

Using Systems Thinking to Collaborate and Catalyse Community Action for Children's Nutrition

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Half of New Zealand's children do not meet the dietary recommendation of two serves of fruit and three serves of vegetables daily. Adherence is even lower among New Zealand's Pacific, Asian and low-income communities, and has decreased over the past five years. University of Auckland researchers collaborated with Healthy Families Waitakere to engage a West Auckland community to explore barriers to children's fruit and vegetable (F+V) intake and catalyse local action on this issue.

Workshops were held in an ethnically diverse, low-income West Auckland community on three consecutive Tuesdays in September/October 2018, facilitated by the researchers and local health promoters. Participants (n=17) included students, parents, teachers, community leaders and local food retailers. A series of structured activities using systems methods (including group model building) were employed to co-create a collective systems map. The map formed the basis of discussions between participants to identify and prioritise systemic interventions for change, considering the causal pathways, feedback and reinforcing loops within their community's food system.

The most commonly discussed barriers to children's F+V intake were the saturation of fast food outlets in their community, advertising of unhealthy food to children, the high cost of fresh produce, parents having little time for food preparation and declining cooking skills, and low energy levels. The group model building process was an effective way to foster discussion with participants about how to intervene at a systemic level to reduce inequities. Several ideas to improve children's F+V intake were identified and ranked by participants according to feasibility and impact.

Key take-home messages:

The group model building process successfully engaged members of a local community in West Auckland to describe their food system and look for points where possible interventions could be successful. Local community members had a wealth of ideas to support equitable F+V consumption in children, which can now be developed and promoted by local health promoters Healthy Families Waitakere.

Funding: Health Research Council Explorer Grant