

Right from the start

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Learning from an international programme to tackle childhood obesity

Around 50 per cent of children who are obese at the age of six will remain so for the rest of their lives. By the time they reach the age of ten the likelihood of them remaining obese in adulthood increases to 66 per cent, leaving them vulnerable to the chronic health conditions associated with obesity such as coronary heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

Dr Jean-Michel Borys, director of the French childhood obesity prevention programme EPODE, argues it is statistics like these that should convince us of the necessity to act as early as possible if we are to successfully address the issue of obesity.

"It is easier to change habits from childhood onwards," he says. "This is the period when children are very receptive to the advice they may be given. However, it is not just a matter of focusing on obesity, as of considering the local living conditions as a whole, promoting healthy eating, active play and recreation and creating the environment that encourages families to adopt a healthier lifestyle."

It is possible to prevent obesity and its complications through interventions that are based on lifestyle and environment, he says, adding: "However, there is a clear need to bridge the gap that exists between awareness and know-how: it is widely known that people need to be more physically active and have a better diet; nevertheless doubts persist over how to effectively implement the necessary related lifestyle changes and, importantly, how to ensure these remain effective in the long term."

The origins of the EPODE programme lies in a pilot experience, the Fleurbaix Laventie Ville Santé study, which was conducted in two small towns of Northern France from 1992 to 2004. Borys says the study showed "very encouraging" evidence of the relevancy of community-based interventions in significantly preventing childhood obesity across all socio-economic groups over the long term.



Dr Jean-Michel Borys, director of the French childhood obesity prevention programme EPODE

"In 2004, the objective was therefore to extend this successful pilot experience to other towns through the design, set up and implementation of a methodology – EPODE – consistent with the official French guidelines on nutrition, diet and physical activity," he says.

Aimed at reaching children aged 0 to 12 years old and their families, it launched in ten pilot towns across France. The model is based on the involvement "of the community for the community," he says, and strives to create the political commitment, secure resources, ensure support services are in place and build an evidence base to enable community stakeholders to implement effective, sustainable strategies to tackle childhood obesity.

"EPODE is also aimed at involving local actors who can influence childhood settings, food environments and physical activity environments, socio-economic policies and socio-cultural norms," he says.

"In this process, the multidisciplinary support services provided by a National Coordination Team, the involvement of local authorities as well as the appointment of a local project manager in each town are critical components. It finally enables to establish local networks and to involve a wide variety of local actors trusted with sufficient flexibility to adapt actions to the local context."

From the outset, EPODE also sought both public and private participation at national as well as local level, something which Borys admits roused suspicion at first.

"At the beginning the national authorities were suspicious because it was a new

programme not a public one, but a public private one and that was not typical in France. They were suspicious but now they cooperate and we have a lot of common projects with the national authorities. For example, they funded a project with the food industry and that is very, very new in France, this collaboration between the private and public sector."

However, both elements are essential for the programme's success, he asserts.

"Without public participation the EPODE programme would not have been possible: town councils, local NGOs, hospitals, schools and health professionals all need to be involved, as well as regional and national governments and international organisations such as DG Sanco."

As for their private partners, he says these are divided into two categories. For local producers and actors, such as supermarkets, local companies, producers and retailers, their support is limited to their own locality.

"There are several possible frameworks for support: via financial means, and by providing specific skills and 'in kind' resources, for example, equipment. Communication can occur at local level only, and no brand or product promotion is permitted," he says.

He continues: "At national level, the corporate partners involved sign a charter of commitment and participate in partner meetings, but they are not permitted to promote brands using the EPODE logo, and they cannot intervene in the content of the programme. The aim is to have the involvement of national partners who wish to be part of the solution, who have corporate social responsibility at their core and who believe in sustainable long-term partnerships."

While Borys stresses that it can take several years for a decline in prevalence to become apparent, he says they have been very encouraged by the evolution of the BMI of children in the ten pilot towns where a decrease of 10 to 15 per cent of the prevalence of overweight children was noted. Of those first ten pilot cities, 90 per cent have since renewed their commitment to the programme.

It was a challenge to see if the same sustainable effects could be replicated in bigger cities, he admits, but says the reaction from other communities has been "extremely positive".

"Local authorities join the EPODE programme on a voluntary basis, with a particular interest in the fact that EPODE brings support services, coordination, consistency and more visibility to existing initiatives. It also enables cross-sectoral collaborations.

"As the programme is now implemented in 226 towns in France, it creates positive dynamics making more and more communities interested in joining the programme," he says.

It has also piqued international interest, and EPODE-inspired programmes are now being implemented across the globe, including in Scotland.

Last year Public Health Minister Shona Robison announced the creation of eight pathfinder Healthy Weight Communities, backed by £1.4m of government funding, which are now taking place in: Armadale and Blackridge in West Lothian, Catrine in East Ayrshire; Barrhead in East Renfrewshire, Dumfries; Dundee; Priesthill and Househill in south-west Glasgow; Stevenston in North Ayrshire; and Viewpark in North Lanarkshire.

With over 150,000 obese children in

Scotland and four in ten Scottish adults predicted to be obese by 2030, Robison argues that the French experience can teach us "valuable lessons in cutting obesity."

She continued: "Like their French inspirations, our Healthy Weight Communities will bring whole towns together to get more active and eat more healthily.

"They'll embrace everything from breastfeeding support groups to walking clubs and healthy local gala days. Crucially, they will involve councils, the NHS, the voluntary and private sector from schools and shops to community centres and parks."

Borys proudly reels off the roll call of other European countries which have used the EPODE methodology to create their own programmes, including Belgium (VIASANO Programme), Spain (THAO Salud Infantil Programme) and Greece (PAIDEIATROFI programme).

The level of interest in the work led to the creation of the EPODE European Network project to facilitate the implementation of community-based interventions using the EPODE methodology in other European

countries, regions and towns, he says, adding: "We are also pleased that the EPODE methodology crossed the European borders and is currently being implemented by the Government of South Australia in six local councils (OPAL Programme) and will be implemented as well in Mexico in the framework of the National Plan "5 Pasos" launched by the Ministry of Health to promote healthier lifestyles and prevent chronic diseases."

Borys is glad that EPODE has captured the imagination of others and hopes to see it travel further still.

"It is more a method than a programme," he says. "That means that the EPODE programme is quite different in one city from another because of all the different people, resources, cultures and ideas.

"What we try to do is be very flexible and trust the local communities. They know what will work for them."

Dr Borys is the keynote speaker at Holyrood magazine's annual obesity conference, 'Tackling obesity together', in Edinburgh on Thursday 29 April. For more information visit www.holyrood.com/obesity