

# **HAF (HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES & FOOD)**

## **PROGRAMME IN MEDWAY:**

### **AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

**CHILDREN, CARERS, PROVIDERS, AND COMMUNITY**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This impact assessment evaluates the Holiday, Activities & Food (HAF) Programme in Medway, analysing its influence on children, parents/carers, providers, and the broader community. Conducted between 2021 and 2024 by the Brighton and Sussex Medical School (Public Health team) along with Medway Council Public Health Directorate, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating structured interviews, surveys, and focus groups with children, parents, stakeholders, and programme providers. The assessment aims to determine the extent to which HAF has contributed to improving children's health and wellbeing, supporting families, enhancing provider capacity, and fostering community resilience.

## Key Findings

### Children's Outcomes

#### Nutritional and Health Benefits

- Access to Nutritious Meals: 17.44% of children reported experiencing hunger at home but felt adequately fed at HAF sessions.
- Mitigating Hunger: HAF provided a critical source of nutrition, particularly for children who lacked consistent access to food outside school terms.
- Children reported eating at home mostly sandwiches and supermarket ready-made foods, making HAF more impactful on their nutrition.
- New Experiences with Food: 35% of parents reported that their child tried new foods because of HAF, increasing dietary variety and reducing food aversion.



## **Physical Activity and Wellbeing**

- Encouraging Active Lifestyles: 56% of children were more physically active at HAF than at home, where screen time dominated.
- Parental Awareness of Physical Health: 50% of parents stated their children were significantly more engaged in active play at HAF than at home.

## **Mental Wellbeing and Confidence**

- Increased Confidence and Independence: 28% of parents noticed smoother school transitions after HAF.
- Sense of Structure and Routine: Particularly valued by parents of SEN children, HAF helped maintain a structured environment during holidays.
- Formation of Happy Core Memories: Parents and children described HAF as providing experiences they would not otherwise have access to.

## **Social and Developmental Benefits**

- Building Social Skills: HAF provided opportunities for children to develop friendships, interact with peers, and gain confidence.
- Stronger Relationships with Adults: Children gained confidence in communicating with programme leaders and staff.
- Encouraging Independence and Self-Reliance: HAF contributed to skill-building, including teamwork and problem-solving.
- Preventing Developmental Regression: Parents of younger and SEN children reported that HAF helped maintain learning and social skills over long holidays.



## Parents' and Carers' Outcomes

### Financial Relief and Support

- Parents saved on at least 16 meals per child during summer holidays, reducing food costs.
- Many working parents avoided expensive childcare expenses due to HAF.

### Mental Wellbeing and Home Life

- 27.43% of parents experienced increased free time, reducing stress.
- HAF provided parents with respite, improving overall family dynamics and mental wellbeing.

### Community and Trust

- Parents formed stronger relationships with providers and other parents.
- Parents of SEN children particularly benefited from new community connections and shared experiences.

## Providers and Community Impact

### Employment and Workforce Development

- HAF created job opportunities, particularly for seasonal and part-time workers.
- Providers benefited from training and career progression opportunities.

### Strengthening Community Connections

- Providers formed stronger relationships with families and local authorities.
- HAF contributed to providers' recognition and trust within the community.



# INTRODUCTION

## Childhood Poverty in the United Kingdom

Child poverty remains a significant issue in the UK, with recent data painting a concerning picture. As of 2022/23, approximately 4.3 million children (30% of all UK children) were living in relative poverty after housing costs [1]. This marks an increase from 3.6 million in 2010/11, indicating a worsening trend over the past decade [2].

The situation is particularly dire for certain demographic groups [2]:

- Larger families face higher poverty rates, with 42% of children in families with three or more children experiencing poverty.
- 45% of all children in poverty were in families with a youngest child aged under five.
- 71% of children living in poverty lived in working families.
- 44% of children in lone-parent families were in poverty.
- 36% of children living in families where someone has a disability were in poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic challenges have exacerbated the situation. High inflation and socioeconomic pressures have contributed to the rising poverty rates. The government has implemented various measures to address child poverty, including increasing the living wage and uprating benefits. However, critics argue that these efforts are insufficient [1].



## Childhood poverty in Medway:

As of 2021/22, 30.6% of children in Medway were living in poverty, slightly below the national rate but well above the South East average of 25% [3].

84% of children living in poverty in Medway are in households with at least one working adult, highlighting the prevalence of in-work poverty [3]. This reflects broader national trends, with rising housing costs and increases in the cost of living driving child poverty rates.

**MedwayGo**, a local HAF (Holiday, Activities & Food) initiative funded by the Department for Education, offers a range of activities for children during school holidays, ensuring engagement and physical activity.

Each session includes a free balanced meal, supporting children's nutritional needs by meeting school food standards.

During the period of the programme, and since the summer of 2021, MedwayGo served 19,793 (sum of unique children per holiday period), and fed, in total, 103,144 lunches. Attendance varied across different holiday periods and was highest during the Summer months.

The programme collaborated with 51 providers from various sectors, delivering 316 activities, including sports, arts, and educational workshops. Inclusivity was a priority, with 15% of funding allocated to children not directly eligible for free school meals, including those with SEN, EHCPs, foster children, and children from military families.



## Methods

A team from the MSc in Public Health at Brighton and Sussex Medical School conducted the assessment between 2021 and 2024 through:

- **Interviews:** Structured interviews with 230 children in 2023 and 260 in 2022 were analysed as quantitative and qualitative data.
- **Surveys:** Surveys from 123 parents/carers in 2023 and 150 in 2022 were analysed as quantitative and qualitative data.
- **Focus Groups:** Four focus groups with stakeholders in 2024, including school staff, providers, and parents, with 10 participants in total were analysed as qualitative data through thematic analysis.

The assessment used data triangulation to understand the programme's impact comprehensively, and the general approach was inclusive to all voices, opinions and experiences.



# CHILDREN

Evaluating the benefits of the HAF programme on children, two main themes emerged: **Health Benefits** and **Social and Developmental Benefits**, each with further subcategories.

## Health Benefits

Health benefits were a key theme identified in focus groups with parents/carers and providers, as well as in interviews with children and parents/carers. These benefits were categorised into **physical** and **mental** health improvements.

### Physical Health Benefits

The physical benefits of the HAF programme include improvements in food and nutrition, motor skills, and coordination.

#### Food and Nutrition

**“Q: What does lunch look like at home?”**

**A: Nothing. I don’t eat lunch unless I am at school.” Survey (child, 8)**

Research has highlighted the impact of interventions such as HAF in reducing food insecurity in adolescents and children, especially those who are considered as living in poverty. The programme is beneficial in offsetting food-related concerns among at-risk families and increases children's positive relationships with food [4].

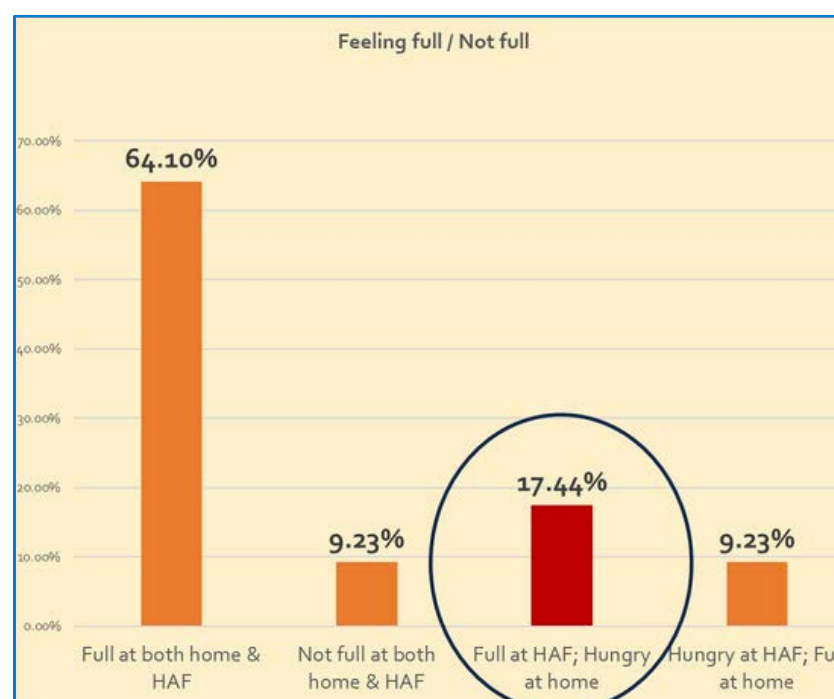
Furthermore, young people in households where there is not enough food tend to skip meals or eat repetitive, low-cost foods due to financial constraints [5].

## Mitigating hunger

**“Without the meal option, there probably wouldn't be a programme.” – Focus group**

Children reported enjoying the food provided at HAF, although this percentage dropped slightly from 78% in 2022 to 73% in 2023. Enjoying the food, especially for fussy eaters, is crucial to ensuring that children are well-fed. Assuming some level of hunger is linked with poverty, HAF's food provision is a mitigating factor.

The majority of children (64.10%) report feeling full at both home and HAF. 17.44% of children said that they were hungry at home, yet full with HAF, suggesting that the programme helped in mitigating hunger for them. About 9% were not feeling full both at home and with HAF, and another 9% mentioned being hungry only with HAF, which required attention.



**Figure 1 - Percentage of children feeling full/not full at home and at HAF.**

## New Experiences with Food

One of the clear benefits of the HAF programme, as reflected in both the surveys and parent focus groups, is the impact on children's food habits. Not only does it ensure that children receive at least one full meal a day, but it also encourages them to try new foods.

42.57% of children report having tried new foods as a result of attending HAF. While 57.43% state they have not tried new foods at HAF.



**Figure 2 - Percentage of children reporting having tried new foods at HAF.**

Parents/carers in surveys reinforced this finding, and 35% reported knowing about these new food experience, as they were meaningful enough for children to report on them.

Parents in focus groups noted that their children were becoming more open to trying new foods at both the programme and at home:

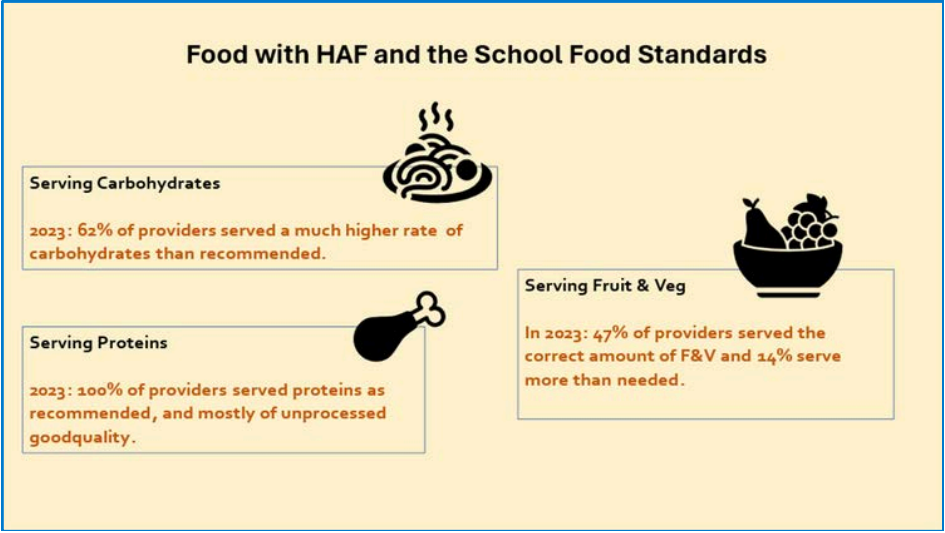
**“And he has tried a few foods, probably only like three in a year or something, but he has tried a few new things.” – SEND Parent/Carer**

**“A lot of the food he won't eat, but trying to get him to eat more menu. So he has to eat what's there. And I'll give him something if he doesn't eat. But he's become a lot better recently. So it's helped in terms of eating different foods.” – Parent/Carer**

### **Variation and Quality of Diet**

Focus group feedback highlighted that children valued the variety of food provided at HAF, as they often did not receive such diverse options at home.

**“It gives them a sense of other things that they wouldn't necessarily have at home” -  
Focus Groups**



**Figure 3- Percentage of providers adhering to school food standards in regards to carbohydrates, fruit and vegetables and protein served at HAF.**

The vast majority of sessions offered hot meals, with a few others providing sandwiches or a choice between the two, catering to different dietary needs, or managing a problem with the provision of a hot meal.

Meals had to adhere to the School Food Standards and our assessment showed that they often followed the guidelines, unlike the food that many children consumed at home.

Interviews offered some insights about what children eat when they are home, and that children as young as 6 years old stated they were making their own meals. Children often have just a sandwich for lunch, in many cases with a sweet spread such as chocolate or jam, which is far from the nutritional value of a balanced cooked meal.

# Children’s descriptions of lunch at home



Comparing 2022 and 2023, In 2023:

- **Sandwiches** – more than doubled
- **Fast food and ready meals** – 60% more
- **Fruit & Veg** – 40% less

Children were eating less nutritious food at home in 2023, making **HAF** more impactful on their nutrition.

Figure 4 - Description of children’s lunch received at home, including the corresponding percentage of children receiving each lunch item.

Asking children what they ate other than lunch, their accounts suggest nutritional deficiencies.

**At home**, beyond the main meal, children mainly eat ready-made snacks, suggesting **nutritional deficiencies**.

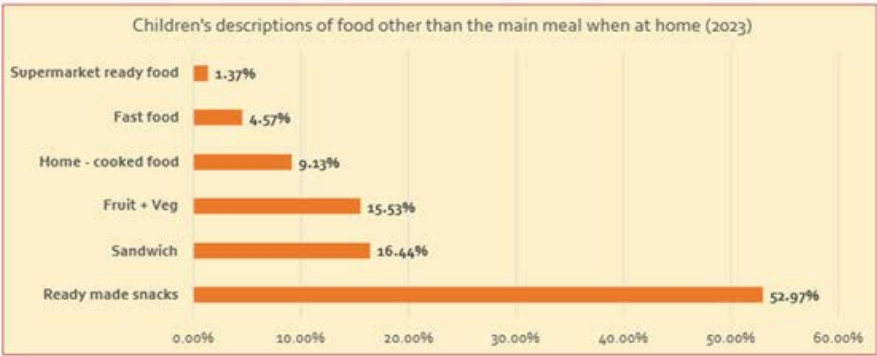


Figure 5 - Description of food received by children at home other than a main meal, including the corresponding percentage of children receiving each item.

Survey responses further indicated that after attending HAF, children became more willing to try new foods at home.



**“Trying different foods and having something that’s not cooked by parents that they generally would normally turn their nose up and be fussy about” – Parent Survey**

## **Relationships with Food**

HAF also fosters an improved relationship with food, as highlighted in both focus groups and surveys. Many HAF programmes allow children to participate in food preparation, giving them a deeper connection to what they eat.

Survey data supports this, showing an increase in the number of children willing to try new foods at home after attending HAF.

**“The hot meal is a bonus because he gets to explore different things as well as eating, having that communication, that play with others.” – Focus groups**

This aligns with children’s interviews, showing an 8% increase in children trying new foods over a year. Additionally, for SEN children, simply interacting with food they did not bring from home is a significant step forward, according to their parents.

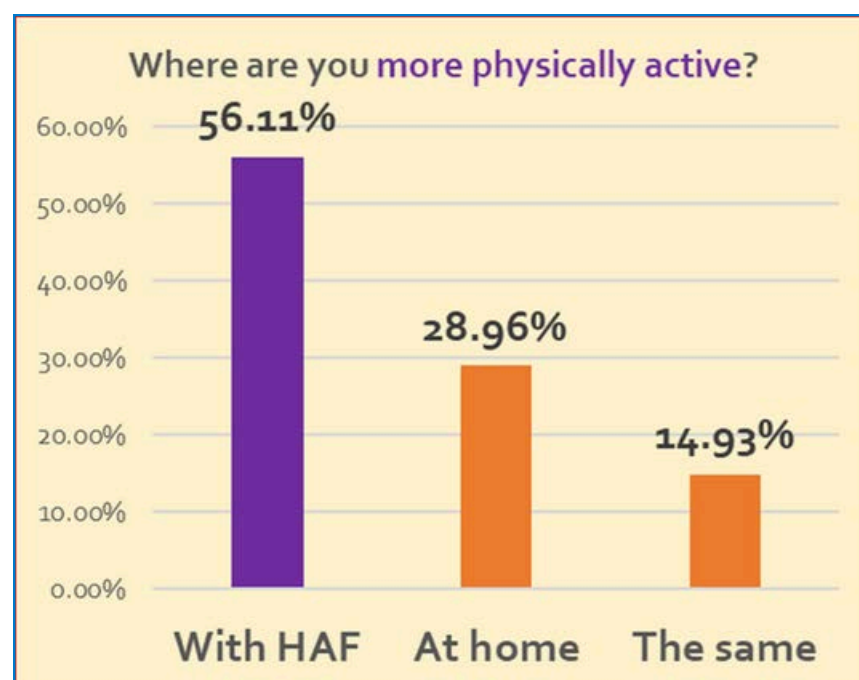
**“The fact that we got them interacting with food and fruits is a big step towards them possibly putting one in their mouth.” – Focus groups**

## **Physical activity**

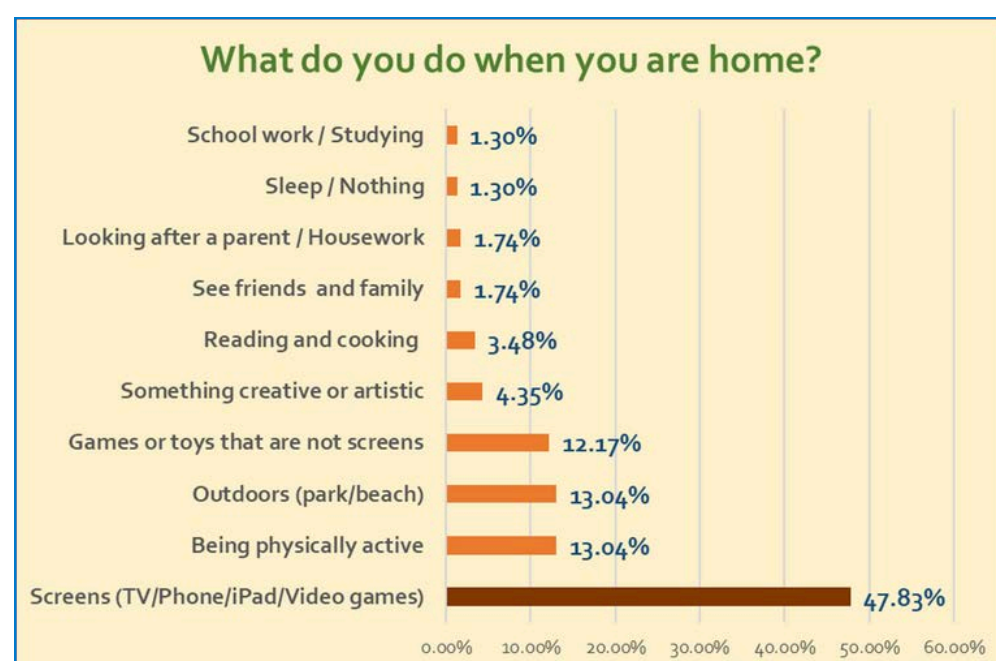
**“This has changed my life. I would be sat on the sofa bored watching TV!” – Child interview**

In addition to dietary and nutritional benefits, HAF sessions promoted physical activity, improving children's fine motor skills and coordination, as well as general fitness.

Interviews with children suggested that 56% of the children thought that they were more physically active at HAF than at home.



**Figure 6 - Percentage of children more physically active at HAF compared to at home.**



**Figure 7 - Description of activities children engage in at home, including the percentage of children reporting engaging in each activity.**

Further reinforcing this, children were asked about their usual activities at home when not attending HAF. The majority responded that they spent most of their time using screens rather than engaging in physical activity.

**"I usually get my mum to play with me but if she says no so I just play on my iPads or go on the balcony and chill with the breeze" - Child interviews**

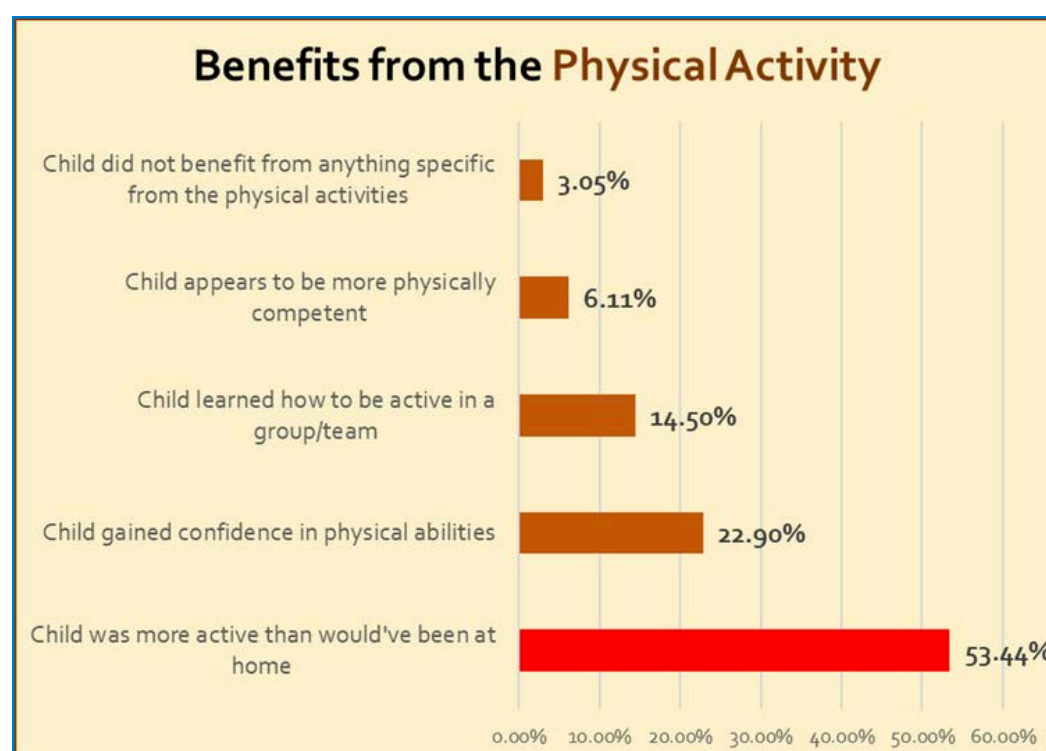


**Figure 8 - Parents report which activities their children engage in outside of HAF, including the corresponding percentage.**


Parents/carers also confirmed this trend, with over 50% stating their child was more physically active at HAF than at home, and stating that the alternative to HAF is screens.

**“Much more active than they would have been without the club.” - Parent survey**

The parents/carers focus groups further highlighted noticeable improvements in children's physical abilities, with 53.44% of parents suggesting that their child is more active at HAF than they would have been at home.



**Figure 9 - Parents’ perception of the benefits received by their children in regards to the physical activity provided by HAF.**



**“This is all improving his physical development ... he physically walks now, which again, is something that they said he wouldn't, he would, he would never be able to.” - Focus Group**

## **Mental Health and Wellbeing Benefits**

**“Joining this is the only time he's ever actually been anywhere without me supporting him directly and been offered someone that will actually do a one-to-one with him. Without this he would never have been given any of the opportunities.” - Focus group**

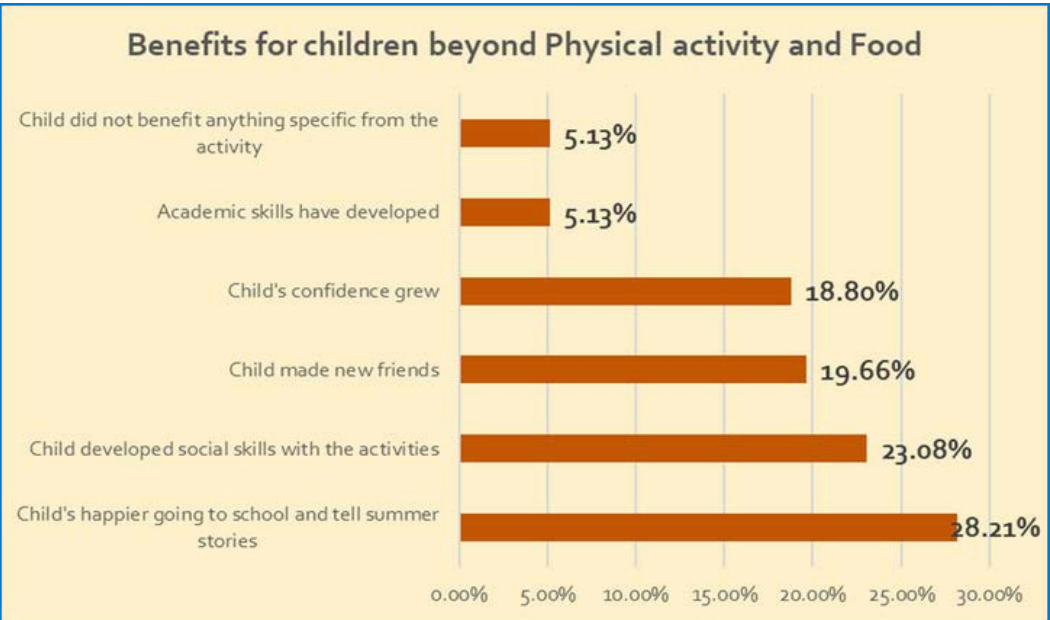
The HAF programme provides not only physical but also significant mental health benefits for children. Parents and carers described how children developed greater independence and experienced smoother transitions after attending HAF. Additionally, the programme fosters trust and safety, provides structure, and helps children build happy core memories.

Research has shown that mental wellbeing in children and young people is closely linked to poverty and social inequality. Economic hardship increases stress, impacts mental health, and lowers educational attainment. Protective factors, such as strong adult support and community initiatives, help mitigate these risks [6-8].

## **Confidence**

Findings from focus groups and surveys indicate that HAF positively impacts children's independence.

The 2022 and 2023 parents/carers surveys revealed an increase in children's confidence after attending HAF, with 18.80% of parents reporting an increase in their child's confidence. Focus group discussions support this finding, suggesting that HAF played a crucial role in boosting children's self-assurance.




**Figure 10 - Parents' perception of additional benefits to children as a result of attending HAF beyond physical activity, including the percentage of parents reporting each benefit.**

**“My child learnt how to make a wooden mallet, fire making a map and orienteering, etc. His confidence grew from being in the woods in nature.” – Parents/Carers Survey 2023**

**“It's been really good for my boy to be able to actually do anything and learn that detachment as well. Because if it weren't for this, he would still be glued to my hip because I didn't trust anyone enough for one to look after him.” – SEND Parents/Carers**

Increased confidence also contributed to easier transitions for children. The 2023 parents/carers survey found that 28% of parents noticed their child was happier going to school after attending HAF during the summer.

**“It's helped transition to Year One having holiday clubs at my daughter's school.” – Parents/Carers Survey 2023**



Focus group participants agreed, highlighting how children became more adaptable and comfortable with new environments:

**“And you know, he transitions now from going to somewhere new to coming back so much better.” – SEND Parents/Carers**

### **Structure**

For many children, particularly those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), structure is vital for wellbeing. Parents and carers frequently highlighted how HAF provided a consistent routine, similar to school, which was beneficial for their children.

**“Needed that children interaction. He likes structure and routine, which are similar to school life.” – Parents/Carers Survey**

**“My eldest is autistic, and so is my third one. She's also autistic. And it gives them a sense of structure during the holidays.” – Focus Group**

### **Happy Core Memories**

One of the most valued aspects of HAF, as reported by parents/carers, was the opportunity for children to build positive and memorable experiences.

**“Thank you very much for the opportunity for my son to have mornings / afternoons / days out” – Parents Survey**

**“So they've had different experiences that I wouldn't have given them necessarily without that.” – SEND Parents**

These experiences help reduce the stigma of poverty, ensuring that children can share their holiday activities with friends, family, and teachers with pride.



## Social and Developmental Benefits

Focus groups and surveys revealed that the HAF programme significantly enhances social and developmental skills, which can be categorised into independence, reducing regression, and relationships with food.

Research supports these findings as many papers have highlighted the impact of interventions in developing emotional, cognitive, and social skills, particularly for socially vulnerable youth. A review found that structured sports programmes enhance self-regulation, decision-making, and social interaction, though emotional skills were less affected [9]. Similarly, an analysis of 73 after-school programmes noted improvements in self-confidence, school bonding, academic performance, and reduced aggression and substance abuse. Programmes that employed structured, evidence-based approaches following the SAFE model (Sequential, Active, Focused, Explicit), were the most effective [10].

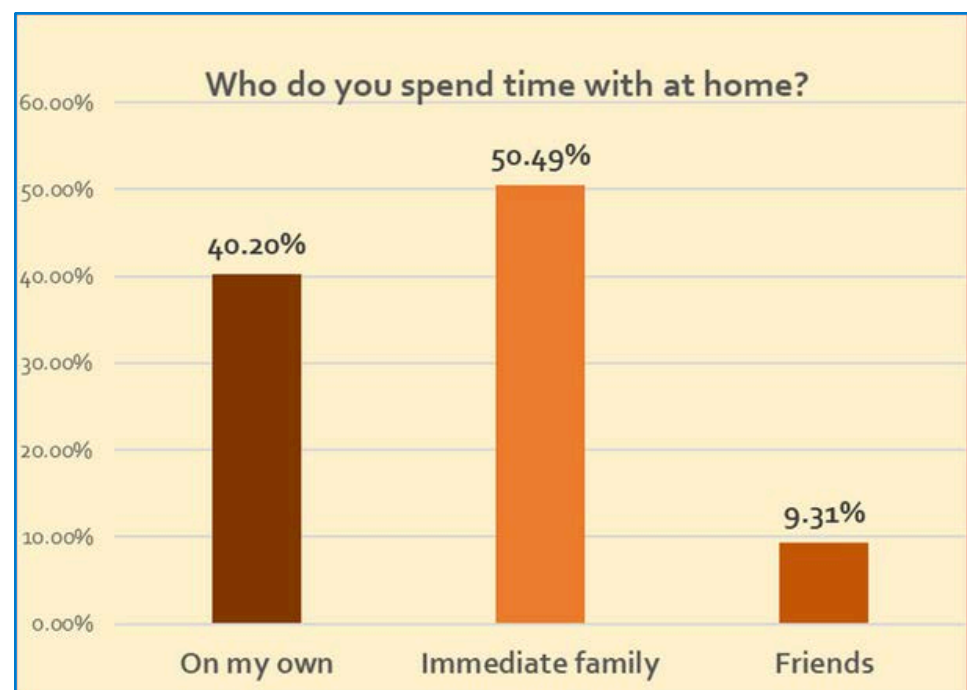
The success of these programmes largely depends on key factors such as positive relationships with peers and adults, which was also seen in the focus groups, interviews and surveys, structured learning environments with goal setting and feedback, and targeted interventions designed to build specific social skills. Programmes that foster these elements are more likely to achieve meaningful developmental outcomes.

### Social Benefits

#### **“Social skills and meeting new people. Making new friends.” – Child Interview**

One of the most significant benefits of the HAF programme is its impact on children's social skills. This was a key theme repeatedly highlighted in surveys from parents/carers and interviews with children, as well as in focus groups.

Many children who were interviewed claimed they spent their holidays at home with their families only, limiting their opportunities to develop social skills with peers. 50.59% of children spent their time at home with immediate family, while 40.20% spent their time at home on their own



**Figure 11 - Percentage of children spending time alone compared to with immediate family or friends when at home.**

At HAF, children engaged in structured social and physical activities, providing an environment for skill development. While some screen time at home may have included social interactions, HAF encouraged face-to-face engagement, fostering stronger social connections.

Focus groups, particularly with parents/carers of SEN children, reinforced this finding. Many parents emphasised that HAF provided an opportunity for children to interact with peers of similar ages, allowing them to learn from one another and develop socially.

**“It's getting him, getting him out and just learning life, you know, and just having that connection with people.” – Focus groups**



## Relationships

**“And he, you know, he transitions now from going to somewhere new to coming back so much better” – Focus groups**

**“My daughter has made new friends and loved the adults that worked there.” – Parent Survey**

Developing social skills at HAF often led to stronger relationships with both peers and adults.

## Peers


Surveys and focus groups showed that HAF encouraged children to mix with peers they might not otherwise meet. These interactions fostered friendships, including inter-age relationships.

**“Children that wouldn't normally play with each other, wouldn't normally be in, by the end of the first week, they started to become their own little family.” – Focus groups**

Most parents/carers observed an improvement in their child's social skills. Additionally, some parents noted their child was happier when surrounded by peers, suggesting that HAF positively impacted the mental wellbeing of children who lacked regular social interactions during school holidays. However, while friendships formed at HAF, many did not extend beyond the programme.

## Adults

HAF also encouraged meaningful interactions with adults, helping children gain confidence and develop communication skills beyond those with other children. Many parents noted that their children became more independent through engagement with HAF staff, which in turn eased transitions to new environments and returning to school.



**“They built their confidence massively with other children, and just being able to speak to adults, I think, is important.” – Focus groups**

### **Increasing Independence**

**“it's the transition of actually being able to drop him off, leave him somewhere, pick him up and he might actually be OK... Separation anxiety meant he couldn't go nowhere. Whereas now he's so used to going somewhere, being left, it being OK and Mummy will come and collect you. He will go to these things.” – Focus Groups**

As noted in the mental health benefits section, HAF plays a critical role in fostering children's independence. Parents and carers noted long-term improvements in their children's ability to function independently, with visible effects even beyond the programme.

### **Reduced Regression**

Another key benefit identified in focus groups was the prevention of developmental regression. Parents and carers shared how their children progressed socially and developmentally since attending HAF.

**“I think socially and developmentally, he's come on leaps and bounds.” – Focus Group**

Although developmental skills were not as frequently discussed by parents and children, parents/carers in the focus groups noticed improvements in their children's skills and abilities after attending HAF.

**“To help a child develop, if you don't have those skills yourself to be able to, sometimes you do rely on authorities to help you along the way.” – Focus Groups**



# PARENTS AND CARERS

HAF provided numerous benefits to **parents and carers**, particularly in the areas of **parenting and caring skills, mental wellbeing, external relationships (including support and trust in the programme), and financial relief**. The following section explores their experiences and perspectives on these key themes.

## Parenting and Caring

### Parenting Skills

**“It actually sort of helps me be a better mum...” - Focus group**

A study concluded that the quality of parent-child relationships is a significant foundation for children’s wellbeing across life, with positive parent-child relationships having a positive impact on children’s mental health both in the short term and long term [11].

Participation in HAF motivated parents and carers to be more engaged with their children, encouraging them to take part in activities together outside the programme.

**“Having these programmes has probably motivated me more as a mum to try and get him out to go and do these things.” - Focus group**



## Financial

**“It is a huge relief on the financial pressures...” - Focus group**


Financial pressure and stress can have a negative impact on both parents/carers and children, with children reporting reduced subjective wellbeing and poorer mental health given financial stress at home [12]. While parents/carers can suffer reduced physical and mental health, with effects on their ability to parent – often translating to children's behaviour with negative effects on children's school performance [12,13].

HAF has provided many parents and carers with financial relief, with many citing the prospect of saving money as a main motivator for attending HAF.

Parents and carers expressed how they save money on food given HAF's food provision, sparing them a minimum of 16 whole meals per child over the summer holiday. Additionally, parents/carers state that their children come home from HAF requiring a smaller meal in the evening, especially given the hot meal provision during the day.

**“It's a free meal, and that saves me doing that for lunch. If it's hot meal, they can have a cold meal at home. So it's less money as opposed to during the week.” - Focus group**

Some parents/carers explain how they have saved money by not having to pay for an alternative holiday programme or private childcare, which has been particularly beneficial to working parents who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford regular private childcare. One parent explains:



**“For me it was the free childcare, because obviously if it's half term or term times most people are still working even if part time. For me prior to this, I was losing money by not working, whereas this helps me still stay on top of actually having an income. Obviously I’m still losing the 60p for every pound being on universal credit.” - Focus group**


This is especially true for parents and carers of children with SEN, as one parent explains:

**“Trying to find a SEND registered place is just thinking of more money. I've looked at some of them that are available when spaces have actually filled up and they say, well, you can book them privately and it's like £35 to £50/£60 per day for one child. That's just something that I would never be able to do.” - Focus group**

Parents and carers also discuss how they have saved money on unique and exciting activities, with HAF allowing their children to go out of the house and have good quality and special experiences that don’t cost a fortune. Some parents state that without HAF they wouldn’t be able to afford similar activities and experiences. One parent explains:

**“I've got two kids, but I have to work as well to pay the mortgage and I'm on my own with the two kids. So having the activities specifically for children, they wouldn’t get that opportunity otherwise. I can't afford to do all the other activities that they provide for free.” - Focus group**

Additionally, parents and carers are grateful for the time HAF allows them to do chores unencumbered, saving money while shopping. One parent states:



**“I’ll actually save money because they’re not with me making me buy everything in the supermarket.” - Focus group**

## **Mental Wellbeing**

**“It’s just been like a massive help to me and I really, really appreciate it.” - Focus group**


Studies have found a strong association between poor parental mental health and children also developing poor mental health [14]. Poor parental mental health can create an unstable home environment – impacting children's cognitive, social, and emotional development as well as physical health and parent-child relationships [14]. There is also evidence for these effects translating to adulthood, culminating in poorer academic outcomes and reduced quality of life [15,16].

HAF allows parents and carers respite from their caring responsibilities, giving them additional time to do chores such as housework or shopping and to do them more efficiently with reduced stress. 27.43% of parents felt that HAF gave them more free time/time to work. One parent states:

**“Whereas obviously if I can just Chuck him in there [HAF] for two hours, I can run around. I get so much done. It ticks off so many things in my list because I do all the stuff that I would necessarily find very, very stressful if I had all of them [children] at the same time.” - Focus group**

Another said:

**“When I know it's been a very productive day, I can sleep better overnight and I'm in a calmer mood and the children ... get a better mum from me rather than me being up here and stressed out thinking I've still got a million things that I need to get done at the house...” - Focus group**



Parents and carers explained how the impact of HAF on their mental health is magnified during the prolonged 6-week summer break, going on to positively impact their children's mental health as well. 17.13% felt that HAF takes the pressure off, and one parent explained:

**“The six week summer holidays, that's my idea of hell, to be honest. I love the first week ... but I end up doing everything I can with them in the first week. And then I've got 5 weeks left and I'm thinking, Oh my God, I can't stay in the house for five weeks with kids all day every day. And it has quite a mental toll on me as well. So I think it [HAF] improves my mental health as well as theirs.” - Focus group**


HAF has also given parents and carers more time to themselves. One parent states they have more time to see friends:

**“So you got to just meet up with a friend, you know, just to have a coffee and catch up. You feel at ease because you know where they're going, ... you know who they're with.” - Focus group**

Parents and carers speak of a more positive home environment as a result of HAF alleviating stress:

**“it saved me stress as well because the time they are out and my stress will have reduced, I will have recovered before they come back.” - Focus group**

Another speaks of feeling like a better parent as a result of having space and more energy:



**“We all love our children, don't get me wrong, but sometimes it is nice for them. And they're not under your feet. You're not under their feet. And then you feel like a better parent for it because when they come back, they're all excited. They're happy to tell you, and you actually have got [time and energy] because you've had your day to decompress, do your housework, do cleaning, whatever.” - Focus group**

While another benefits from the support provided by HAF, allowing them to feel like a better parent:

**“ I don't like trying new things myself and I don't like going to new destinations that I don't know about. So I really fear them. Obviously I'm aware that puts impact on my children, but by having that comfort of having Medway go, they're learning those new skills. I know it sounds really bad someone's teaching them that for me because I feel like I would let them down in that aspect.” - Focus group**

Many have expressed gratitude in the focus groups for the support provided by the programme, especially to those with SEN children:

**“I get a break and they get well cared for and I'm so pleased Medway has done this...”**

**“...it's just been like a massive help to me and I really, really appreciate it.”**

**“I'm on my own, so I don't have really have like family input or family to support. So it's kind of crucial to have that support ... from the HAF programme.”**



# PROVIDERS AND COMMUNITY

HAF has had several positive impacts on providers, most notably in terms of employment and employability (including empowerment, skills, connections, and community), as well as the wider community. The following section explores providers' experiences of HAF and their outlook on these key themes.

## Employment

**"...we're always looking forward to HAF because we know that we're busy..." -**


**Focus group**

Employment and job security have been shown to have many positive impacts on individuals' wellbeing, including positive effects on both the physical and mental health outcomes of employees [17]. Unemployment has repeatedly been shown to have detrimental effects in terms of mental health outcomes, with individuals facing unemployment suffering more greatly from anxiety, depression and stress [18].

HAF has afforded providers employment, stating that their sessions are always well attended. One provider expressed how they and their team look forward to the school holidays, given the opportunity to work, as their team is predominantly made up of full-time mums. They state:

**"We are full-time mums. So ... we have jobs now. You know, we're always looking forward to HAF because we know that we're busy. So it's been good for us." -**

**Focus group.**



HAF also provides work experience for young people, such as university students, as well as providing employment for those utilising job centres (discussed further in the next section). Providers expressed their hope that HAF will remain and continue to offer them employment.

## Employability

HAF has also aided the employability of providers through the following means:

### Skills


**“I've had to learn, I've had to grow over three years. It's brilliant...” - Focus group**

HAF provides an opportunity for local providers and their team members to grow and develop through additional training and learning experiences.

As a consequence of the additional training, providers and their teams become more employable. Additionally, by hiring young people and individuals through the job centre (those who have no job, or those looking for a higher-paid job), HAF allows them to build their CVs, making them more attractive to future employers. One provider expresses:

**“I think with the HAF programme and the training it allowed those that were either on the system or, you know, from the job centres [to] get the skills in order to be able to get better paying jobs or get better jobs as well.” - Focus group**

Not only are children learning from providers, but providers are also learning from the children they encounter through HAF, sharing knowledge with each other, such as sign language. One provider states:



“It's nice to also learn from the new kiddies that come through us through HAF and that challenges our staff, our leaders learn new skills at the moment.” - Focus group

## Empowerment

“It's empowered us.” - Focus group

Studies have shown that training and the opportunity to develop new skills within the workplace increase employees' job satisfaction and psychological empowerment [19]. Given the Acquisition of new skills, HAF has empowered providers to run an organisation, one that they were not running before, which can help their own children as well as others. One provider expresses how:

“I can go home and sleep knowing that the provision is well looked after. And that's as a result of HAF giving us that power, that skill set, you know, empowering just housewives. That's who we were before HAF. Three years ago I was just a mum, nothing more. Now I'm a director.” - Focus group

“It has empowered us to grow to know that we can sit in that position and fight for our children and also serve them in fighting for them.” - Focus group

## Connections

“It's ... helped us to meet a lot more parents and SEND parents ... and see the needs of different kinds of children.” - Focus group

HAF has enabled providers to **strengthen their connections** with parents and the wider community, fostering a deeper understanding of the needs of local children.



By engaging directly with families, providers can **tailor their services** to better support children. One provider described how they ensure ongoing support beyond HAF:

**“...we also make sure there's a pathway that if they attend ours and we feel that they're really benefiting, then they join us for the rest of the year at no cost. So they're with us on a weekly basis, not just during the HAF programme.” - Focus group**


Additionally, through these relationships, providers can **signpost families to other services** that may better suit their children's needs. Many providers highlighted how trust-building through HAF has led to a high rate of **repeat attendance**:

**“Most of them are ... repeat attendees. So them, their carers, their families are satisfied with what happens. Our staff ratios are extremely high. We have some teachers from very specialist schools helping us, but we have some youngsters helping us. So they can learn from the ... attendees and they can learn from the adults. So having that mix is good. But our staff ratio is ... very high. But that works for the attendees.” - Focus group**

## Community Impact

**“It's a programme that is touching lives.” - Focus group**

Community connectedness fosters trust and belonging amongst individuals, while also being an important factor for many people's wellbeing [20,21]. Community connectedness improves both the physical and mental health outcomes of community members while also promoting community engagement – an important factor in increasing involvement with other community services and reducing health inequalities [22,23].



Providers reported that HAF has **strengthened their position within the local community**, fostering support from **parents, schools, and local authorities**. The programme has also created **new work opportunities**, with one provider explaining how their reliability has led to **expanded responsibilities**:

**“So they're trusting us more and even the local authority that we sit in that's Greenwich are now beginning to look at us as short breaks providers and are saying OK, come on to the framework for short breaks. We see that you've run this for XYZ amount of years, we can trust you now, you know.” - Focus group**

Many providers described HAF as an **essential part of the community**. As a result of their involvement in HAF, providers have become **well-known and trusted** in their local areas. One provider emphasised:

**“Our name is well known now within Medway.” - Focus group**


This recognition has led to increased trust, with families **seeking advice and support** beyond HAF, including assistance with housing and other local services:

**“I would say that a lot of parents have now come to us to seek advice, because they think that we have more experience. So when they need something, they come to us for signposting.” - Focus group**



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