

# WHAT MAKES IT HARDER FOR LONDON'S CHILDREN TO BE HEALTHIER?



**LONDON'S  
CHILD  
OBESITY  
TASKFORCE**



SUPPORTED BY  
**MAYOR OF LONDON**



London is one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Yet our city is home to some of the poorest neighbourhoods in the country. In fact, today almost two in five Londoners live in poverty.<sup>1</sup>

This affects London's children. After taking account of the cost of housing, 38% of London's children – around 700,000 – live on a low income.<sup>2</sup> In inner London, this figure rises to over 40 per cent. Four of the six poorest local authorities in the UK (in terms of household income and relative poverty) are in London.<sup>3</sup>

This has significant consequences for the health of London's children. For example, nearly two fifths (39%) of London's low-income families worry about running out of money for food.<sup>4</sup> Most families experiencing food insecurity (60%) are in work and living in the most deprived lowest 20% of neighbourhoods (measured through the index of multiple deprivation) of London.<sup>5</sup>

Part of the problem is the high cost of housing and the nature of low-wage work in the city. Of the 700,000 London children living in low-income families, nearly half live in the private rented sector.<sup>6</sup> Some 500,000 have at least one parent who works,<sup>7</sup> with many parents having more than one job to try and

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**IN INNER LONDON,**  
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**RISES TO OVER**  
**40%**

**722,000**  
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**LONDON EARN**  
**LESS THAN**  
**THE LONDON**  
**LIVING WAGE**

The London Child Obesity Taskforce was established in 2018 as part of the Mayor's commitment to address child obesity. Find out more at [www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/health/londons-child-obesity-taskforce](http://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/health/londons-child-obesity-taskforce) or email [childobesitytaskforce@london.gov.uk](mailto:childobesitytaskforce@london.gov.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> Mayor of London 2018. Economic Development Strategy. London, GLA

<sup>2</sup> London Sustainable Development Commission 2017. London's quality of life indicators report 2017. London, GLA

<sup>3</sup> Valadez-Martinez L, Hirsch D 2017. Compilation of Child Poverty Local Indicators. Loughborough, Centre for Research in Social Policy

<sup>4</sup> GLA 2013. A Zero Hungry City – Tackling food poverty in London. London, GLA

<sup>5</sup> London Assembly 2019. The Survey of Londoners. London, GLA

<sup>6</sup> London Sustainable Development Commission 2017. Op cit

<sup>7</sup> London Sustainable Development Commission 2017. Op cit





make ends meet. An estimated 722,000 workers in London earn less than the London Living Wage.<sup>8</sup> In families where neither parent works, 70% of their children are living in relative poverty.

Recognising the impact of this situation on Londoners' life chances, the Mayor is committed to take action through his Economic Development Strategy. This strategy seeks ways to tackle some of the costs that low-income households face, by promoting fair and stable employment.<sup>9</sup>

In his Health Inequalities Strategy, the Mayor also recognised that inequity is a major health concern. Unhealthy weight is a clear example. Childhood obesity has a strong relationship with deprivation. This has major implications – not just for children's future life chances, but for our city's future success as a place of fairness, productivity, culture, tolerance and opportunity.

Given the diversity of our city, we know that different children face different challenges, depending on a wide range of factors (see box). But children from all walks of life are finding it hard to eat and drink healthily and stay active. We look at these daily realities through the eyes of four children from low-income families: Justin, Hannah, Anik and Jodie. These case studies are drawn from conversations with a range of children, parents and caregivers.

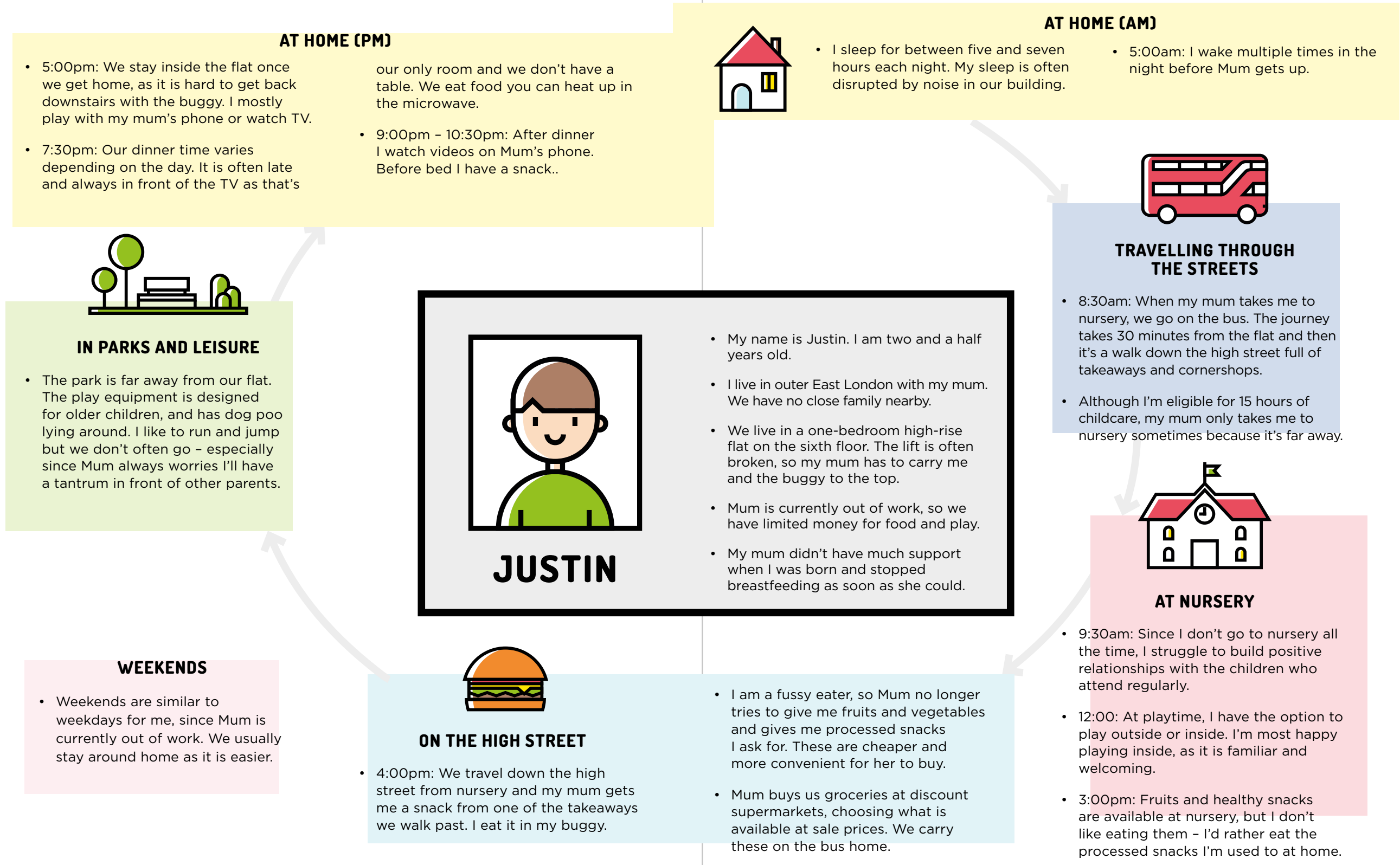
#### FACTORS AFFECTING CHILDREN'S HEALTH

- family income and how it is spent
- whether parents work and what they do
- who is involved in their lives as caregivers
- where they live
- what space and assets the household has access to
- the public and private spaces they frequent
- their perceptions and realities of community safety
- their family's social networks
- how they engage online and through social media

<sup>8</sup> Trust for London 2017. Beyond the Food Bank. London, London Food Link

<sup>9</sup> Mayor of London 2018. Op cit. Economic Development Strategy 2018. London, GLA

**JUSTIN** is two and a half and lives with his mum. She's out of work and they have very little money. Living on the sixth floor of a noisy tower block, he sleeps badly, often waking early. He watches TV while his mum gets ready. The lift is often broken and it's hard getting down the stairs with a buggy - and then it's half an hour by bus to the nursery. So, even though Justin gets 15 hours' free nursery support, he often doesn't go. Their flat has no kitchen so meals are heated in the microwave and eaten on the sofa, with the TV on. With no money for play activities and feelings of isolation (with no family around), Justin does little. At night, he mainly watches TV and plays videos on his mum's phone. Justin eats a lot of snacks, which his mum gets from the local high street. Even though he likes to run and jump, his mum avoids the local park because she's worried he'll misbehave in front of the other parents. She also feels unsafe, as there are people she'd prefer not to see and the play equipment is designed for older kids.



**HANNAH** is five and lives in outer South-East London. Her parents work very long hours in their jobs, so she spends a lot of time with her grandma, who lives locally and has ill health. A bowl of sugary cereal, food from the freezer and lots of time watching online videos make it easier for Grandma to care for Hannah when her parents are working. Hannah's mum scours grocery store flyers every week to stock the freezer up with frozen foods on promotion. They can't pay for the dance lessons Hannah wants and can only afford swimming the two days a month when it is free. She doesn't have a garden. Grandma drives Hannah to school because her health condition makes walking difficult. In the evenings, when her mum is doing chores, Hannah watches videos. She is targeted with adverts for unhealthy food and drinks online, on the high street and in the supermarket. She pesters her mum for these foods – especially the ones branded with her favourite cartoon characters.

### AT HOME (PM)

- 5:30pm: After I get home, I watch my favourite shows on TV – mostly online, while Mum does cooking and cleaning. Between videos I often see adverts showing sweets that Mum and I can get in the shops.
- 7:00pm: We eat dinner together, often using ready meals or frozen foods.
- Mum and I eat at the dining room table in the TV room. Sometimes, if Dad finishes his shift on time, he will join us.
- 8:30pm: I go to bed after having a bath.



### AT HOME (AM)

- 6:00am: I wake up.
- 6:30am: Mum and Dad have to leave early for work, so one of them drops me off at Grandma's house on route to work.
- 6:45-7:45am: While Grandma gets ready, I watch TV for an hour before breakfast, which is often a bowl of sugary cereal.

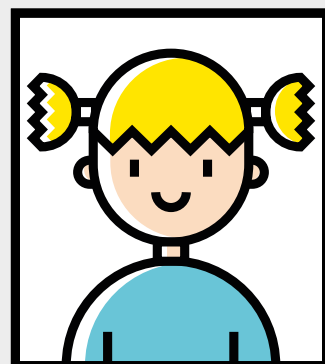


### IN PARKS AND LEISURE

- 5:00pm: Sometimes I get to go to the playground in the park, but if I need the toilet we have to drive home as there are none close to the children's playground.
- I would love to go to dance lessons and sports after school – especially dance – but Mum says I have to wait till we have more money saved.

### WEEKENDS

- Some weekends we use the local swimming pool. I would love to go more often but Mum says it is expensive.
- I usually go with Mum to the high street. She will buy a snack from a takeaway at the end of all her errands.
- As a treat, we go to the cinemas to see a movie. Mum buys me popcorn and a drink, since it is cheap with the entrance ticket. I love it!



**HANNAH**

- I'm Hannah. I'm five and a half.
- I live with Mum and Dad in outer South East London.
- We live in a flat and have a small porch but no garden to play.
- My parents do long hours at work, so I spend a lot of time with my grandma, who lives 20 minutes away..
- My grandma has a health problem that affects her walking so she often drives, or I have to slow down and wait for her.



### ON THE HIGH STREET

- 3:30pm: My mum or grandma pick me up from school.
- 4:00 pm: We go to the high street on route home. I go with my mum to the local discount supermarkets for

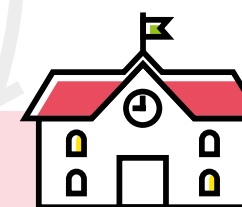
groceries. We often go to all three, as Mum looks to see what is on promotion and buys lots to freeze for another time. I like to go shopping as I see the cartoons I know on snacks and can ask Mum to buy them for me.

- We often go to the cornershop for a drink. My Mum looked for a water fountain but there aren't any around, so we buy juice instead.



### TRAVELLING THROUGH THE STREETS

- 8:00am: We usually drive to school. I would prefer to walk, but it's hard for Grandma with her ill health.

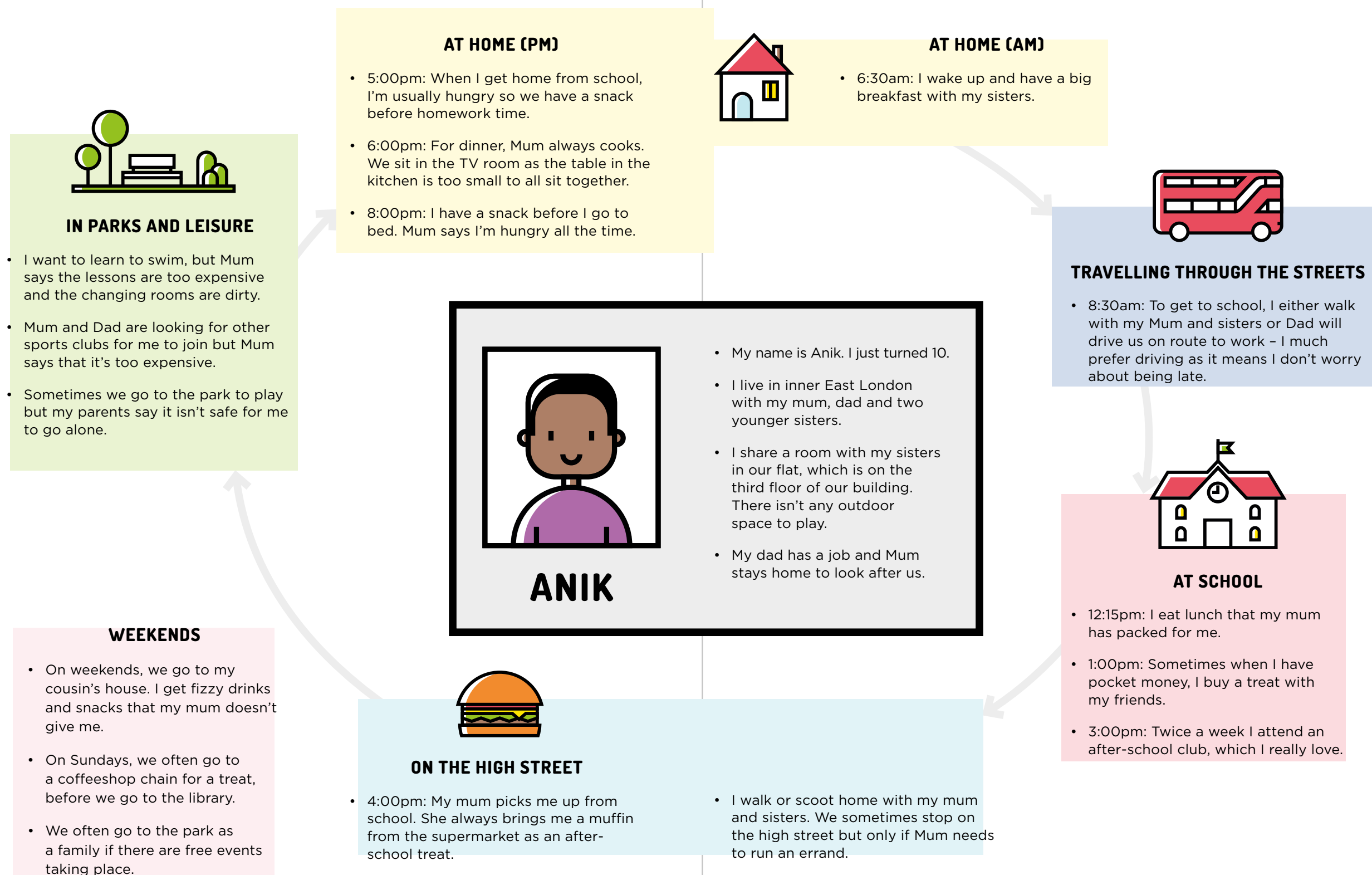


### AT SCHOOL

- 12:30pm: I eat lunch in the school cafeteria with my friends. I don't always like the food they give us.
- 1:30pm: In the afternoon I like PE – but sometimes this gets cancelled if it's raining and we have to play board games instead.
- 3:00pm: At the end of the day I often get a treat from the school tuckshop.



**ANIK** is ten. He lives in inner East London with his parents and two younger sisters, in a third-floor flat with no outside space. His mum has looked at sports clubs for Anik to join – she'd like him to be more active – but cannot find affordable options nearby. Anik enjoys going to the park but his mum doesn't consider it safe. The toilets are dirty and there's all sorts of rubbish lying around – so visits are limited to when she is with him. Anik either walks to school with his mum or is driven by his dad on his way into work. He prefers driving as it's less of a rush. When he does walk, his mum is relieved that the route is through the small streets that don't take them past the many local fast-food outlets on the main street. Mum always cooks dinner. She wishes there was enough space in the flat for a table so they could all sit together to eat. She makes him a big breakfast and a packed lunch too. At weekends they visit relatives, who always offer him crisps and fizzy drinks..



**JODIE** is 15 and lives in inner South London. Her mum cleans offices for a living so is often not home at night. Jodie looks after her 13-year-old nephew Kodi who also lives with them, and cooks for him when she can. Their tiny flat has a living room with a coffee table and a small kitchen off the side. It's tempting to get takeaways as they are cheap and easily available – the high street is five minutes away. Jodie also regularly uses a takeaway delivery app on her mobile phone. On her mum's one night off, they order food in and eat and talk together on the couch. Jodie used to play a lot of sport outside of school but she doesn't any more. On the way home from school with friends, Jodie and Kodi often go to their favourite chicken shop as the owners let them stay for as long as they want and make them feel welcome. In her free time, Jodie likes to use her free bus pass to travel around London with her friends. When she is on her own in the evenings, she talks with her friends on social media – often until past midnight.

**AT HOME (PM)**

- At night, it's just me and my nephew Kodi as Mum is out working.
- 6:30pm: We get home to the flat and turn on the TV – we mostly hang out here on the couch. In our flat, the living room is only big enough to fit a couch and coffee table. We have a small kitchen off the side but no table to sit at.
- 7:30-8:30pm: There isn't a real grocery store within close walking distance, so I usually get us dinner from the takeaways around the corner.
- I know how to cook, and I like it, but I find it difficult in our small kitchen and buying different ingredients is so expensive.
- Mum will often order in food when she has a night off. This means the three of us can spend time eating all together on the couch and can catch up.



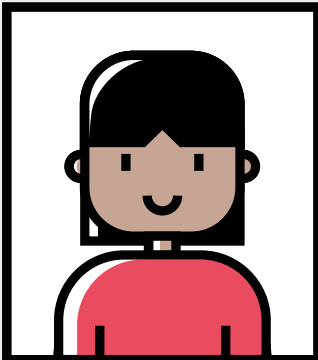
**AT HOME (AM)**

- 1:00-2:00am: In my bedroom, I talk to my friends on social media until I fall asleep.
- 3:00am: Most nights I wake up when I hear my mum getting home and I check my phone before going back to bed.
- 8:00am: I'm so tired that I sleep in until I absolutely have to get up – I'm usually late, so don't have time to eat before I leave for school.



**IN PARKS AND LEISURE**

- Growing up, I often used to play pick-up soccer, but I don't really any more – it doesn't fit in with my social life and weekly plans.



**JODIE**

- I'm Jodie. I am 15 years old.
- I live in inner South London in a two-bedroom council flat with my mum and 13-year-old nephew.
- My mum works as an office cleaner and is not home most nights so I look after my nephew.



**TRAVELLING THROUGH THE STREETS**

- 8:45am: I hop on the bus with my free bus pass to travel to school, which is 20 minutes away.



**AT SCHOOL**

- 9:00-9:30am: I arrive at school some time around 9am or a bit after. I'm often late.
- 12:30pm: For lunch I go with my friends to the chicken shop or other fast-food restaurants on the high street. They have good, cheap meal deals.
- 1:30 pm: Most afternoons we have PE, but it's often cut short depending on the other classes that day.



**ON THE HIGH STREET**

- 4:00pm: My friends and I meet up and walk to the high street after school to get some food.
- We usually go to our favourite chicken shop to hang out. The owners are friendly, let us stay as long as we please and, unlike other places, we don't feel judged or labelled.
- I usually get a meal deal to eat – it is cheap (£2-3) and tasty.

**WEEKENDS**

- On weekends, I go with my friends to house parties. Now with our free travelcards we can travel anywhere in London so we often don't get home till after 3:00am.
- I like keeping my weekends unplanned as I never know what I'll be invited to last minute.

The daily lives of Justin, Hannah, Anik and Jodie offer insights into the multitude of factors that create an 'obesogenic' system – a system that makes it easier, rather than harder, to gain excess weight – for so many children across London.

While the four children described here have different daily routines, the settings they spend their time in are the same: home, school or nursery, streets, shops and parks. Even though there are important differences, all these settings present children with

too many opportunities to eat and drink unhealthily, and not enough to be physically active.

At the same time, the reality of their everyday lives – lack of money, poor housing conditions and the working lives of their parents and caregivers – reduce their ability to make the kinds of decisions that would help them be healthier. Meanwhile, all around them there are many temptations to consume foods and drinks that offer easy and affordable pleasure, and very few options that entice them to be physically active.





**WHAT MAKES IT HARD FOR LONDON'S CHILDREN TO BE HEALTHY?**

Justin, Hannah, Anik and Jodie are based on the lives of real children. They show the types of pressures they and their caregivers face when making decisions about what to eat, drink and do. These influences vary, and not all of them affect every child. But some do affect all of London's children.

The extra challenge for children in poverty is that their life circumstances make them more exposed and susceptible to 'obesogenic influences' – social, economic and environmental pressures that make it more likely that people will gain excess weight. These pressures are clearly visible in the profiles of our four children and are borne out by independent evidence.

**What makes it harder for Justin, Hannah, Anik and Jodie to be more physically active?**

- Long distance from sports facilities and clubs, and high cost
- Lack of cleanliness and access to facilities in parks and green spaces
- Local environments with high levels of traffic, noise and pollution
- Housing with limited access, such as tall buildings, which make it more of an effort to go outdoors
- No outdoor space at home, or space that is limited or unappealing
- Neighbourhoods where it is difficult or unpleasant to walk
- Caregivers with more incentives to drive rather than walk to school
- Limited play spaces close to home
- Discomfort about spending time outside for various reasons including litter, dirt, vandalism, poor lighting and gangs
- Discomfort about spending time outside for various reasons, like litter, dirt, vandalism, poor lighting, gangs, etc.

**What makes it harder for Justin, Hannah, Anik and Jodie to eat healthily?**

- Long working hours, making it hard for caregivers to prioritise healthy eating and active childcare
- Lack of money, shaping diet choices and limiting ability to experiment with new foods
- Small living spaces and limited kitchen amenities, with limited living space beyond TV room, making families reliant on frozen or microwave meals and takeaways
- High costs of treats such as toys and colouring books compared to sugar and unhealthy foods
- Exposure to unhealthy adverts on the streets
- Repeated exposure to unhealthy food and drink advertisements through YouTube and TV
- Easy availability of fast-food and takeaway outlets
- Lack of large local food shops selling affordable healthier options
- Dependence on higher-cost cornershops with limited access to fruit and vegetables
- High exposure to supermarket price promotions, often on unhealthy, fast foods
- Social norms and parents' own relationship to food and drink
- Parents' mental wellbeing and adverse childhood experiences.

**What makes it harder for Justin, Hannah, Anik and Jodie to drink water?**

- Ease of access to sugary drinks on the high street
- Lack of drinking fountains
- High price of bottled water
- Lack of positive messages on the benefits of water, leading to a perception of water as second-rate option

