Using behavioural insights to improve the healthiness of children’s packed lunches

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Background
Childhood obesity continues to rise in the UK from 9.3% in children aged 4-5 years to 19.8% by age 10-11. Only 1 in 100 school packed lunches meet national recommendations for school meals in England with 82% containing unhealthy snacks and 61% sugar sweetened drinks. Encouraging parents to identify healthier choices could reduce added sugar content and improve the healthiness of school lunches.

Methods
A cluster randomised controlled trial was implemented in 17 primary schools (8 intervention, 9 control) in England. The intervention comprised of 3 packs of materials delivered to parents who make children lunches (7-11 years). Materials were designed using behavioural-insights to raise awareness of added sugar and offer healthier options. The materials were delivered over a 4-week period in intervention schools. Photographs of the contents of the packed lunches were taken at 3 time points; 1719 pre-intervention, 1745 post-intervention & 1725 at 3 month follow-up. Visible items in each photograph were coded for nutritional content. A parental survey was conducted at post follow up to explore parental knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about healthier packed lunches.

Results
The coding and analysis is underway and findings will be presented in November. Presented data will describe group differences pre-intervention, post-intervention and follow up from the >5000 lunch boxes for 1) the number lunch boxes that contain surgery food; 2) the average number of sugary food items; 3) the average grams of sugar in lunch boxes; and 4) the proportion of lunch boxes that contain fruit or vegetables.

Conclusions
This study was funded by Public Health England to explore whether low cost, low intensive interventions can have a significant impact on changing health behaviours. There is a lack of evidence on improving the nutritional quality of packed lunches and if improvements are identified there are potential implications for child health, nutrition and obesity rates.

Key messages:
- The study aims to ascertain the effectiveness of a behavioural-insight informed intervention in changing the healthiness of packed lunches provided by parents of primary school aged children.
- This low cost, low intensity intervention has the potential to improve the healthiness of primary school age children’s diets.