“I need energy to make my brain work”: Supporting children, teachers and whānau through the KidsCan ECE programme

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The KidsCan’s ECE programme is designed to remove barriers to participation in early childhood education through the provision of raincoats, shoes, nit treatment products, lunches and snacks. Data from an evaluation of the pilot programme involved surveys and interviews with whānau and teachers. Findings showed the benefits for children’s health and attendance, although not every child experienced the same beneficial changes. This article considers some of the key findings of the evaluation in relation to participation, nutrition, wellbeing and learning and, recognising not all services have access to the KidsCan programme, discusses the potential value for all children of shared eating and cooking experiences.

KidsCan is a charitable organisation whose mission is to level the playing field for children whose families are struggling so they have the same opportunity to learn as others. Working in partnership with low-decile schools throughout Aotearoa, KidsCan’s school programmes include food, clothing, and a range of hygiene products. In response to the increasing requests for help coming from the early childhood sector, in 2018 KidsCan created and launched its first national programme to support children under 5. KidsCan’s ECE programme was designed to remove barriers for children to participate in early childhood education through the provision of raincoats, shoes, socks, nit treatment products, daily fruit and cooked lunch (KidsCan, 2023).

Although the programme focuses on supporting children the impacts are experienced by whānau and teachers as well. This article presents some of the findings of an evaluation of the KidsCan ECE programme. While only a small number of early learning services have access to the KidsCan programme this article highlights some of the possible benefits for all children of access to nutritious food, especially fruits and vegetables, and shared cooking and eating experiences. In addition, it may lead other settings to consider applying to KidsCan for support.

Background

Poverty is a pressing challenge in New Zealand, and this can have many long-term effects for children. While recognising that “many children growing up in households with very low income or material hardship experience love and support from their whānau, families and aiga around them”, it is important to be aware of the association between measures of child poverty and adverse outcomes with potential negative long-term impacts (Duncanson et al., 2022, p.15). The Child Poverty Monitor (2019, n.p.) website notes: “Poverty limits opportunities and choices, and creates toxic stress that can make daily life unbearable. It fractures relationships, undermines health and education, and can make it almost impossible to get out of survival mode”. In contrast, “Children who grow up in households with enough money are more likely to be healthy, to do well at school, to gain work, positively contribute and take up opportunities available to them” (New Zealand Government, 2022, p.3). Recent data (New
Zealand Government, 2022) documents some improvements in reducing child poverty, but it remains an ongoing problem.

Understanding poverty is complex. The Ministry of Social Development looked at the relationship between household income, financial and physical assets, and other factors (Perry, 2022). While there is an overlap between households with low income and material hardship, not all households with low incomes experience material hardship, and not all households experiencing material hardship have low incomes (Perry, 2022). Nevertheless, Duncanson et al. (2019) highlighted that “the proportion of households with children experiencing severe-to-moderate food insecurity was significantly higher for households with a gross income at or below $50,000 per annum (43%) compared with 8% of households with gross income over $50,000 per annum” (p. 3). In 2020/21, around one in six children (14.9%) were reported to be living in households where food ran out sometimes or often due to lack of money (Duncanson et al., 2022, p.16).

In a UK review of 109 studies measuring food insecurity, children who experience food insecurity were more likely to be reported to have poorer health on a variety of measures than food-secure children. Food insecurity may also affect social wellbeing, mental and emotional health, and school performance (Aceves-Martins et al., 2018).

KidsCan aims to assist in reducing the impact of food insecurity by providing healthy lunches and snacks at the ECE centre as well as other items such as clothing and nit treatment to further address barriers to participation in education, with the aim of enhancing the longer term outcomes for children affected by poverty.

Evaluating the KidsCan ECE programme

Our evaluation set out to explore whether:

- the KidsCan ECE programme helped families to send their children to ECE centres consistently
- children were healthier because they were participating in the KidsCan ECE programme
- the KidsCan ECE programme helped lift children’s wellbeing
- the KidsCan ECE programme helped deliver better quality early learning for children.

There were 24 centres included in the evaluation. The centres had volunteered to be part of the pilot programme and provide feedback through the research. These comprised 11 education and care centres, 12 kindergartens and one kōhanga reo in three regional clusters: Northland; Auckland; and Hawke’s Bay. Nests within this total were seven case-study settings. The number of case-study centres in each region were 3 in Northland, 2 in Hawke’s Bay, and 2 in Auckland. These centres signalled their willingness to be case-study centres in initial discussions with KidsCan and gave formal consent after meeting with and discussing the project with the research team.

Seven of the 24 centres reported that they had a food programme for all children in place prior to starting with KidsCan and another nine indicated that they provided food, generally fruit, bread, or cereal, if children needed it.

The research utilised a mixed-methods approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data from two cohorts of children and whānau. Cohort 1 data were collected prior to the KidsCan programme starting in the ECE service. This included all whānau and their children attending the centres who consented to participate. Cohort 2 included whānau where children had received at least six months of the ECE KidsCan programme. Again, this included all whānau and their children who met the criteria who consented to participate. Because a number of children had moved on to school, or for left other reasons, only some of the Cohort 2 whānau had been part of Cohort 1. Others were new children and families who had joined the centres after the Cohort 1 surveys and interviews. The data included the following:

1. Analysis of the Ministry of Education Early Learning Information (ELI) data (enrolment and attendance data on all children at 23 of the 24 centres.)*

2. Whānau surveys at each of the 24 centres. (346 Cohort 1 baseline whānau surveys pre KidsCan and 252 Cohort 2 surveys from whānau whose children had received at least 6-months of the KidsCan programme.)

3. Teacher surveys at each of the 24 centres. (43 teacher surveys.)

4. Whānau interviews at seven case-study centres. (105 whānau interviews comprising: 34 Cohort 1 interviews pre KidsCan with 21 follow-up interviews, 34 Cohort 2 interviews with whānau whose children had at least 6 months of KidsCan; 16 interviews with Cohort 2 whānau once their child started school.)

5. In-depth teacher interviews at seven case-study centres. (57 teacher interviews; 31 pre KidsCan and 26 after one year of KidsCan in their centre.)

6. Interviews with five new entrant and Year 1 teachers in the schools the children moved to once they left the case-study KidsCan ECE centres.

In each cohort the majority of the children attending the centres were described by their whānau as either Māori (39% for Cohort 1 and 37% Cohort 2) or Pasifika (39% and 44%). The remaining children were described as European (7% and 13%) and Asian (6% and 5%), with a small number identified as “other” ethnicities.

Participants were aware that they were helping to evaluate the pilot programme and inform further rollouts to other centres and families. Wānanga and whanaungatanga visits allowed participants to have input into the design and provided opportunities to strengthen relationships and share information. For example, whānau requested paper surveys as an option in addition to the planned online surveys and the opportunity to complete surveys at the centre if they wished; researchers were asked to share photographs and details about themselves and also to spend time in the settings when not collecting data. The research was founded on a partnership approach and drew on the strengths of the research team (both Māori and Pākehā) and of the participants in all phases of the evaluation.

Findings

Overall, it was clear that the KidsCan ECE programme was appreciated by families and teachers and had a favourable impact on child and family wellbeing. This section includes a summary of some of the findings. Further details can be found in Peters et al. (2020).

ECE participation for children.

Ministry of Education Early Learning Information (ELI) data (which collects and stores information on enrolment and attendance), were analysed to compare attendance figures from before the programme with attendance during the same months of the year when children were receiving the KidsCan programme. Ten centres had lower absence rates (although the changes were not statistically significant). According to the teacher survey, none of these centres had previously had a food programme in place, although they might have provided something if a child came without food.
For those centres which had a food programme in place prior to partnering with KidsCan, gains in attendance had presumably already been made when their food programmes had first been introduced, leaving little room for further reduction in absences when this was replaced by the KidsCan programme. However, as later sections will show, moving to the KidsCan programme freed resources that enhanced the quality of participation and learning.

As well as comparing the whole (changing) cohorts before and during the KidsCan programme, we looked at the children from Cohort 1 who were still attending the centres and were part of Cohort 2. The absences of these children were lower when participating in the KidsCan programme, compared to the same months the previous year before KidsCan. In three of these months the reduction in absence rates was statistically significant. We cannot say these changes are causal, as other factors may be at play, such as the children being a year older. However, the qualitative data from the case-study whānau and teachers provided strong evidence that did attribute improved participation in ECE to the KidsCan programme.

The majority (65%) of Cohort 2 case-study whānau said their child’s attendance had increased since participating in the programme. They described how having food provided made it more likely they would send their child. The jackets and shoes were attributed to keeping children warm and dry and therefore assisting participation by reducing sickness.

Help for breakfast and lunch some days if I don’t have enough money during the week. Also never stop him from going to school [ECE] if it is a food issue—Always available at the centre. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Yeah, yeah, I guess I’m more likely to send them. … ’cause I don’t have to worry about like their lunches and stuff. (InterviewW44)

Well yes because we always walk every day, even if it’s raining. So, yes, the jackets and that do come in handy. They’re really helpful. (InterviewW14)

All of the above [items in the KidsCan programme] was very helpful to make my child attend school [ECE] on a regular basis. They were less sick, full tummy and very settled at school. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Across all three regions 58% of teachers in Cohort 2 interviews described how providing healthy food at the ECE centre had enhanced participation. Forty-six percent of teachers also noted that the coats and shoes had made a difference to attendance.

…I certainly, on a Monday, Mondays were days where numbers were really, really low…. As soon as food is provided, you see the numbers slightly increase. Especially after the weekend when things have been tight, and the money’s run out. You know, things aren’t accessible to families until later in the week. Participation has increased that way. (InterviewT09)

We’ve had a more consistent attendance… Them having jackets, decent footwear, that’s contributed to, to them being able to come here. We’ve always provided kai, but giving them healthier options too, you know? It has been really good…. (InterviewT13)

Despite all the positive feedback, the programme could not address all the issues affecting participation. As one teacher noted:

I need to be honest and let you know that our rolls have really dropped, and our attendance can be, at times, poor. And it comes down to health matters. And a day like today [wet day], a lot of our families do not have transport… So, it is a big thing, and I don’t think food alone will combat that…. (InterviewT08)

**Impact on nutrition and children’s health**

Sixty four percent of Cohort 2 whānau surveyed reported their children’s diets had become more nutritious as a result of participating in the KidsCan programme, noting particularly the inclusion of more fruit and vegetables. Whānau in the Cohort 2 interviews and survey also commented on their children’s improved health and nutrition due to the items KidsCan provided. This was partly attributed to healthy food being more readily available and also because children were more willing to try foods they had previously rejected. As well as eating healthier food children’s consumption of “junk” and poor-quality food was reported to have fallen.

My child (has) slowly changed, he’s eating less junk food. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Tries and will eat food he wouldn’t have touched before. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Definitely the food. He’s not eating rubbish, he’s getting good meals, that would help. Shoes, jacket keeping him nice and warm … not getting sick…. A happy boy. A happy, healthy boy. (InterviewW38)

Well his lunches—the lunches provided, so healthy and it helped to change his diet because he was more open to you know, more of what they’re having at school [ECE]. (InterviewW21)

Teachers also described a number of health-related benefits for children:

I suppose the energy levels have been different… that’s a part of health, and their attention spans in the afternoons … there probably has been less smaller health problems…. Like common colds and stuff like that. … So, I guess the food, or the content, that we’ve been having with more fruit and vegetables, and healthier options possibly has done a bit. (InterviewT08)

“Overall, it was clear that the KidsCan ECE programme was appreciated by families and teachers and had a favourable impact on child and family wellbeing.”
Oh, the children … they’ve got that good energy, you know what I mean? It’s not … the sluggish type of feeling of, ‘I don’t want to get up’ … you can see that there is an excitement and energy in their bodies.

(Interview T33)

Teachers also saw the benefits of learning about food and healthy eating:

They’re getting good healthy kai. It’s also… different tastes, different experiences. Because a lot of it was new, there was a lot of talk about what the food is. So, there was lots of new learning for them, you know? ‘This gives me energy; I need energy to fuel my body. I need energy to make my brain work.’ So, there’s been lots of discussion about that as encouragement to get them to eat something that’s new to them. (Interview T09)

Impact on the wellbeing of children and their families

When whānau were asked about the benefits of the KidsCan programme for themselves, 87% of the Cohort 2 survey respondents described the benefits that the programme had provided for them personally. Of these, 29% mentioned that it reduced stress and worry, both a reduction in worry about providing the lunches and reduced pressure in the mornings to prepare a lunchbox. Other comments indicated a more general reduction in stress. The next most frequently mentioned benefit for whānau was that the KidsCan programme helped them financially (22%) and they appreciated not having to purchase food and clothing.

Everyone eating the same food together was described as an important aspect of the programme by Cohort 2 whānau, who felt this had encouraged their child to eat what was provided and to try new foods.

She now eats more variety of foods because all kids have the same meal. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

It’s healthy food for her and being around other kids helps encourage her to try foods she otherwise would not. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Eating the same kai as everyone else has made her experiment with foods she may not always try at home. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Cohort 2 interviewees also described the pleasure and happiness for children from receiving the “gift” of new clothing. There was further pleasure for some children in having the same shoes and raincoats as their friends. One of the teachers described children regularly showing and commenting that they had “same shoes!”

The experience of care and pleasure from everyone participating in the same programme led a number of whānau and teachers to credit the KidsCan ECE programme with affective changes for children that made a difference to the social connections and the sense of belonging in the community.

And there’s a lot of love in there, you know! And you see a lot of parents that come in, and when they’ve got things from KidsCan, it just like… Not so much the child… it lights the parents’ faces too … And I think it brings them back, makes them keep bringing their child. (Interview W20)

I reckon, there is a saying at home we have; the family that eats together stays together… So that’s kind of brought the parents more to bond with their kids, kind of thing. Like even making meals, helping other kids. (Interview W57)

They [the children] all have more of a sense-of-belonging, not nearly so outcast… Especially being able to eat the same kai as everyone else, not being like, ‘Oh well they have this, and I don’t have…’ (Interview T23)

They are warm, they love them [the clothes], they are not whakamata about having them, it puts them on a level playing field—they all have the same. (Interview T24).

Well there is a sense of pride in their shoes and their coats… I think too kind of a sense of calm… knowing that there’s lots of kai here. Because some of our children are, you know, really quite hungry. (Interview T35)

Impact on children’s early learning

Cohort 2 whānau survey responses indicated that they had seen a connection between the food programme’s provision of healthy “brain food” and their children’s learning.

My child is warm and full that enhances her ability to learn. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Fresh lunches are an essential part of a child’s health and wellbeing and their ability to learn throughout the day. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Lunches provided means she has good decent food which helps with learning. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

I find that my son eats a lot healthier at kindy compared to seven months ago when he first started KidsCan. No more pies and not so much unhealthy food. He gets a lot more brainfood. (Cohort 2 whānau survey)

Teachers commented on the positive changes that they had observed in children’s engagement in learning, attention span, and behaviour.

I do believe it [being well fed] frees their mind up to actually focus on what is around and what they might like to do rather than coming from a survival instinct. Like when you’re in that survival instinct lots of fight, flight or freeze, you can’t really focus on anything else... (Interview T30)

Well for me, the dynamics of the kids are a lot more engaged, they will be engaged for a lot longer period of time, we can give them more one-on-one help. That they are a lot more persistent and resilient. And… have a much better, you know, ‘can-do’ attitude. (Interview T10).

For me there’s just been an ongoing improvement in engagement… You don’t see those kids around who are lethargic, or who are just tired…. If you’ve got a full belly, you’re not feeling tired and grumpy. We certainly are in a totally different space around behaviour. …we just don’t have it [problems with behaviour] anymore. (Interview T14)

Before KidsCan, you know a physical activity, or a mental activity… a learning activity—they would just give up on…. Whereas now the kids are really, really persistent. And really striving, striving to do something. They’re not just give up and defeatist. (Interview T10)

When centres had been investing their own resources in providing food, the KidsCan programme lifted this financial pressure, allowing them to provide more resources for children’s learning:

Part of the extra funding [created by no longer having to pay for a food programme] allows us to employ a person for an hour (Interview T11)

The financial side means we’ve been able to just buy more resources instead of spending it on food … We are able to buy...
more resources and books … like quality resources instead of ones that are old and dated. (Interview T04)

Reflections
While the menus were varied, some of the foods, like chickpeas, were unfamiliar to some whānau. Three teachers noted that the food programme in ECE could have a wider impact if it was accompanied by sessions for families where the menus and recipes were shared and sampled. Coming together to try the food would let whānau experience what their children were eating in the ECE centre and this could support the provision of low-cost nutritious food at home, for the wider family, and for the ECE children once they move to school.

Although the food was easy to prepare, managing a food programme could be challenging for teachers if they did not have a cook or other help. Storage was also a factor for some of the centres if their kitchen was small. One centre noted having to buy a larger fridge, another noted needing to allocate some resource space to dry goods. The initial set up and getting the programme running could be challenging for centres but they persisted because of the benefits they could see for children. What to do with excess food was also an issue at the start. Once KidsCan agreed that any uneaten perishable food could be taken home by whānau this was really appreciated.

Discussion
The findings demonstrated that the programme had a number of benefits for children, such as good nutrition, and keeping them warm and dry. The benefits were also associated with reduced absences, engagement in learning, increased energy and attention span, and fewer small health issues. The benefits were felt too for the whānau through some of the stress and financial concerns they experienced being reduced, and importantly providing a strong sense of belonging in the ECE community due to the programme being provided for all. Again, this depended on the starting place for families. For those who could not otherwise provide the items for their children the positive impacts were greatest in taking some of the “weight off their shoulders”. There was a strong sense of care for and pride in their children. Seeing the children happy, healthier, and engaged could change the whole culture of the wider ECE community.

Of broad interest in these findings are the benefits of improved nutrition for health and learning and the value of eating and cooking together. These ECE findings are consistent with evaluations of food programmes in schools where the main benefits have been to the children’s learning through improved concentration and attention span (Bryne et al., 2018; Massey University, 2011) and fewer problem behaviours (Watts, 2018). The reported beneficial outcomes for the children’s early childhood education are also potentially a path to improved longer term outcomes. However, it is important to note the number of centres who were providing foods from their own funds prior to receiving the KidsCan programme. While there were clear benefits from this, it diverted funds from the teaching and learning time and resources that these centres could provide. This is a difficult dilemma for teachers and it appears that more assistance with addressing food insecurity is needed. For those not able to access the KidsCan programme perhaps the Fruit in Schools and Milk in Schools programmes could be extended to ECE.

Eating shared meals encouraged children to try new things and repeated exposure to fruit and vegetables over time showed children changing their preferences and starting to enjoy foods they had previously resisted. This is important; earlier studies reviewed by Gerritsen et al. (2019), indicated that overcoming children’s “aversion to the bitter and unfamiliar textures of vegetables requires repeated exposure and long-term positive reinforcement in order for children to begin to like such foods” (p. 15). Similarly Lakkakula et al. (2010) found that the number of children who reported liking vegetables that they previously disliked was greater after eight or nine tastings. Shared eating experiences, especially with the children and teachers eating together and repeated opportunities to try different fruits and vegetables is something all early learning centres could include in their programmes as learning experiences, even if the children bring lunches.

The sense of wellbeing and community this KidsCan programme created could be replicated even without the KidsCan programme.

“The findings demonstrated that the programme had a number of benefits for children, such as good nutrition, and keeping them warm and dry ... reduced absences, engagement in learning, increased energy and attention span, and fewer small health issues...."
While there are many benefits to a shared food programme there are challenges for centres that do not have a cook. There are regulations and food safety guidelines to follow and additional demands for teachers if they are also preparing food.

Conclusion

The KidsCan ECE programme was a valued source of support, but the complex interaction of individual and environmental aspects means the desired increase in children’s participation varied. Nevertheless, there were a range of benefits reported by both whānau and teachers that show how beneficial the programme can be.

The findings of this evaluation highlighted the challenges faced by many families of young children. Ru et al. (2023) provide insights into the potentially penal nature of welfare supports and highlight the need for humane approaches to supporting those who are experiencing a range of hardships. Universal provision of food and clothing in the participating centres was an important element of this programme, providing a sense of wellbeing and belonging for the early learning communities involved. Similar results have been found in schools too, with reports of children’s self-esteem being lifted by new clothing and no stigma associated with receiving these items (Massey University, 2011). Meanwhile we have to fight for policies that enable whānau to have sufficient incomes to address material hardship, without reliance on charity.

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Notes

1. ELL does not hold data for Te Kōhanga Reo
2. W = Whānau
3. T = Teacher

References


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