sandwiches, but she was not certain whether they really were healthy because she liked them with a lot of salad cream. Rosie, also, thought brown bread was possibly more healthy than white. Emma said she loved any meal with rice. Ben said he did not really like some of the foods that he thought were healthy, like vegetables, but he did enjoy eating fruit and yogurts (Figure 4). Bronwen's favourite healthy meal was baked beans on toast with grated cheese. Matthew's was a 'fishee pasta' and his detailed drawing reflected knowledge of a balanced meal (Figure 5).

Healthy thoughts

The conversations with the children were perhaps unsurprising. Collectively, their responses to questions demonstrated that the children knew that exercise, a healthy diet and good

hygiene are components of a healthy lifestyle. Given that the questions were asked during a recent coronavirus lockdown it is perhaps surprising that only one child spoke of wearing masks and washing hands to be healthy. Thoughts relating to a 'healthy diet' showed children felt some foods, such as chocolate, were unhealthy while fruit and vegetables were good.

Answers revealed awareness of knowledge which linked to strands within the National Curriculum in England (DfE, 2013), such as children should be taught to: 'describe the importance for humans of exercise, eating the right amounts of different types of food, and hygiene'; 'identify that animals including humans, need the right types and amount of nutrition' and 'recognise the impact of diet, exercise, drugs and lifestyle on the way their bodies function'.

There was, however, one key comment within the conversations worthy of further note. Matthew identified the need for healthy lifestyles to include 'fun'. He suggested that a healthy lifestyle goes beyond hygiene, exercise and a balanced diet. This makes one pause for thought. Does not science influence the arts, and flourish when creativity is embedded? In the same way, should the science curriculum be more embracing, bringing in and supporting more ideas from personal, social and emotional education? And are we in danger of assuming that adults and children all have the same baseline understanding of what the well-used term 'healthy living' means?

In recent months, particularly during the lockdown, the importance of looking after mental health has been stressed. Matthew recognised the need for fun within a healthy lifestyle and this surely must be an important part of maintaining positive mental health. Do we need to be rethinking what a national curriculum for 'science' might entail?

Acknowledgements

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Reference

DfE (2013) *National Curriculum in England: Science programmes of study: key stages 1 and 2*. London: Department for Education.

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