



UCL

HELEN HAMLYN CENTRE FOR PEDAGOGY

0-11 YEARS

Food banks in early years settings: The impact on children, families and staff

Alice Bradbury and Sharon Vince

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of the Monday Charitable Trust in funding this important work, and the many participants who gave their time to the project. Thank you also to the wider team in the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11 years), and the Helen Hamlyn Trust as our funders, for the broader support which has allowed this research to be conducted.

To cite this report: Bradbury, A. and Vince, S. (2024) *Food banks in early years settings: The impact on children, families and staff*, London: Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11 years), UCL Institute of Education.

Executive Summary

1. Food insecurity – where families cannot access enough food or the right food in socially acceptable ways – is increasing in England due to the cost of living crisis.
2. Food banks in early years settings such as nurseries, children’s centres and pre-schools provide free or reduced cost food for families that are struggling, without the need for eligibility checks.
3. Case studies of early years settings show how they operate food banks or food pantries, often making use of food redistribution systems which reduce food waste. There is also often provision of clothing, toiletries and other essentials.
4. The impact on children is seen by staff to be positive in terms of learning and behaviour, improved relationships with parents, reduced family stress and healthier eating.
5. Food is a key part of the culture of learning in early years settings, as well as being seen as an essential ‘basic need’. Settings use free breakfasts and provision of a wide variety of foods to build learning, as well the food bank.
6. The advantages of locating the food bank at the early years setting are that it is a convenient location which does not have the stigma associated with a traditional food bank. Parents are more willing to take food from a food bank at an early years setting.
7. The disadvantages for the staff relate to the cost and the time taken to stock and organise the food bank, and to apply for funding.
8. We conclude that the impact is positive overall, and recommend that this work be recognised more widely and funded as part of attempts to reduce the impact of food insecurity on young children.

Introduction

Why research food banks in early years?

This research project was motivated by a desire to explore the growing use of food banks in education, with a particular a focus on early years settings. In 2021-22, there were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK, which is 29% of children (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). It is well established that providing free meals for children living in low-income households within educational settings makes a considerable difference to their developmental outcomes (Cohen et al. 2021), but the impact of free food provision for the whole family is less well researched. Food banks have increased in number in recent years, with demand rising recently due to the cost-of-living crisis (Trussell Trust, 2023; Irvine et al, 2022); and there is clear evidence that food banks in schools are rising in prevalence (Bradbury and Vince, 2023; Lucas et al, 2023). One study conducted prior to the pandemic in early 2020 revealed that 18% of nurseries responding provided a food bank for families to use (Learner, 2020). Given our mission to improve children's education and particularly those living with disadvantage in HHCP, we decided to invest in researching this topic, with the help of the Monday Charitable Trust. Our hypothesis was that providing for the whole family in a familiar setting such as a nursery improves health and reduces stress among the whole family, with resultant effects on the child's educational outcomes. Our aim here was to use case studies of a variety of types of early years settings to explore how food banks work and what staff see as their impact. We focus here on England, given the devolved nature of early years policy in the UK.

A parallel project focused on primary schools (see Bradbury and Vince, 2023) suggested that there might be some commonalities and some differences with food banks in early years settings. As researchers we are both interested in the particularities of early years as a sector (meaning all provision for children from birth to five), and wanted to devote time and effort to exploring this issue rather than simply including some nursery schools as part of the Food banks in Schools project. Importantly, early years settings are distinct from schools in having funding from both the state and parent fees, with the proportion varying according to type of provision, i.e. nursery school, private nursery, children's centre (Catoretti & Paull, 2022). They also vary in terms of hours of attendance, size, and age group of children. Even before Covid, previous research had suggested that nursery schools were on the 'frontline' of dealing with social issues among families (Hoskins, Bradbury, & Fogarty, 2021) and thus the implications of having a food bank in terms of relationships with parents/carers was an area of interest.

Why Research Food Banks in Early Years Now?

The project was conducted in February – November 2023 at a time when the UK was undergoing a cost-of-living crisis, caused by high inflation, increased food and fuel prices, sudden increases in energy bills and stagnant wages (OBR, 2022; Harari, 2023). This latest crisis followed the challenges of the Covid pandemic, and a decade of austerity under Conservative-led governments since 2010. Growing concern over the impact of the era of 'permacrisis' on young children was apparent in reports from the Children's Commissioner (2021) and Ofsted (2022).

At the same time, the phenomenon of schools and other institutions providing food banks, in addition to those run by organisations such as the Trussell Trust in churches and village halls, was attracting increasing interest in the press (Martin, 2023; Weale, 2023; Walker, 2023). However, while issues of how to fund early years (the so-called 15/30 'free hours' policy) were under discussion at the time of the research, there was little from policy makers in relation to how early years settings should support families through the cost-of-living crisis. Thus we also saw this research as shining a light on the extensive work done by early years settings in alleviating child poverty, as an under-researched area.

A note on terminology

For ease of reading, we use the term 'food bank' here to encapsulate the free or reduced-cost provision of food, clothing, toiletries and other household items. This includes systems such as food pantries, where membership is paid to then access food at a reduced price. This provision is distinct from free breakfasts at nurseries, which also feature in our discussion but are not our main focus.

Research Questions

The aim of the study was to add to the growing research base on food banks in education settings by exploring how they operate in early years settings, their impact and the advantages and disadvantages for the setting, using small scale case studies of settings with a food bank in operation.

Our research questions were:

1. How do food banks in early years settings operate?
2. What is the impact on children, as perceived by educators?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages for the setting?

This report begins with a brief review of the existing literature on hunger, family stress, impacts on early childhood development and learning, and some background on the use of food banks.

Literature Review

Our review of the existing research has focused on the key themes of: impact of food insecurity on children; the impact of hunger on learning; and, food banks and stigma.

Research on impact of food insecurity on children

Living with food insecurity has been shown to have a physical impact on children and adults, including poorer levels of nutrition (Bruening et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2019b), and reduced physical activity (Bruening et al., 2018; Gulliford et al., 2006; Fram et al, 2015), which may lead to increased levels of obesity (Food Foundation, 2019; Metallinos-Katsaras et al., 2009). There is also evidence that not getting crucial nutrients such as iron and iodine can result in reduced cognitive functioning (United Nations World Food Programme, 2006), and that there is a link with poorer health outcomes, including asthma, high cholesterol, diabetes and anaemia (eg Nagata et al., 2019; Pai & Bahadur, 2020).

In terms of the impact on mental wellbeing and family functioning, this is also well established (Brown et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2022; Ward & Lee, 2020). There are links between food insecurity and depression, stress (Pourmotabbed et al., 2020) anxiety, and sleep disorders (Arenas et al., 2019). Parents report feeling guilt and shame surrounding being unable to feed their child(ren), stress from constant worry and financial juggling, frustration at the lack of options available when purchasing food, stigma from using food banks and other such resources, and sadness at their overall situation (Leung et al, 2022). Some in this study reported sleeping to excess or misusing alcohol to help them cope with and escape from the constant stress. Parents also report being concerned about the quality of food they can provide, with further feelings of shame and guilt (Lindow et al, 2022).

Parents' own health is affected by food insecurity as they reduce their consumption to allow their children to eat (O'Connell et al, 2019a; 2021). This means that typically, only the more extreme food insecurity results in children missing meals as parents compensate. Parents in families in which children are forced to miss meals are more likely to encounter more severe depression (Becker et al., 2019; King, 2018), and clearly there is increased stress, even

when children may not present as hungry at school or nursery. Poorer mental health among parents is associated with poorer family relationships, harsher punishments and less responsiveness (Brown et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2022; Ward & Lee, 2020); thus food insecurity can have multiple impacts on the family and therefore on children.

Children experiencing food insecurity are more likely to suffer from anxiety (McLaughlin et al, 2012; Weinreb et al, 2002) and mood disorders including depression (McLaughlin et al, 2012); even though they are less likely to miss meals than their parents. Instead, the link between living with food insecurity and mood disorders may be that stress, anxiety and depression from parents 'trickles down' to children (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2003), with negative parent-child interactions that promote anxiety and low mood amongst children more likely due to parent stress, and parental depression resulting in less warm and nurturing parenting (Zaslow et al, 2009).

Research on children, hunger, learning and development

International research on hunger and learning focuses on long-term malnutrition and, in the short term, how the arousal state of hunger impedes attention and concentration. A report from the United Nations World Food Programme (2006) makes this distinction between the impact of hunger upon a child's future capacity to learn as determined by brain development, and their ability to access current learning due to poor concentration and attention. The same report details how children in the early years (and infants in particular) are disproportionately affected by poor nutrition due to the rapid development of the brain during this period.

Links between nutrition and overall health are well established (Bellisle, 2004), including the impact of a lack of food resulting in malnutrition on children's cognition. Young children who are inadequately nourished are also prone to a weakened immune system making them more susceptible to short term illnesses caused by viruses and bacteria (Smith, 2020). Such illnesses affecting the respiratory and immune systems have been found to resolve when children have sufficient food intake, although the cognitive effects discussed below do not (Shields et al, 2012). Research suggests low iron levels resulting in anaemia lead to impaired cognition functioning (Taras, 2005), and children with stunted growth due to inadequate nutrition performed poorly on cognitive tests regardless of how recently they had consumed food (López et al, 1993). Studies suggest short-term hunger has little effect on cognitive processes: there was no effect on cognitive functions amongst young children who omitted breakfast but typically ate a balanced and

sufficient diet (Kral et al, 2012). It is the long-term lack of food or poor nutrition that is more significant in terms of cognitive effects.

This is not to say, however, that being hungry does not affect learning and development. Qualitative studies suggest impacts including tiredness and an inability to concentrate for children experiencing hunger. In their qualitative study, O'Connell et al (2019a) found children needed to rest their heads on their school desk as they were so tired from hunger. Wider survey-based research has also found that teachers see an impact: 60% of teachers surveyed by NASUWT (2022) said that they had seen an increase in the number of children arriving at school hungry, with almost 70% claiming that more pupils were lacking in energy and/or concentration as a result of this. Another survey of over 500 schoolteachers found that 88% of teachers who saw children coming to school hungry stated they were fatigued and 84% said they were easily distracted (Chefs in Schools, 2022). Finally, a larger survey of almost 18,000 teachers conducted by the NEU found that 87% of teachers had seen children too tired to learn or unable to concentrate due to hunger (NEU, 2023).

While the impact on younger children is less well established, the evidence would suggest that they too are affected by food insecurity both directly and indirectly, and potentially in both the long- and short-term. Hunger and malnutrition, and the regular minor illnesses they cause, may impede young children's interactions with their environment, preventing them from participating in play (Uniter Nations World Food Programme, 2006). Given the importance of play and investigating the world around them to young children's learning and development, this has long term impacts upon their future learning and development. Smith (2020) notes that malnutrition in young children can lead to developmental delays, particularly in communication, plus behavioural and emotional issues, including poor concentration.

Research on food banks in England

The literature on food banks in education in England is limited, with Will Baker's and colleagues' work the main source of empirical studies (Baker and Bakopoulou, 2022; Baker, 2022; (Baker, 2023). Baker's work, using interviews with staff running food banks in schools and early years settings, and with families, provides some key information on how what he terms 'food charity' operates. His analysis of the underlying causes focuses on the cost-of-living crisis and a retreating welfare state in England, in a context where charitable food aid is an increasingly socially acceptable response to poverty. Baker argues that education settings are having to take responsibility for ensuring

children's basic needs are met. This research includes children's centres' contributions to their communities during the Covid crisis (Baker and Bakopoulou, 2022). Beyond this work, the literature mainly focuses on food provision for students in schools (e.g. Cohen et al, 2021; Lalli, 2021), rather than on wider families or in early years settings. This is the first report specifically focused on food banks in early years, to our knowledge.

As we noted in our report on food banks in schools, the wider literature on food banks is a useful source for understanding the issues in this project, as food banks have been established for over a decade in England. A key point to note from this literature is the focus of research on impacts in social as well as health terms (O'Connell et al, 2019a; Knight et al, 2018). Not having enough food is potentially damaging not only to your physical health, this work argues, but also has an impact on your social life, wellbeing and mental health. Food poverty is clearly linked to poverty in general, but the specifics of food insecurity as defined thus:

Whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain (Anderson, 1990 p1560, cited in Lambie-Mumford, 2017, p17).

Understanding this importance of 'social acceptability' is important in understanding the complexity of food insecurity for families. Ethnographic work on standard food banks and their users (Garthwaite, 2016) emphasises the significance of stigma in preventing and discouraging people from using foodbanks, even when in need. Although families increasingly have to resort to food banks (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2018), visits to them can be a 'deeply stigmatising experiences that already have harmful effects on self-esteem' (Pybus et al, 2021 p23). This means that many food insecure families do not use one, reflecting international findings that families only use food banks in the most extreme circumstances (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; 2015). Understanding stigma and how it relates to access are important in our discussion of how nurseries can offer a different way of accessing free food, with less stigma and easy access.

The research study

Case study settings

The research was designed to gather rich data about the real experiences of those working in early years settings with food banks, through interviews with staff at a small number of case study settings. The sample was opportunistic, as access was gained through the researchers' networks of contacts, through social media appeals for participants, and through the UCL website. The aim was to include a balance of different types of early years settings and have some geographical variation, and so settings were selected on this basis. The final sample included different types of setting, and through the majority were in London due to the location of our contacts, we did include two settings in the Midlands and the North of England. As well as conducting the interviews, we visited each setting to gain a sense of the local area and buildings and wrote fieldnotes on our observations of the research site. The six settings are detailed below.

Table 1: Early Years Settings

Setting	Description
1	Nursery School in inner London
2	Nursery School in city in the Midlands
3	Pre-school in a village in North of England
4	Pre-school run by social enterprise chain in inner London
5	Children's Centre in inner London
6	Nursery run by social enterprise in South London

Interviews

There were 14 participants across the 6 settings. In each setting we attempted to interview a headteacher, manager or setting leader, plus staff involved in the foodbank and practitioners. In some cases this was more appropriate or feasible than others, depending on the set up of the early years setting. In all cases we were able to interview someone in a leadership position, except at EYS5 where the Children's Centre staff were not available, and we were limited to speaking to those who run the food bank, who come from an external organisation. Interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes, and were conducted at the settings.

Table 2: Participants

Setting	Role	Pseudonym
EYS1 (Nursery School)	Headteacher	Abigail
	Admin Officer	Audrey
	Cook	Amelia
EYS2 (Nursery School)	Headteacher	Naomi
	Early years practitioner in 3- and 4-year-olds' room	Natalie
	Early years practitioner in 2- and 3-year-olds' room	Nicola
EYS3 (Day nursery)	Manager	Helen
EYS4 (Pre-school)	Manager	Bethany
	Practitioner	Brenda
EYS5 (Children's Centre)	Food pantry manager	Stephanie
	Food pantry volunteer	Stella
EYS6 (Day nursery)	Nursery manager	Gita
	Nursery practitioner	Gabrielle
	Chef	Greg

Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed professionally and pseudonymised. We analysed the data thematically, based on themes drawn from the research questions and additional ideas arising from the literature review. This included adding new themes such as the importance of space and the use of food in the curriculum, as the analysis progressed. Analysis was undertaken individually and then as a team, to allow for a range of viewpoints and alternative perspectives. Eventual findings were agreed by both authors following in-depth discussion of the data.

Ethical issues

The project was approved by the UCL Institute of Education ethical review system, and adhered to the BERA ethical guidelines. Names of settings and participants have been changed, and any details have been adjusted to ensure that they cannot be identified. Given the sensitivity of the topic of family food poverty, particular care was taken to ensure total anonymity of families who use the food bank. Data are stored safely using the university network and the project adheres to GDPR regulations. After the interviews, each setting was given a £100 donation to their food bank or associated charity, as a thank you. This was only communicated after the interviews, so it was not an incentive.

Findings

Findings 1: How do food banks in early years operate?

We found a variety of practices at the early years settings, which of course varied in how they operated, facilities and staffing themselves. The model in operation at one of the nursery schools (EYS1), the pre-schools (EYS3 and EYS4) and the nursery (EYS6) was similar: food was delivered from a partner organisation, usually a food waste distribution service, on a weekly basis and made available for parents in an informal way. This meant having a room or a cupboard where parents could drop in as they picked up their children. At EYS2, they made up food parcels for families who were struggling, as well as giving them food bank vouchers, so that families had immediate access to food. In these cases, parents could usually pick what food they wanted and how much, in contrast to the limitations associated with traditional foodbanks (Lambie-Mumford, 2017). There were no vouchers to hand in, or often any staff to interact with, if they did not want to. Interviewees explained:

So we now have the food bank that you saw on the way in. So we have it at the entrance because some people, they like to use it in private. So we know that some families access that, but they wouldn't do it if they had to come in and ask. So we try to make sure it's stocked with the basics. (Bethany, EYS4)

When we moved it from where it was [in the corridor] into like a more enclosed space, I'm hoping that, you know, that they don't feel – like it's in a room where they can relax and things (Gita, EYS6)

One case study that differed distinctly was at EYS5, a Children's Centre, where a partner organisation ran a food pantry on the site once a week. They also ran food pantries at other children's centres in the borough. The food pantry was open to parents and pregnant women, who could choose to pay £2.50 for five portions of fruit and vegetables and then five other food items, or £5.00 for 10 portions of fruit and vegetables and 10 other food items, of their choice. The food was partly from food sharing organisations, and partly bought by the organisation to support the families, with funding coming from the local authority and from the money earned at the food pantry. Some staff at the pantry were volunteers, including one of our interviewees.

As well as food, the settings also offered other products, such as toiletries, sanitaryware, shoes and clothing, sometimes in partnership with other organisations:

we're going to have a slot, I don't know, like a Tuesday between 2 and 3pm - families can come and have a little rummage [among the clothes]." (Abigail, EYS1).

One of my team noticed that this little one had like clothes that were too small for him and so we gave him quite a large bagful of clothes and she was really grateful for her kid. But we can do different things and it's not just the food. You know, there's a, one of our nursery pantries that does shoes, kind of like, yeah, they take in shoes and the parents will take them if they need them. (Gita, EYS6)

another agency that helps us is Bloody Good Period and they send so much sanitary wear and products for us to put out, because again, if they're not paying for that, maybe they can use that money for food or something else. (Bethany, EYS4)

In many cases, staff were seeking to expand their provision to other services, to improve what they offered (for example, by providing recipe information alongside the food) or to make parents feel more comfortable by easing access.

Findings 2: What is the impact on children and their families?

In the interviews participants spoke in detail about the impact on children of the food bank, and relatedly, on their families. In terms of learning and participation in educational activities, participants emphasised how making sure children were well-fed was one of their 'basic needs':

We expect the children to be coming in and doing all these different things and I just think there's no point in any of it if they're not having their basic needs met first. (Bethany, EYS4)

It's one of their basic needs to have food, so if we can provide that or if we can help contribute towards providing that in their home environment, it all makes such a big impact on them because they will feel, their basic needs will be met, but they will also feel excited, they will feel happy. They'll feel ready to learn, you know, and they need food, they need all of that nutrition to help them function and to help

their brain make those connections that they need, especially at this age, because in the first five years of their life, that's when all of the connections in their brains are happening. So it does affect their wellbeing and it's so important for them. (Gabrielle, EYS6)

This language of basic needs draws on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a theory commonly taught in education courses, which states how children cannot learn if they are cold, scared or hungry; once, these needs are met, they can address other needs, such as learning. Other participants spoke about allowing children to focus and concentrate, without the distraction of hunger.

There were also noted physical affects, including increasing children's energy, and impact on behaviour:

You can often tell that the families where they are really struggling food-wise – the children can be quite thin and – so it's definitely – with the food that they get here, they would have plenty of energy to be running around in the playground. We don't seem to have any children who can't engage in all the nursery activities. So I'm sure that the provision of food contributes to that. (Naomi, EYS2)

Sometimes you can see that they come in and they are hungry. If they are hungry, it really affects their behaviour... They are aggressive. They don't do good listening. They are so frustrated. They fight among themselves. You know, there's little, little squabbles between the children. They will grab a toy from you, because they are so frustrated, but once they have been fed and they are really OK, it reflects on their behaviour. They are really calm. (Brenda, EYS4)

While some of these conversations brought together the impact of the food bank with the impact of free breakfasts at nursery, it was clear that participants saw a link between children's hunger levels and their engagement and behaviour.

In some cases, participants noted the impact of improved quality of food and better nutrition due to the food bank, and the food provided at the nursery:

*I would hope that they, you know, are getting more nutritious meals cooked at home and there's more food available for them (Gita, EYS6)
I think knowing what they eat here is going to be really good for them is a really important factor of their nursery day. (Abigail, EYS1)*

A lot of the staff have mentioned before when they're eating proper food they notice a difference in the children. They're more energetic. (Helen, EYS3)

All of these positives were complemented by the participants' enthusiasm for teaching children *about* food as part of the EYFS curriculum. This included understanding healthy eating, building social skills around food, and encouraging enjoyment of food:

I think to develop a healthy relationship with food, you have to do it early on, to be familiar with vegetables and how they taste and acclimatised to them so that you're not reliant on a microwave meal that's just full of salt and sugar to give you that kind of hit. You've got to start it young otherwise you set yourself up for trouble later on down the line. (Greg, EYS6)

...it is a lot, a lot of independence that we are teaching them. We get a lot of language as well, when they're eating. And it's also those social skills of sitting down together, and the conversations, the backwards and forwards. It's holding those. So mealtimes is a massive, massive impact on learning which we get from them. (Natalie, EYS2)

Also trying to help them have the joy of food, so it's not just about a functional thing but really enjoy the process of having a meal and that kind of thing I think is really positive. (Abigail, EYS1)

This finding is distinct from our work in schools, because early years have a curriculum which involves building social skills, physical skills such as using a knife and fork, and personal skills. Talking about food and eating together are therefore not an adjunct to the learning, but part of the learning that takes place in early years. Participants saw the food bank as part of an overall commitment to developing a healthy relationship with food.

Relatedly, there was a concern to reduce the stress of food insecurity for children who were becoming aware of their lack of food at home:

I think that it's another stress, isn't it, for them [parents]. Another stress for the family, like you say, food insecurity, not to know what they're going to have for dinner or have they got enough left. [...] That's always going to impact the children in one way or another, isn't it? If you've got a stressful home situation, it's always going to impact the child somehow. Even with the best will in the world, it still will. So some of the children here, especially the older children, are quite aware of their home situation. Even at age four, will come and say when they

have breakfast, "I wanted breakfast this morning, but we don't have any food because we don't have any money to get cereal," and things like that. Or they'll come in, maybe things that the parents wouldn't ask for, the children will come in and say, "Can I have some of that for at home, for my house?" and things like that. So it definitely does, because it's things that a four-year-old shouldn't be worrying about. So it definitely does impact the children as well. We definitely do see that. (Bethany, EYS4)

As Bethany suggested, the impact on children and their families cannot really be separated; reducing stress for parents means a happier home life and less worry for the children. The staff were really aware of how much stress parents were under:

Sometimes even just getting them out the door to go home, the fact they have something, they have an option there. But also, you know, a lot of them are probably thinking "What do I cook today?" Or "What can I provide, what is something quick that won't take a lot of hassle?" And they have that option there by using it. (Gabrielle, EYS6)

Just by some of the reaction that you get from parents when you give them stuff, and it's – you can almost see parents just going – almost taking a [breath] – you know, their shoulders go down, they can – "Oh right, I can make a meal tonight." Because at the end of the day, our parents are good parents. They want to – they do prioritise their children. If they are struggling for food, the children will eat and they won't. So that actually – that's not great for the parents' wellbeing. And if the parents' wellbeing isn't good, it does have an effect on the children. The children sense the atmosphere and the strain. (Naomi, EYS2)

As well as the relief of not worrying, and being able to eat themselves, participants also talked about how the food bank impacts families by reducing their overall spending, so that money could be spent on other essentials:

every single little bit nowadays helps, it might only be a pound or whatever but that pound can go to something else. (Audrey, EYS1) because they'd got that food bank to see them through the Christmas break, that they could pay their electricity bill that month. (Bethany, EYS4)

[it] frees up a little bit of money then for them to be able to put the heating on in their homes. And that's a big issue for a lot of people, even working people really. And it's just freeing up them little bits of money as and when you can, isn't it, really? (Nicola, EYS2)

Thus we can see the food bank as having multiple impacts on children and their families which are often interlinked: free food meant reduced stress, easier home lives, more engagement, and better physical health.

Findings 3: Advantages – location and relationships

Participants outlined a number of advantages of having a food bank at the setting, in addition to the positive impact on children outlined above. The location of the food bank, first of all, was seen as advantageous for parents who would be attending the setting anyway to pick up and drop off their children:

So it's nice that we can have it here and it's something that will help them [parents] out with helping their day run smoothly and hope it's helping the child's day run smoothly as well. So I think that's what is very good about having it in the nursery because they can come and go as they please and pick something up on the way, it's not a hassle or an extra thing to do. (Gabrielle, EYS6)

But I think the thing that makes it work is that they're coming to the building, so it basically is a food bank but it's not portrayed in that way, and they don't see it that way (Abigail, EYS1)

They really feel very comfortable [here] because sometimes you don't even have what you want. You know that there's another food bank somewhere, but just walking into the place, just going to collect the food, sometimes some of them feel a bit embarrassed or they feel a bit shy. But all I care, you are bringing your child anyway. So you drop your child, you pick it up. Nobody even sees it. (Brenda, EYS4)

As Abigail and Brenda suggest, the setting is convenient - parents are already there so they do not need to do an extra journey to a food bank and pay travel costs – but also lacks the stigma associated with food banks in the community. This reduction in the stigma associated with food insecurity was widely cited by participants as an advantage for the parents; Naomi explained:

... some of our families are very – they don't want to do that, because they don't want to be seen that they're having to use a food bank. So they have to be desperate to ask us about food, the food needs. And then us having food on-site means if we even get a sense of, like, they're struggling, we literally put food in a bag and say, "Look, take that home." They don't have to make a big thing of it. They don't have

to ask in front of a load of people. They don't have to go and queue outside the food bank. I think people in this area, they're very – it's quite a close-knit area and people know what other – each people are doing. And there is a massive stigma around not having enough food I think, yes. (Naomi, EYS2)

The absence of eligibility requirements or vouchers for the food banks also meant that a wider group of families were able to access the food banks, as and when they needed it. As Abigail noted at EYS1, '*I think anything that feels less like charity and more like a gift they seem more responsive to*'. Even so, at EYS3 Helen responded to a question about how many parents take tins of food home with '*a lot won't out of shame*'.

At the Children's Centre, the fact that the provision was a food pantry as opposed to a food bank was key to reducing the stigma for parents:

We also try and avoid any kind of terminology and language that implies that our service is for people that are in need because we don't want people to – something that we're really proud of about our food pantries is that we're actually not a food bank. I think there's a fair amount of stigma attached with attending a food bank, and we like to give our families the dignity in attending a food pantry. They're paying for their attendance. We pride ourselves in being able to give people the choice and selection and, yes, try and just remove, yes, I think the stigma that has come with accessing some food provisions. (Stephanie, EYS5)

More widely, the location and informality of food provision at the early years settings were described as key to their impact on children and families. In terms of advantages for the setting staff, the key benefit beyond those listed above was improved relationships with parents. Conversations about accessing the food bank gave the staff a better understanding of the child and their home context, and also opened the doors to wider conversations with parents:

I think in some cases, it has definitely helped [relationships] in that they, one, I think open up to you a little bit more. It helps us as a nursery to know about the family situation which then that conversation leads onto other things, which are obviously important for us to know about the children and the background. Also, we then have parents who once you get over that hurdle of them being open about that and speaking about that, then they'll speak to you about other things that they need help with as well, that maybe they wouldn't have felt like they could before. (Bethany, EYS4)

I think the parents trust us more, and have a better relationship with us. Obviously, that in turn helps the children with their bonds with us, and they get to know us better when they're here with us. (Helen, EYS3)

I think once they do open up to us, then they're not embarrassed. And it does make it [the relationship] a lot stronger because they feel that they can come and speak to us about anything. (Natalie, EYS2)

This development of closer and more communicative relationships with parents led to better provision for the children, staff commented, and in turn to better provision for families in need. It was noted, for example, that some families in temporary accommodation were not able to cook food that was provided. This greater knowledge of the families also allowed the staff to signpost parents to additional services:

I'm probably the first person that they will speak to and then usually if it's something I can signpost them to, like, because we work with the children's centres and stuff like that if it's something we can't help them with we will signpost them (Audrey, EYS1)

When they don't know anything, I can explain them. I can help them to have that, have registration for something or I can indicate to them for someone if they need an appointment or interpret or children, helping for speech and language. (Stella, EYS5)

Thus there were clear advantages for the setting of operating a food bank, well beyond the clear impact on children's health and wellbeing. However, as the next section examines, there were also additional burdens associated with the food provision.

Findings 4: Disadvantages – the burden on early years settings

A major disadvantage for the settings was the increased costs associated with operating a food bank; these included paying for the food itself, equipment to store food safely, and containers for provided meals, and increased energy costs. For early years settings which were not state-owned such as EYS5, this affected their viability as a business. In other settings, grants and funding were used but there was uncertainty over their sustainability:

As much as we really want to do it with the way things are at the moment we're really having to watch what we're spending. We want to help the families but yet, you know, we don't want to do ourselves out of business. (Helen, EYS5)

that was one of my biggest worries, like what we do if, once that money runs out and, you know, you don't necessarily have the funds to be able to continue to provide that. And that's really sad because like if I want to add additional things, they have to be like, not a lot at once because I wouldn't be able to sustain it, which is not really what I want to do, yeah, because you want to give as much as you can but if it's not sustainable, it will just fizzle out in six to nine months which is not what I want. (Gita, EYS6)

Funding, and sustainable regular funding in particular, were seen as essential in allowing the settings to continue to provide for families; otherwise, there were risks to the setting's budget overall or other aspects of provision needed to be cut. This was the case even in settings which used food waste organisations.

There was also an impact on time and workloads, though few settings wanted to emphasise these given the positives of the food bank. As Audrey at EYS1 commented, 'it's just extra stuff, we just do it, we just crack on with it'. The tasks involved ranged from organising the delivery of food and moving it the right places, sorting it into what was useful in the kitchen and what could be handed out, and findings what was healthy and didn't contain nuts (due to children's allergies), to applying for grants and locating additional sources of support. Where the settings organised clothing as well, they had to gather additional information on what families needed and find new sources of donations.

It can take a lot of time, especially when need changes. So whereas we were doing the food bank and that was sorted as such, we do the weekly shop in order for the things that we need, and then we realised that actually, we need shoes. The children need shoes as well, coats. So it's when you identify a new area of need that it then takes longer, again, more time, but we are lucky, like I say, to have [name of partnership manager] because she does a lot of the running around, trying to find everyone. (Bethany, EYS4)

Unlike in the schools in our previous project, the food banks in early years were rarely the responsibility of one person: multiple staff were involved including the kitchen staff, perhaps due to the wider flexibility of the staff in the setting (contrasting with set hours where teachers have to be in the classroom). Nonetheless, there were impacts in terms of time and workloads which were seen as a disadvantage, albeit one that could be managed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This project has shone a light on the work undertaken in early years settings to address the impact of food insecurity among families with young children. The operation of food banks in nurseries, children's centres and pre-schools is seen in these case studies to have an impact on children's engagement with their learning, motivation and physical health (check), and an impact on families more widely, reducing levels of stress and allowing limited funds to be spent on other essentials such as heating. The food banks encompass a range of provision, well beyond food, that allow families to provide for their children more effectively and encourage a closer and more communicative relationship between the families and the setting staff. Their location at an early years setting means that they are convenient for parents, and there is less stigma associated with using a food bank there. As stigma is seen as a major barrier in accessing free food, it is therefore likely that food banks in early years settings increase take up of this essential service overall. There are costs both in terms of time and money for the settings, but they are counter-balanced by the positive impact of the food banks; no one wanted to stop the provision and instead many were planning to expand it.

There are wider debates relating to child poverty and the role of education settings in addressing the impact of a reduced welfare state, which we do not delve into here. Our focus in this report is on the impact of food banks on families and children, which we conclude is hugely positive, in multiple ways. This leads us to the following recommendations:

1. Early years settings' work in reducing food poverty should be recognised, for example in Ofsted reports, as a key part of how they support children and their families.
2. Funding for food banks in early years should be considered as a strategy for reducing the impact of child poverty, given the convenience and accessibility of food banks in early years settings, and the reduced stigma of using these.
3. Early years settings should be encouraged, where appropriate, and enabled to develop, continue and expand their provision of food and other goods to families in need, by those in leadership positions within local authorities, private nursery chains, and social enterprises.

References

- Baker, W. (2022). *Food banks in schools and the 'cost of living' crisis*. BERA. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/food-banks-in-schools-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis>
- Baker, W. (2023). Schools and food charity in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 49(6), 1387-1402.
- Baker, W., & Bakopoulou, I. (2023). Children's centres, families and food insecurity in times of crisis. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 31(1), 27-44.
- Becker, C. B., Middlemass, K. M., Gomez, F., & Martinez-Abrego, A. (2019). Eating disorder pathology among individuals living with food insecurity: A replication study. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 7, 1144–1158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702619851811>
- Bellisle, F. (2004). Effects of diet on behaviour and cognition in children. *British Journal of Nutrition*, 92(S2), S227–S232. <https://doi.org/10.1079/BJN20041171>
- Bradbury, A., & Vince, S. (2023). *Food Banks in Schools: Educational Responses to the Cost-of-living Crisis*. from <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10174817>
- Brown, S. M., Doom, J. R., Lechuga-Peña, S., Watamura, S. E., & Koppels, T. (2020). Stress and parenting during the global COVID-19 pandemic. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 110, 1046-99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104699>
- Bruening, M., van Woerden, I., Todd, M., & Laska, M. N. (2018). Hungry to learn: The prevalence and effects of food insecurity on health behaviors and outcomes over time among a diverse sample of university freshmen. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 15(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-018-0647-7>
- Cattoretti, G. & Paull, G. (2022). *Providers' finances: Evidence from the Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers 2021*. Department for Education. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1071812/Frontier - SCEYP 2021 Finance Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1071812/Frontier_-_SCEYP_2021_Finance_Report.pdf)
- Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). (2023). *Child poverty facts and figures*. Available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>
- Children's Commissioner (2021). *The Big Answer*. Available at <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/> Accessed 10 January 2024
- Chung, G., Lanier, P., & Wong, P. Y. J. (2022). Mediating Effects of Parental Stress on Harsh Parenting and Parent-Child Relationship during

- Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic in Singapore. *Journal of Family Violence*, 37(5), 801–812. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00200-1>
- Cohen, J.F.W., Hecht, A.A., McLoughlin, G.M., Turner, L. & Schwartz, M.B. (2021). Universal school meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, diet quality, food security, and body mass index: A systematic review. *Nutrients*, 13(3), 911.
- Dunifon, R., & Kowaleski-Jones, L. (2003). The Influences of Participation in the National School Lunch Program and Food Insecurity on Child Well-Being. *Social Service Review*, 77(1), 72–92. <https://doi.org/10.1086/345705>
- Food Foundation. (2019). *Children’s Future Food Inquiry*. The Food Foundation. <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/childrens-future-food-inquiry>
- Fram, M. S., Richie, L. D., Rosen, N., & Frongillo, E. A. (2015). Child experience of food insecurity is associated with child diet and physical activity. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 145(3), 499-504.
- Garthwaite, K. (2016). Stigma, shame and ‘people like us’: an ethnographic study of foodbank use in the UK. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 24(3), 277-289.
- Griffith, R., O’Connell, M., & Smith, K. (2016). Shopping Around: How Households Adjusted Food Spending Over the Great Recession. *Economica*, 83(330), 247–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecca.12166>
- Gulliford, M. C., Nunes, C., & Rocke, B. (2006). Food insecurity, weight control practices and body mass index in adolescents. *Public Health Nutrition*, 9(5), 570–574. <https://doi.org/10.1079/PHN2005886>
- Harari, D., Francis-Devine, B., Bolton, P., & Keep, M. (2023). Rising cost of living in the UK. House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9428/CBP-9428.pdf>
- Hoskins, K., Bradbury, A., & Fogarty, L. (2021). A frontline service? Nursery Schools as local community hubs in an era of austerity. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 19(3), 355-368.
- Irvine, S., Gorb, A., & Francis-Devine, B. (2022). Food banks in the UK. House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8585/CBP-8585.pdf>
- King, C. (2018). Food insecurity and child behavior problems in fragile families. *Economics & Human Biology*, 28, 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2017.11.002>
- Knight, A., O’Connell, R., & Brannen, J. (2018). Eating with friends, family or not at all: young people's experiences of food poverty in the UK. *Children & Society*, 32(3), 185-194.

- Kral, T. V. E., Heo, M., Whiteford, L. M., & Faith, M. S. (2012). Effects on cognitive performance of eating compared with omitting breakfast in elementary schoolchildren. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics: JDBP*, 33(1), 9–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0b013e31823f2f35>
- Lalli, G. (2021). *The free school meal voucher scheme & children's access to food during the Covid-19 crisis* (Education & Covid-19: BERA Small Grants Fund Research). BERA. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/the-free-school-meal-voucher-scheme-childrens-access-to-food-during-the-covid-19-crisis>
- Lambie-Mumford, H. (2017). *Hungry Britain: The rise of food charity*: Policy Press: Bristol.
- Lambie-Mumford, H., & Green, M. A. (2018). Austerity, welfare reform and the rising use of food banks by children in England and Wales. *Area*, 49(3), 273-279.
- Learner, S. (2020, February 10). *One in five nursery staff have set up a food bank to help struggling families*. Daynurseries.co.uk.
<https://www.daynurseries.co.uk/news/article.cfm/id/1621181/one-five-nursery-staff-food-bank-struggling-families>
- Leung, C. W., Laraia, B. A., Feiner, C., Solis, K., Stewart, A. L., Adler, N. E., & Epel, E. S. (2022). The Psychological Distress of Food Insecurity: A Qualitative Study of the Emotional Experiences of Parents and Their Coping Strategies. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 122(10), 1903-1910.e2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2022.05.010>
- Lindow, P., Yen, I. H., Xiao, M., & Leung, C. W. (2022). 'You run out of hope': An exploration of low-income parents' experiences with food insecurity using Photovoice. *Public Health Nutrition*, 25(4), 987–993.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021002743>
- Loopstra, R., & Tarasuk, V. (2012). The relationship between food banks and household food insecurity among low-income Toronto families. *Canadian Public Policy*, 38(4), 497-514.
- Loopstra, R., & Tarasuk, V. (2015). Food bank usage is a poor indicator of food insecurity: Insights from Canada. *Social Policy and Society*, 14(3), 443-455.
- López, I., de Andraca, I., Perales, C. G., Heresi, E., Castillo, M., & Colombo, M. (1993). Breakfast omission and cognitive performance of normal, wasted and stunted schoolchildren. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 47(8), 533–542.
- Lucas, M., Classick, R., Skipp, A. and Julius, J. (2023). *Cost of living crisis: Impact on schools*. Slough: NFER.
- Martin, M. (2023, August 9) 'Recognise schools are 'at frontline of poverty', Ofsted told', *Times Educational Supplement*.
<https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/primary/ofsted-inspections-schools-pupils-poverty> Accessed 10 January 2024

- McLaughlin, K. A., Green, J. G., Alegría, M., Jane Costello, E., Gruber, M. J., Sampson, N. A., & Kessler, R. C. (2012). Food insecurity and mental disorders in a national sample of U.S. adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 51(12), 1293–1303. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2012.09.009>
- Metallinos-Katsaras, E., Sherry, B., & Kallio, J. (2009). Food insecurity is associated with overweight in children younger than 5 years of age. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109(10), 1790–1794. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2009.07.007>
- Nagata, J. M., Palar, K., Gooding, H. C., Garber, A. K., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Weiser, S. D. (2019). Food Insecurity and Chronic Disease in US Young Adults: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 34(12), 2756–2762. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05317-8>
- NASUWT. (2022, October 3). *Cost of living crisis harming education*. <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/article-listing/cost-of-living-crisis-harming-education.html>
- NEU. (2023, April 4). *State of education: Child poverty*. NEU. <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/state-education-child-poverty-0>
- O'Connell, R., Knight, A., & Brannen, J. (2019a). *Living Hand to Mouth*. Child Poverty Action Group. <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/living-hand-mouth>
- O'Connell, R., C. Owen, M. Padley, A. Simon and J. Brannen (2019b). "Which Types of Family are at Risk of Food Poverty in the UK? A Relative Deprivation Approach." *Social Policy and Society* 18(1): 1-18.
- OBR (Office for Budget Responsibility) (2022). *The outlook for household income and consumption*. Available at: <https://obr.uk/box/the-outlook-for-household-income-and-consumption/> Accessed 10 January 2024
- Ofsted (2022) *The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22*, Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202122-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202122> Accessed 10 January 2024
- Pai, S., & Bahadur, K. (2020). The Impact of Food Insecurity on Child Health. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 67(2), 387–396. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcl.2019.12.004>
- Pourmotabbed, A., Moradi, S., Babaei, A., Ghavami, A., Mohammadi, H., Jalili, C., Symonds, M. E., & Miraghajani, M. (2020). Food insecurity and mental health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Public Health Nutrition*, 23(10), 1778–1790. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898001900435X>
- Pybus, K., Power, M., & Pickett, K. E. (2021). 'We are constantly overdrawn, despite not spending money on anything other than bills and food': a

- mixed-methods, participatory study of food and food insecurity in the context of income inequality. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 29(1), 21-45.
- Shields, B., Wacogne, I., & Wright, C. M. (2012). Weight faltering and failure to thrive in infancy and early childhood. *BMJ*, 345, e5931. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e5931>
- Smith, Z. (2020). Faltering Growth. In *Clinical Paediatric Dietetics* (5th ed., pp. 556–565). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Taras, H. (2005). Nutrition and Student Performance at School. *Journal of School Health*, 75(6), 199–213. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2005.tb06674.x>
- Trussell Trust (2023). *End of Year Stats*. Trussell Trust <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>
- United Nations World Food Programme (2006). *Hunger and Learning*. https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000118955/download/?_ga=2.90406426.1451247341.1681923175-1267229146.1681923175
- Walker, A. (2023). *How schools became the frontline against hunger*. Schoolsweek. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/how-schools-became-the-frontline-against-hunger/>
- Ward, K. P., & Lee, S. J. (2020). Mothers' and Fathers' Parenting Stress, Responsiveness, and Child Wellbeing Among Low-Income Families. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116, 105218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105218>
- Weale, S. (2023, August 31). One in four teachers gave food to hungry pupils in England last term, survey finds, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/31/teachers-gave-food-hungry-pupils-england-survey> Accessed 10 January 2024
- Weinreb, L., Wehler, C., Perloff, J., Scott, R., Hosmer, D., Sagor, L., & Gundersen, C. (2002). Hunger: Its Impact on Children's Health and Mental Health. *Pediatrics*, 110(4), e41. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.110.4.e41>
- Zaslow, M., Bronte-Tinkew, J., Capps, R., Horowitz, A., Moore, K. A., & Weinstein, D. (2009). Food security during infancy: Implications for attachment and mental proficiency in toddlerhood. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 13(1), 66–80. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-008-0329-1>

ucl.ac.uk