

## **The Food Dude Healthy Eating Programme**

Since 1992, the Bangor Food and Activity Research Unit (BFARU), under the direction of Professor Fergus Lowe and Dr Pauline Horne, has pursued extensive research to identify the key psychological factors influencing children's food choices. On the basis of that knowledge, an intervention has been devised that enables children to enjoy eating healthy diets, rich in fruit and vegetables—the Food Dude Programme.

The programme incorporates two key elements — peer-modelling and rewards. For 16 days, 15-20 minutes daily, the children watch a series of fun video episodes featuring the Food Dudes — a group of positive role model kids who gain superpowers when they eat fruit and vegetables that help them in their battle with General Junk and the Junk Punks who are taking away the energy of the world by depriving it of healthy food. The children then have the opportunity to taste fruit and vegetables themselves. If they succeed in consuming these foods then stickers and a variety of Food Dude prizes are given as rewards. There is also a home pack which establishes the programme's effects in the home environment and helps recruit the strong support of parents.

By encouraging children to taste fruit and vegetables repeatedly, the programme helps them to discover the intrinsically rewarding properties of these foods and develop a liking for them. In the process, the children come to pride themselves as being fruit and vegetable eaters in a school culture that has now become strongly supportive of the eating of fruit and vegetables. This combination of biological and psychological factors maintains the children's change of eating behaviour over time.

Early studies involving children aged from 2 to 7 years-old, in homes, schools and nurseries, confirmed that use of these principles brings about major and long lasting increases in children's consumption of fruit and vegetables. The programme was then developed as a stand-alone package that could be administered by primary schools themselves across the full age range of pupils (i.e., 4-11-year-olds), and it was tested in schools in England, Wales and Ireland. These trials showed increases in consumption of fruit and vegetables that generally ranged from 100-200% on average across all children, to several hundred percent for children who initially ate very little fruit and vegetables (the “poorest eaters”). The effects are long-lasting and evident in evaluations conducted up to 18 months after the initial intervention. The programme impacts upon consumption and liking of fruit and vegetables across the board – at school and at home.

The most extensive roll-out of the programme to date has been conducted by the Irish Government. With support from the EU and Industry, in 2005 they launched a pilot scheme in 150 primary schools across Ireland, which was independently evaluated by academics at University College, Dublin. The scheme proved so successful (with children, parents and teachers) that the Government has now announced that it is to be made available as a national scheme to all primary schools in Ireland. The success of the programme was also recently recognized by an Award for Combating Obesity given by the World Health Organisation.

There are now growing indications that other countries also would like to introduce the Food Dudes Programme to help combat childhood obesity and other health disorders.