

# SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM RESEARCH

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Kellogg Company Fund commissioned research in 2022 to develop a deeper understanding of and build on previous research around the benefits of school and community breakfast programs. The research was conducted in five countries where breakfast programs (BPs) are at different stages of development with the main objective of understanding more about the impact of these initiative on the following:

- Children's abilities to participate at school.
- Children's social skills from the perspective of parents.
- Children's social skills from the perspective of teachers/administration staff.

The key findings of the interviews conducted with parents, teachers and staff involved with BPs in Brazil, India, South Africa, the UK and U.S., were as follows:

- Breakfast programs are spaces where children/students can build a sense of belonging, which in turn gives them a sense of security and identity that supports their social development.
- Interviewees in the U.S., the UK and Brazil, where BPs are well established, emphasize community building as the most beneficial impact of the program. Sharing breakfast together can provide a context and environment for children where values such as kindness and the importance of helping others are reinforced.
- From the parents' perspective, students across all countries have expressed excitement about going to school in the morning due to the prospect of eating breakfast and socializing with their friends.
- The teachers interviewed pointed out that students seem to be calmer and less irritable, disruptive and tired during lessons. Teachers also report that students are better able to follow along with the class, as they have had time in the morning to effectively unwind and wake up during the time spent having breakfast at school.
- Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) benefited as much as other children, this research adds to the body of knowledge but there is more to learn.

## THE STORY SO FAR

BPs are an established intervention in schools and communities around the world. Whilst they are not uniform or consistently administered, their primary aim is to provide healthy food to children in areas where food security is an issue. Many of these open approximately an hour before school starts and are run by teachers, teaching assistants, catering staff and other employed staff/volunteers usually on school premises including in classrooms or at community centers; others are part of the school day and held in classrooms or cafeterias.

In countries where BPs are well established, they have evolved. Many provide the opportunity for children to complete homework and other cognitive tasks, as well as time to play and socialize. Early research looking at the impact of BPs on outcomes beyond health and nutrition have indicated that these programs provide other benefits such as improved classroom behavior, positive impact on mood and the development of social skills, as well as relationship building and social interaction in general (Deppe, 2017). These impacts, in turn, lead to a positive impact on the wider community of parents and staff. Kellogg wanted to further our understanding of the additional benefits of BPs through this research.







## **THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAMS ON CHILDREN'S ABILITY TO MORE FULLY PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL**

This research project has both validated and extended previous research, discovering new ways BPs are positively impacting children beyond providing important nutrition.

The present research confirmed that BPs provide a calmer start to the day, minimizing the rush and potential for family conflict. The provision of a social outlet also provides children with opportunities to meet and interact with students of different ages across the school. This helps to develop relationship building skills, form new friendships and provide a valuable outlet for communication. As an added benefit, this space encourages students to try new and different foods. (Graham, Russo and Defeyter, 2015 and Golding et al., 2015)

The present research identified new aspects of BPs that have a direct impact on students' social behavior. Previous research hinted that participation in BPs encourages students to overcome emotional insecurity, self-consciousness and shyness. This latest research confirmed this and also identified that BPs improve students' abilities to socialize whilst having a meal and learn manners and etiquette at the same time. Parents, in particular, value these changes in behavior when they are practiced in the home.

Additionally, this research discovered that BPs impacts positively on students' abilities to share, and improve the management of emotions and behaviors in different social scenarios. BPs encourages children to recognize and make healthy food choices for themselves, as well as imitate positive behaviors between different age groups.

## THE IMPACT ON SOCIAL SKILLS: THE PARENTS' VIEWS

Several benefits were shared by parents interviewed. School breakfast programs have a positive effect on their children in the following ways:

- Enhanced self-awareness and acceptance by peers – The sense of belonging that BPs can create for students creates a more welcoming school community. This is particularly true for BPs that have evolved beyond meal provision to include other activities.
- Improved self-esteem and confidence – Spending time with fellow students at the BP gave many children confidence to engage with their peers, older students and the adults around them.
- An expanded friendship network – Children who attend BPs meet other children in the same school year/grade and sometimes across other years/grades. This facilitates a strong sense of belonging and creates links between academic and extra-curricular activities.
- More adventurous with food – Many children become more willing to try different foods at BPs than at home. Seeing other children try different foods gives them the confidence to experiment.
- Better table manners and etiquette – Many parents appreciated the improvement in table manners that BPs provide.
- Independence from parents – Children become more self-sufficient and helpful at home.
- SEN children appear to benefit in the same way as all the other children – but more research is needed.
- Adoption of more inclusive behaviors across the school – in general children who attend BPs learn how to socialize and behave with others, and older children learn how to care for and model behavior for younger students.



*It helps with socializing. I know my son doesn't really eat, he's a very picky eater. I think just the act of sitting with his friends and seeing what they're eating encourages him to want to expand his palate because he's looking at his peers trying something different.... It really helps with socialization.*

*- Parent of 6-year-old, public school, U.S.*

*There are some key people that he has spent more time with because of them being in the club.... Maybe his bonds are a little bit stronger there. There were also a couple of the kids who were in the club that he went to camp with during school holidays last week.... That made the transition to camp easy because he was excited about those people being there.*

*- Parent of 5-year-old, public school, UK*

*I think it's very good for my daughters. This is also related to bringing friends closer. ....When my older daughter went to another school, she left home after having breakfast, and she didn't sit in the cafeteria. She had no contact, she didn't create a habit, and she had no friends.*

*- Parent of 5-year-old, public school, Brazil*

*Everyone is happy, and around food and the activities make them entertained.... That could be the reason why my son is more interested in making friends with the other children.*

*- Parent of 6-year-old, public school, UK*





*As for breakfast, it's great because of the interaction with other age ranges. For example, there are children younger than him and he says they are so cute, and he likes them. Also, the older children, as it makes them build a link and it must make him feel more important ...to be with someone older. Both factors have contributed to this social improvement.*

*- Parent of 4-year-old, private school, Brazil*

*Yes, so she's been learning how to help at home, and now, sometimes ... she comes and says, "Mommy, do you want to help me with the breakfast?"... Because she's going to [the] breakfast program [and] seeing what's happening there, she's helping to set the table, to bring the things. She's doing the same thing at home, which comes.*

*- Parent of 9-year-old, public school, UK*

*It gives her something to look forward to when going to school. It makes her going to school easier and fun.*

*- Parent of 5-year-old SEN, private school, South Africa*

*She has started eating all vegetables, she learned all the table manners and ... also[ is]sitting with everyone and eating together ... . She speaks to everyone so there is a unity and confidence built up.*

*- Parent of 10-year-old, private school, India*



## THE IMPACT ON SOCIAL BEHAVIORS: THE TEACHERS' AND STAFF VIEW

Several benefits were shared by teachers and staff interviewed. School breakfast programs have a positive effect on children they engage with in the following ways:

- Better concentration and behavior in class - It appears that students spontaneously and jointly decide to behave, a collective agreement that enables them to concentrate and engage in their work and at the same time feel a sense of belonging within a community.
- Improved social skills – Children who attend some BPs have the opportunity to interact with children of different ages and are more confident in communicating with their fellow students and adults.
- Happier – In India teachers observed happier body language in children who attended BPs, whilst in the U.S. teachers commented that children were less angry and rumbunctious.
- Inclusive behaviours – By being in a mixed-age group, younger children learn to share food and older children help teach them how to use cutlery and behave. This creates a sense of community and inclusion.
- More willing to engage in conversation and more inquisitive – By being around a table, children talk more to each other and become inquisitive about each other's food choices. This helps reduce the level of classroom chat because children find it easier to communicate, express preferences and describe their needs more succinctly.







*Food is very regulating for our kids. It's a foundational thing. It's about that as well. A lot of the focus is about being a primary regulator in order to engage and be social with another person.*

*- Teaching support staff, SEN public school (ages 4-21), U.S.*

*First of all, the higher grade students tell the lower grade students how to fill their plates and keep it in their own place. This was the first thing we noticed. The senior grade kids would tell them how to carry the plates and table manners, which have been improved immensely.*

*- Teacher, private school (ages 2-17), India*

*A child looks forward to asking those who have opted for the breakfast and ask questions like "hi, can you please help me know the menu for today?", "How much calcium is there in this buttermilk?", "what nutrients am I consuming here?", whether it is protein carbohydrates or whatever. So, they look forward to how much of protein or carbohydrate did they consume after the meal.*

*- Teacher, private school (ages 2-17), India*

*I've seen it that children who may have been more in solitude or just working independently will engage a little bit more at the mealtime, especially if it's something that they like and they want to talk about it, or they want to talk about something that they ate at home that was similar.*

*- Chief Operating Officer, public school (ages 2-5), U.S.*





*[...] the positive side of it is that you will see that they are less talkative when they are in the classroom. They won't be too much with their friend... because they have got 20 minute of breakfast program where they have been able to express themselves in a lot of ways [...]. I think the breakfast program tends to bring them a bit more discipline when they are in the classroom.... They are more concentrated in their class, in their activities, or whatever homework you have set them up to do, or any coursework you are doing, then you see they are more focused.*

*- Teacher, public school (ages 5-11), UK*

*Yes, there have been occasions where students who don't normally attend breakfast program or need to, just come to breakfast program, and they may be known to have negative behaviors throughout the school. That has helped them to just see everybody and to almost be a little bit vulnerable, and evaluate their behavior before they start acting. Then they socialize in a positive way. [...] The students who do attend breakfast program tend to be quite strong-willed and a bit more independent. I think to normal adults or adults who don't work with kids, would look at that behavior and be like, "Oh, you are being rude," because you are so outspoken and independent, but actually they're just children who have already formed thoughts in their mind, and they're articulating it in a way that is just okay to them.*

*- Teacher, public school (ages 5-11), UK*

*The ones that attend with us always look forward to coming to school ...because we get to help them out with their homework.... With those shy kids you can't even ask them anything in class, but they will come to us and talk to us and say, "Ma'am I've got a problem with this." And you will find a student who doesn't attend breakfast program asking help from a student who attends the breakfast program.... They form friendships... doing that.*

*- Teacher, public school (ages 7-15), South Africa*



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Allow for mixed-age groups to attend where possible – With mixed age groups, older students learn to nurture the younger ones, helping and supporting them during mealtimes. The younger children learn by copying the behavior of the older students. Overall, this improves all children's social skills and encourages the formation of new friendships outside of a classroom setting. This needs to be balanced with the research from the U.S. that concludes that greater numbers of students attend BPs when held in their classrooms.
- Implement playful activities – Activities at BPs that are less constrained by the educational structure of the classroom are important to bonding and promoting social interactions. A range of activities gives children a channel to engage and express their emotions in different social scenarios. Teachers have observed greater social interactions and new friendships being formed through these playful activities.
- Incorporate educational content into discussions during breakfast – The BP is a good environment for learning and development. For instance, in the U.S., teachers discuss the colors of foods, practice counting when serving portions, and share information about nutrition. Doing so provides children with confidence to learn and communicate these new vocabularies.
- Provide a varied food choice – Choosing food encourages children to formulate opinions, communicate their needs and in turn improve their social skills. Providing children with food choices also opens up discussions surrounding food, rather than just accepting what is given to them.
- No food from home – When implementing a BP, it's recommended that children are not allowed to bring food from home because it increases conflicts and creates hierarchies. Whereas BPs that provide food create a space where different socioeconomic statuses can be leveled.
- Ensure the duration is long enough – A BP that lasts up to an hour allows for children to unwind and socialize at a pace that they feel is not rushed. Where children are allowed to release energy, this has a great impact on classroom behavior

## CONCLUSION

Now in place for more than 20 years in some countries, it is understood that BPs provide important nutrition to children who might otherwise go without. This latest study builds on earlier research (please see the Kellogg literature review from 2021 for more details) showing that these programs also provide students, families and school communities with other far-reaching social benefits. Students who participate in BPs show up ready to learn and develop the social skills to engage in meaningful ways with school communities and their families.





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Kellogg undertook a fully literature review in 2021 which inspired this work. For further citations please see that work as well as the references below.

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