

Investigating young people's physical activity and eating behaviours and how best to provide support: Triangulating data from young people, practitioners, and commissioners

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Background

Physical activity and diet quality decline during the adolescent years,^{1,2} putting young people at risk of health conditions and failure to reap health benefits.³ Therefore, interventions are warranted to support young people to be active and eat healthily. Guidance on the development of such complex interventions advises on engagement with stakeholders, both service users and professionals.⁴

Objectives

- To understand influences on young people's physical activity and healthy eating behaviour from the perspective of multiple stakeholders to inform intervention development
- To seek opinions on the optimal support for young people to make positive changes to their physical activity and healthy eating behaviours

Methods

- Online qualitative 1:1 interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule containing open-ended questions to elicit views on behavioural influences and optimal support from young people, practitioners, and commissioners
- Pseudonymised, verbatim interview transcripts from each participant group were analysed separately using Reflexive Thematic Analysis⁵ before data were triangulated between groups

Results

Each participant group yielded five themes and multiple sub-themes. Findings which overlapped between participant groups are presented here, four of which relate to behavioural influences (I) and six to optimal support (S). Each finding is presented with a pseudonymised illustrative quote from one participant.

I Role of parents
Participants expressed how current behaviour is resultant from upbringing and parents continue to exert a large influence during the teenage years. Parents were therefore seen as both potential role models and gatekeepers and there was consensus that they should be involved in programmes.

“So if a teenager genuinely wants to make lifestyle changes, whatever it might be, they've got to have the support of their parents, even if they're generally quite independent, because it might be that parent has to take them to that football club or that parent has to pick them up.”
(Heather, 39, commissioner)

I Role of peers
Peers were considered very influential to young people with their support seen as beneficial to engaging in healthy behaviours.

“100 percent if my friends were eating healthy, I would too. Me and my friend in particular we always eat McDonald's like always, it's almost become a little addiction, and I feel like if she was to turn around and be like 'I'm not getting it no more,' I'd be like 'Oh why am I getting it then.' I don't wanna be eating it by myself.”
(Juliet, 19, young person)

I Knowledge
There were similar opinions on young people's limited understanding of healthy eating, as well as a lack of awareness of physical activity guidelines resulting in gaps to be filled.

“[Young] people that I've worked with have always found it a surprise that you can have frozen and tinned fruits and veg and that will still count as well.”
(Hayley, 32, practitioner)

I The environment
The current environment was considered challenging for young people to act in healthful ways. A plethora of influences were cited such as availability, opportunities, infrastructure, covert advertising and marketing strategies, and how the environment interacts with intentions.

“You are a young person and you need to be more healthy, okay great. But if they're in a school that doesn't support them to do that, or an environment that doesn't support them to do that they're not going to do it.”
(Celia, 35, commissioner)

S Set goals
Participants felt the use of goals can help young people focus and achieve behavioural changes through monitoring progress. All groups felt that recognition of progress is an important part of behaviour change.

“The feeling of that I'm working towards something better, just to have a goal at the end, whatever that is, that would make me do it.”
(Edith, 17, young person)

S Make it different to school
Opinions were that both the support offered and the way it is delivered would have to be different to school experiences.

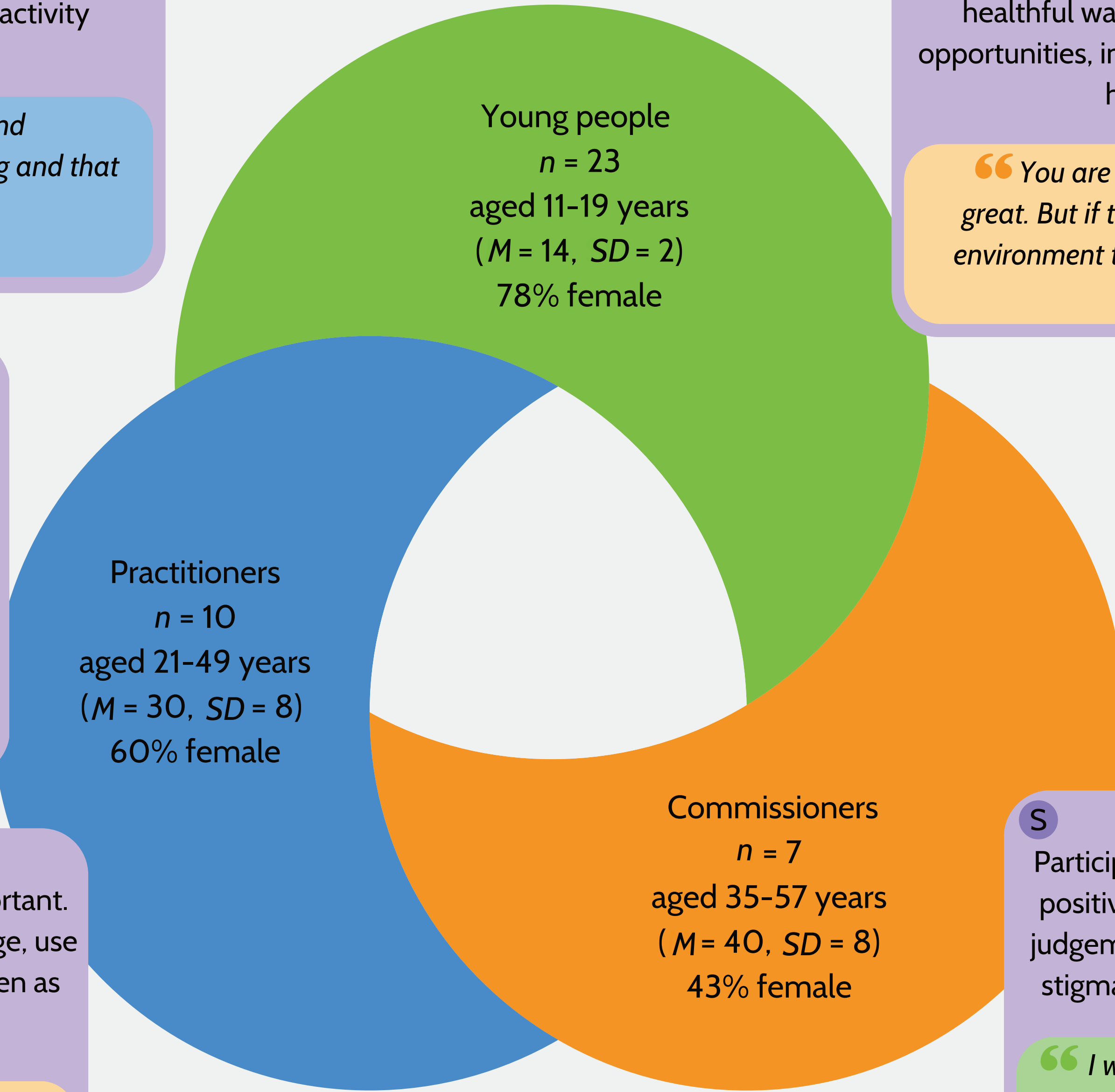
“They don't want to come here and be like school. So it's got to be very different to what the classroom environment would be like for them.”
(Jack, 31, practitioner)

S Make language approachable
The need for language to be approachable was seen as important. This included considering young people's developmental stage, use of technical terms or jargon, and using phrases which are seen as negative or considered a turn-off.

“Don't bamboozle them with technical speak but don't make them idiots either, finding the right language is really critical.”
(Heather, 39, commissioner)

S Keep it positive
Participants were keen for support to be delivered in a comfortable, positive setting. This included a variety of aspects including, a non-judgemental un-pressured atmosphere free from criticism, reducing stigma, and adopting a strength-based solution focused approach.

“I would want the information to be delivered in a constructive way not in a criticizing way. I wouldn't want to go feeling like my like lifestyle was being criticized.”
(Phoebe, 17, young person)



S Make it practical and interactive
There was agreement that sessions need to be highly practical and interactive in order to be fun and engaging for young people. This was seen to result in better learning and retention.

“It needs to be extremely engaging because I think we find young people just switch off ... as long as it's practical, its good ways of doing it.”
(Meredith, 31, practitioner)

S Help develop skills
Participants voiced the need for support to help young people develop skills. This was seen as necessary for behavioural change given the perception that young people lack skills to regularly act in healthful ways. Problem-solving, cooking, and meal planning skills were seen as most important, while taste testing different foods was suggested as beneficial.

“So some support around [preparing healthy food] I think is really important. So they're actually physically able, they have some physical skills.”
(Archie, 41, commissioner)

Conclusions

- This study triangulated data on behavioural influences and optimal support for young people's physical activity and healthy eating behaviours from a range of stakeholders
- The results obtained represent the voices of key stakeholders in intervention development, and can be used in the creation of a new support programme for young people
- The resulting programme should be acceptable and beneficial to users, deliverers, and local commissioners

References

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