



# Chapter 6

## Healthy Kids, Bulgaria



**Elina Golemanova, Teodora Handjieva-Darlenska,  
Svetoslav Handjiev**

Healthy kids Bulgaria website: [apraagency.com](http://apraagency.com)

### 1. Healthy Kids programme overview

In 2012, the Healthy Kids in Bulgaria programme was developed, in order to combine the efforts of public, private and community partners to help prevent childhood obesity in the country.

The primary goal of the programme was to make balanced nutrition and physical activities accessible and fun for Bulgarian families and primary school students by showing how fun a healthy lifestyle could be. Through the use of various interaction methods specifically created to match the characteristics and needs of each target group, the programme aims to inspire and initiate healthier behaviour based on informed choices, balanced nutrition, daily physical activity and family and community initiatives.

The coordination team developed a strategic plan for an educational program, supported by various in-school and after-school activities, in order to educate children between 7 and 13 years old on how to make their own daily food choices and to promote an active lifestyle amongst families. The aim was to raise awareness and

engage school communities, professionals, celebrities, parents and teachers to be active participants in the discussion on the health risks of overweight and obesity amongst children. Healthy Kids in Bulgaria aimed to motivate people to consider and implement a change in their daily nutrition and physical movement choices. Interactive activities in each stage of the programme were designed to change children's nutrition and physical habits and teach them to be proactive in their selection of healthy food and ways to exercise.

## Settings

The Healthy Kids in Bulgaria activities were tailored to the needs of each community. Outdoor settings included the schools' surroundings and playgrounds and public areas such as parks and city squares. Indoor activities were held in the schools' classrooms, sport halls, conference rooms and other public indoor areas. The combination of outdoor and indoor activities allowed a maximum utilisation of each venue and ensured a fun educational environment for the participants, suitable for each part of the program.

In order to assure the activities' success and influence, BASORD (the Bulgarian Association for the Study of Obesity and Related Disease) has conducted a two-day training of selected students, which were chosen to be Healthy Kids organisers in Bulgaria. During the 2012–2013 academic year, the programme's organisers held a number of fun and interactive lessons with games and competitions at school and outdoors. The use of diverse and interactive trainings and games engaged children and sparked their interest in a balanced diet and sports.

## Participants

After the pilot year of implementation, Healthy Kids in Bulgaria widened its range to include another region in the programme. By the end 2014, 20 schools took part in the activities and over 8,500 families were directly involved in the interventions.

## Methodology

Healthy Kids in Bulgaria was implemented in periods, in accordance with the schools' schedule. Each period was divided in stages, implemented once a year for the overall period of 5 consecutive years. The methodology was developed to ensure the continuity of activities and proper evaluation with result measurement. At the beginning and at the end of each period the results are measured and progress reports are done.

- *Introduction:* The programme is introduced to the school community, teachers and parents, and their agreement for children to be involved is requested;
- *Research and plan development:* The children's BMI and nutritional knowledge are measured. A nutritional and educational plan is developed, in accordance with the government guidelines and the specific needs of the school;
- *Communication and development:* The programme is communicated to the media and general public by means of public relations and social marketing activities;

- *Distribution of basic information:* Basic nutritional information is distributed to the participants. The informational materials are developed according to each target group's specific characteristics and informational needs;
- *Implementation of the activities:* Distribution of informational materials for children, professionals, teachers and parents; school branding and sports facilities renovation, organization of nutritional and cooking classes, organization of regular parents-teachers meetings and discussions, organization of physical activities opportunities and games for the children, open-air family days, etc.
- *Results measurement:* Parents, teachers and children's knowledge and understanding of the information distributed, lessons learned, lifestyle change.

## Target Groups

The predominant primary target group was primary school children of ages 7 to 13, along with their parents, and the teachers. Most of the targeted children and their parents come from middle class families with average income. They live in a respective area (region) in capital that contains both low and high socio-economic backgrounds. This target group focuses on children who study at public primary schools, including kids with disabilities that are in the same school classes. The parents come from various educational backgrounds and have high influence on the family decisions and lifestyle choices.

The project was also directed towards people working in local authority offices, doctors and university students with the aim to attract their attention to the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and the need for action. Neighbours and friends of families and professionals that participate in the programme are also involved via Healthy Kids in Bulgaria. Media representatives play a significant role in the behavioural change and healthy lifestyle perception. Their attention and reflection on the problems of obesity are essential in the process of addressing the issue to help achieve recognition and further growth.

The efforts were concentrated in the city of Sofia to ensure project sustainability, and to focus on achieving the objectives and desired results, local authorities and NGOs were actively involved in the activities plan development. The beginning of the programme was funded by a private partner –the biggest food and beverage company in Bulgaria and a leader in nutrition, health and wellness– Nestlé Bulgaria.

In 2012, Healthy Kids in Bulgaria was launched at 10 schools in the capital. In less than a year, the programme attracted more than 3,500 families with children between the ages of 7 and 13 from two districts in Sofia –Triaditsa and Studentski. Events and activities targeted families, school stakeholders and the society through the involvement of private and public partners. Today, 8,500 families participate in the programme that is held in 20 schools in Sofia.

## Central level

Healthy Kids in Bulgaria was developed by APRA Porter Novelli Group in partnership with BASORD. The programme is funded by Nestlé Bulgaria, which allowed the sustainability of the project in the challenging economic conditions of the country.

The central coordination team is led by Elina Golemanova, Account Manager at APRA Porter Novelli Group, and Professor Svetoslav Handjiev, Chairman of BASORD.

The central coordination team is dedicated to the development of the strategic planning of the programme's activities and their implementation phases. The team maintains relations with all project partners and stakeholders and coordinates the work of each local team member.

## Local level

The role of the local team is to implement the specific actions in the schools of each region. The members of the local team also include famous sportsmen who are loved by the public –volleyball players Evgeni Ivanov-Pushkata and Svetlozar Ivanov. The local team members keep regular contact with the school staff and the local stakeholders and also work on the field together with Healthy Kids in Bulgaria organisers.

## Scientific level

Because Healthy Kids in Bulgaria is developed in collaboration with BASORD, the Association is the main scientific body of the program. As the most authoritative association in the area, BASORD promotes healthy nutrition, informs the general public including disadvantaged populations about the problems of adult and childhood obesity and has created a network of nutrition and obesity specialists targeting health inequalities. BASORD collaborates with IASO for the organisation of SCOPE courses in Bulgaria and is a partner of EU projects such as DiOGenes and DIETS.

## Partners and collaborations

The programme action plans were developed with BASORD and received the support of local authorities and stakeholders:

- Three national ministries:
  - The Ministry of Education and Science;
  - The Ministry of Physical Education and Sports;
  - The Ministry of Healthcare.

In addition, the programme has had the full support of the local municipalities throughout the years. Organizations that took part in the project throughout the years include:

- Sofia Municipality;
- The Municipality of Triaditsa region;
- The Municipality of Studentski region;
- The Municipality of Lyulin region;
- The Bulgarian Gymnastics Federation – member of the European Gymnastics Federation;
- The Bulgarian Athletics Federation;
- Euro-Toques Bulgaria;

- The Association of the medical students in Bulgaria;
- Celebrity sportsmen.

In addition to the public and private organizations mentioned above, several types of stakeholders were involved in the programme.

## 2. Social Marketing Activities

Each year, the central coordination team develops an integrated communication plan, which is implemented by each local coordinator, responsible for the schools in the respective region.

The central team conducts a kick-off meeting with partners, local authorities, school directors and local coordinators, in order to present the school's strategy for the upcoming year.

Once the project plan is shared with all the stakeholders, the local coordinators will hold field meetings, develop the actions' schedules, and distribute the organisers' roles and engagements. They are also responsible for the informational campaign in the schools, such as:

- Official Letters to school stakeholders and parents;
- Regular meetings with teachers and school directors;
- Personal contacts and programme presentations to the parents held by famous Bulgarian sportsmen;
- Declarations for participation, which each of the parents sign, in order to give permission for participation in the programme.

followed by:

- In-class balanced nutrition lessons for all children, explaining the basics of balanced nutrition, the nutritional pyramid, fruits and vegetables consumption;
- In-class balanced nutrition games and activities for all children, giving practical knowledge and engaging children;
- Healthy Cooking Classes in school, teaching all children how to prepare a balanced sandwich for school;
- Open Sports lessons by celebrity sportsmen and sports tournaments at schools;
- Fast, Brave, Skilled and Healthy celebrations for all children in the school yard, which participate in cooking and relay races;
- Picnic in the mountains for all school stakeholders, etc.

The interactive balanced nutrition lessons and games were supplemented by healthy cooking classes where children prepared a balanced school menu. Celebrity chefs visited each of the schools and organised games and practical lessons to teach students how to prepare a balanced school lunch.

As part of the programme and in partnership with the Bulgarian Athletics Federation, Healthy Kids in Bulgaria became a part of the international project IAAF Kids Athletics

and all schools in the programme were involved in athletics trainings and competitions for both teachers and children. Over 100 children and teachers in each school took part in athletics games and competitions for one day. The chairman of the Bulgarian Athletics Federation Dobromir Karamarinov visited some of the schools and awarded prizes and certificates to the participants.

Besides the school-based activities, numerous public events for the whole family are organised, in order to reach the local communities. Public and private partners take part in the activities; and media are invited to visit each of the events. The celebrity endorsement is very valuable, as well. Children are influenced by famous role models who help them understand the importance of active lifestyle and balanced nutrition.

### 3. EPHE Community

*Triaditsa Municipality* is a district located in the central part of Sofia. As of 2006, its population is about 65,000 people. The district has an area of 9,8 km<sup>2</sup>. It includes three neighbourhoods of the capital: Ivan Vazov, Strelbishte and Gotse Delchev.

Moreover, the inhabitants have a range of lower to high income, the unemployment in Triaditsa is only 3.7% which is more than two times less than the national average. There are no manufacturing plants within the district so the economy relies on services, trade, finance, tourism and administration. The infrastructure is currently under development.

In 2012, the programme Healthy Kids in Bulgaria became part of the EPHE Project. Ten schools from 2 local communities within the capital of Sofia were chosen.

The selected schools include areas with varying socio-economic backgrounds. 7 of the schools are located in Triaditsa Region, 2 schools cover the whole Studentski Region and 1 private school was also involved. This approach allowed us to monitor the differences in the behaviours of each target group, as well as to examine the efficiency of the implanted actions within a variety of families.

There are 12 schools and 10 kindergartens in the region and 7 of the schools are monitored by the EPHE project. Many important medical facilities are located there including the Medical-Military Academy, the Hygiene Centre, the Dental Institute, the Children Paediatrics; the hospitals Alexandrovska, Prof. Ivan Kirov, Sv. Ekaterina, Maichin Dom and Sv. Sofia. There are three polyclinics as well.

The average age within the community is between 15 and 64 years old and refers to 64% of the Triaditsa population. The region has one big sports hall and a stadium, but they are mostly used for activities organised by private entities or for institutional public events.

Healthy Kids in Bulgaria receives a very strong support from the Triaditsa Municipality team. The Municipality Director for Sports and Culture and the Deputy Major are amongst the programme founders. They played a significant role in the launch of Healthy Kids and thanks to their efforts, the programme was able to cover almost

all schools in the region. Thus they are very motivated to implement all EPHE actions and activities. Furthermore, the EPHE project gives added value to the region with the scientific data and the research results developed within the project frame.

*Studentski Municipality* is one of the most diversified areas in Sofia. It includes three neighbourhoods of the capital: Studentski Grad, Durvenitsa and Musagenitsa. The district is located in the southern part of Sofia. The population is 71,961 inhabitants with lower to middle income. Average age within the community is between 15 and 64 years old, which refers to 86.1% of the population. It is unlike most campus areas in Western Europe and Northern America. Studentski is a common living place for most of the students of Sofia's numerous universities. This helps students from different higher education institutions meet and interact, but on the other hand causes major transportation issues as the bulk of Sofia's university faculties are situated relatively far from the city centre and public transport is often unable to cope with Studentski Grad's needs. The traffic is frequently congested especially during rush hour - mornings and late afternoons.

2011 marked the set-up of the largest skate park on the Balkans situated within the park area in front of the University of National and World Economy. Two multifunctional halls, Hristo Botev and the Winter Palace of Sports, host a number of events regularly. Because of the cheap rent, less than €20 per month, it is a very attractive place to live.

Studentski grad hosts the National Sports Academy in Bulgaria and the local authorities are very open to actions, directed to active lifestyle and physical activity. Nevertheless, Studentski Municipality has 3 sports fields, 1 sports hall, 3kms of cycle tracks and 10 sports clubs.

Within these two communities the Healthy Kids Project targeted 200 families in 10 schools: 3 self-contained elementary schools with about 700 students in each school; 6 elementary schools, combined with a high school in one building with about 1,000 students in each and 1 private school with about 500 students:

- *9 of them public:*
  - 20 OU<sup>1</sup> Todor Minkov;
  - 41 OU Patriarh Evtimii;
  - 47 SOU<sup>2</sup> Hristo Danov;
  - 73 SOU Vladislav Gramatic;
  - 104 OU Zahari Stoyanov;
  - 121 SOU Georgi Izmirliev;
  - 126 OU Petko Todorov;
  - 8 SOU Vasil Levski;
  - 55 SOU Petko Karavelov
- *1 private school:*
  - School St. George

---

1. OU (OU - основно училище) - primary school (duration: 8 years, age of students 7-14).

2. SOU (COY - средно общо-образователно училище) - secondary school (duration: 12 years, age of students 7-19).

25 families from each school were monitored for a period of 3 years with the EPHE project and all of them will continue to participate in the programme after the project ends.

## 4. Interventions Undertaken

### 4.1. Preparation Step–End of 2012 to June 2013

Within the first year of the project, the focus was on preparing the community for the project implementation and to further gain support from the local partners. A motivation and awareness campaign was developed, in order to motivate families to get involved and take part in implementing the first evaluation phase.

Official letters were sent to national and local authorities (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Science, local mayors) and a meeting with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science was organised. During the meeting, the EPHE project was presented and the Municipality was officially invited to support EPHE actions. Having the support of the Ministry, an official invitation letter from the Ministry was sent to all school directors so that they felt very comfortable with EPHE implementation.

In order to raise awareness on the project in Bulgaria, BASORD organised a press conference to commemorate World Obesity Day. The press conference was followed by free check-ups for weight, fat mass and cardiovascular risks from October 30th to November 3rd at the NPC in Sofia and a scientific conference on the developments in the fight against obesity was held on the same day.

Once the schools were involved, the focus was put on the families' motivation, in order to ensure a high participation rate and dedication of the parents and teachers. The main motivation for most of the families was the healthy camp "School for Health – For children, parents and teachers", organised by BASORD in one of the most famous seaside resorts of Bulgaria. A lottery was organised for all the families and teachers who participated in the project and 5 families and a teacher from each school were drawn at random to take part in the camp. They spent a healthy week at the seaside with a professionally developed schedule, including balanced nutrition classes, entertaining sports activities and sports games for the whole family, and personal nutritional consultations by Professor Svetoslav Handjiev and his team. This approach led to 94% participation rate within the data collection of the baseline evaluation and to the empowerment of EPHE.

### 4.2. The Intervention Step: September 2013 to June 2014

After examining the baseline results, a detailed action plan was developed for the second year. The results showed low fruit and vegetables consumption, high soft drinks consumption and long screen exposure amongst Bulgarian children. The actions were

designed to address the price influence, the habitual intake and home availability of fruit and vegetables, as well as the parenting practices such as nagging behaviour.

Each school had a dedicated intervention plan and it was implemented within the second evaluation period. As the first “School for Health” began in September 2013, this was the best occasion to start the intervention and to turn 130 parents, children and teachers into active lifestyle and balanced nutrition ambassadors. Within the camp frame, personal anthropometric measurement and professional consultations on the healthy lifestyle and the specific health problems were held. Each family had the opportunity to ask specific questions, based on the measurement results. Specific health concerns were discussed. The EPHE families and teachers spent a week on the seaside with a balanced menu and a fixed daily programme. Morning gymnastics, fixed sleep and rest time and balanced nutritional menu were also a part of the programme. Besides the four main pillars of EPHE intervention, the nutritional approach was based on two more important dietary elements for the Bulgarian children: the consumption of milk and dairy products (which is the lowest in EU amongst children), and the traditions in the healthy and balanced diet (the so-called Balkan diet).

While parents had lectures, children painted their favourite fruits and vegetables with a smiley face and food they don't like with a frowny face. The organisers explained why all fruits and vegetables are good for health and how they can be prepared, in order to be tastier for the children. Family games and beach sports activities were organised every day.

At the end of camp, there was an official closing ceremony. The Minister of Education and Science awarded special certificates to all participants in the School for Health initiative. National and local media representatives were invited to cover the event and the EPHE project received publicity.



Dances during “School for Health – For children, parents and teachers”



### “School for Health – For children, parents and teachers”

“School for Health – For children, parents and teachers” initiative was presented at different scientific congresses (International symposium on obesity and related diseases, Albena 2014; Scientific Forum of MOCA, Bucharest 2014; National Congress on Nutrition, Varna 2015; and European Congress on Obesity, Prague 2015). “School for Health – For children, parents and teachers” gained much attention from other countries such as Romania, where school-aged children expressed their wish to take part in it.

Within the school year, all children took part in in-class activities:

- Balanced nutrition classes and games, based on fruit and beverage consumption and the nutritional pyramid;
- Healthy cooking activities and participation in the European Day for Healthy Food and Cooking with Children;
- Some of the famous sportsmen in Bulgaria, Olympic gold medallists and World Champions, visited the schools and held open lessons for the children;
- Each school had a sports celebration and organized kids’ athletic tournaments in the school yard;
- Lessons on water consumption and sleep importance were held by the programme organisers and the children developed their own “Dreams Diaries”, which were signed by celebrity sportsmen;
- Water Day with painting exhibition and paintings on the ground was organized, in order to focus on the importance of water consumption. Parents received informational materials on water and children won special certificates, delivered by their favourite animated hero.

## 4.3. Public events

### 4.3.1. Sofia Festival of Science

In 2012, Healthy Kids activities were organised during the Sofia Festival of Science. In a tent within the festival area, a nutritionist held balanced nutrition presentation

and lessons. Interesting tricks and tips were presented with real practical examples. As a complement of the theory, a celebrity chef demonstrated healthy recipes to parents and children. After the demonstration, there was a fun cooking competition for parents and children.

### **4.3.2. European Day for Healthy Food and Cooking with Children**

For 3 consecutive years, Healthy Kids in Bulgaria participated in the European Day for Healthy Food and Cooking with Children, organised by Euro-Toques Bulgaria under the patronage of the European Commission.

Each year, nearly 500 kids aged 7 to 12 from private, public, and specialized schools for disabled children participate in the event. They prepare healthy food together with chefs, popular TV hosts and celebrity sportsmen. The initiative aims to encourage children to pick up and cook a well-balanced menu, and to look for it. All Healthy Kids in Bulgaria children participate in the event, together with the programme partners.

In 2013, three of the Healthy Kids celebrity ambassadors took part in the European Day for Healthy Food and Cooking with Children. They were the deputy-minister of Sports, the most famous Bulgarian gymnast, Yordan Yovchev, the most successful Bulgarian basketball coach and a TV star, Titi Papazov, and the beloved World Champion in volleyball Evgeni Ivanov-Pushkata. They cooked together with children and had numerous TV interviews raising awareness about the event.

In 2014, the festival was opened by the Head of the Representative Office of the European Commission in Bulgaria, the President of Euro-Toques Bulgaria, and Yolanta Delibozova – Yoli, the Bulgarian face of 24KITCHEN. For the first time, the initiative joined in the global idea of Jamie Oliver, Food Revolution Day, which seeks to gather more than a million children to cook to set a Guinness World Record. Jamie Oliver sent his special video lesson to all the participating Bulgarian children, in which he showed how to prepare a “Rainbow salad”. The little cooks, together with first class chefs of Euro-Toques Bulgaria, prepared a healthy and balanced menu.

## **5. Remarkable activities**

### **5.1. World Water Day**

The World Water Day celebration, organised in one of the schools, was one of the most remarkable actions in 2014. Over 200 children from first to seventh grade celebrated the World Water Day in 126 primary school Petko Todorov in Triadtisa. Students prepared a special exhibition entitled “Water in Our Lives” to promote the importance of daily water consumption as part of a balanced diet and active lifestyle. One of the most popular young performers and the winner of the first season of the music show X Factor, Raffi Boghossian, was a special guest at the event. Raffi looked at the children’s work and talked to them and their parents about the

importance of water consumption for their health, after which he awarded all participants in the exhibition with Healthy Kids in Bulgaria certificates. Parents received materials with valuable information and tips on how to motivate children to drink 8 glasses of water per day, whereas the most active students were honoured by the guest star, with whom they took souvenir pictures. A special guest was Mrs. Silva Avramova Radilova, Deputy Mayor of Triaditsa District in Sofia Municipality as an active project partner.

## 5.2. Celebrity and officials' endorsement

The main lesson, learned from the project, was the important role that celebrities and officials play in motivating families. Role models have strong influence and we consider them a necessary instrument in the process of change of behaviours. The open sports lessons in the schools were not only appreciated by the children, but sometimes by the teachers and directors too, who were even more excited. The participation of the Minister of Education and Science in the "School for Health" initiative had also a great impact amongst all participants in the project.

And last but not least, the EPHE project gave an additional added value to Healthy Kids in Bulgaria. It let the programme coordinators develop additional skills, share experience with other EPODE member programmes and participate in international meetings of high importance.