



# Evaluation of the National 2011 Schools Top Trumps Tournament

## Final report

### Executive Summary

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## Executive summary

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) Research Centre was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the National 2011 Schools Top Trumps Tournament, sponsored by Nokia. The evaluation aimed to establish whether and how participating children and schools benefited from involvement in the Tournament, in terms of learning, social skills, behaviour and enjoyment. The evaluation also sought feedback on plans for the 2012 Tournament.

A qualitative case study approach was employed to capture the views of pupils and teachers at different stages of the Tournament. As well as observing Tournament play in action, researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with 71 pupils of whom five were School Champions, together with nine teachers in eight schools. In addition, brief questionnaires were administered to parents and children attending the Tournament Final in London. Questionnaires were completed by 32 of 72 Tournament Finalists, and by 44 of their parents.

### ***Top Trumps is "fun"***

Among the teachers who had elected to enter their class/school in the Top Trumps Tournament all said they had done so primarily to provide an enjoyable extra-curricular activity or as a reward for hard work, and in one case for Year 6 pupils, as a respite from exam pressure. It seems that this expectation was borne out as everyone told us that the children who had taken part in their school had greatly enjoyed participating.

The children we interviewed were similarly very enthusiastic about playing the game, both generally and in the Tournament, with many opting to play additional games outside the 'formal' competition i.e. during breaks, over the lunch period and in Golden Time.

*It was a lot of fun –different to everything else. You saw other people go out to do it, and you really looked forward to it.*

All parents of Finalists endorsed the statement 'Top Trumps is fun'. Most also said that playing Top Trumps had helped them to spend quality time with their children (33 of 41).

### ***Learning - new words, better decisions and fun facts***

Encouragingly, teachers had noted positive learning outcomes for children in terms of literacy, numeracy and decision-making skills. Although it is not possible to make causal links between playing the game and specific gains, individual teachers remarked that playing Top Trumps enabled children to:

- practice reading skills
- learn new words or mathematical terms such as units
- exercise number skills such as comparing heights, weights, dates, or rating scales
- hone decision-making skills/ ability to make choices
- develop lateral thinking and strategic play
- find out and retain new facts and figures.

To some extent these are 'typical' outcomes one might expect to see in a classroom. However it is notable that teachers variously felt that the speed of play appeared to stimulate pupils to focus and think faster and were impressed by the amount of information they could absorb and process whilst playing.

Most children we spoke to also recognised the impact playing Top Trumps had on at least some of these areas, and almost universally told us it is a "fun way to learn". Even amongst older children who were more likely to say they had not encountered anything new, many examples of learning were given across the age range, concerning facts, vocabulary and improved ability to rank data and understand mathematical terms.

*Once you've got a card you really like, it sticks in your head. Even though you're having fun, you're also learning quite a lot.*

In addition, some pupils reported that as the Tournament progressed, they got better at choosing categories where their card had a good chance of winning.

A majority of parents also felt that their child had gained new knowledge or skills through taking part and 40 out of 42 considered Top Trumps 'educational'.

### ***Social skills, confidence and self-esteem***

Where pupils from different classes had taken part in the Tournament together, both staff and pupils felt this had worked well, with children happily playing outside existing friendship groups, and older pupils offering help and guidance to younger ones. Pupils themselves said they had got to know children in different classes and established friendships, including 'shy' children who rarely joined in with group activities.

A few teachers had actively attempted to involve isolated pupils or those with behavioural problems and several described how participation had benefited individual children, including those who found it hard to socialise or who tended to avoid competitive games - for some, simply taking part was an important step.

Equally, there were benefits for those who did well in the Tournament. Champions reported feeling more confident following their success, and teachers noted that these pupils had indeed increased their self-esteem and gained the respect of other children.

*His self-esteem can be quite low. But, through doing this, and doing quite well in the league table on the computer, his self-esteem and profile in the class has been hugely improved.*

In addition, staff felt that pupils given the opportunity to plan and manage games would benefit longer term from developing these 'life skills', as well from the more immediate boost to their confidence. One pupil known to be generally disruptive was said to have risen to the challenge of responsibility for organising some aspect of the Tournament in his class. Other pupils given responsibility for organising the games said they were very proud of having solved various logistical problems and to have supervised younger children.

Parents also were generally very positive about the influence of participation on their child's social skills, confidence and/or self-esteem.

### ***Winning, losing and fair play***

Both staff and children recognised that playing Top Trumps encouraged positive attitudes towards winning and losing. It was noted by several people that playing Top Trumps did not seem to trigger the arguments or divisive behaviours often associated with other competitive activities, such as football. One Deputy Head commented that the Tournament had promoted fair play by encouraging pupils to take turns, listen to others and to take losing in their stride.

Children enjoyed winning, but generally kept a sense of perspective, recognising that "it's just a game". Some mentioned "feeling bad for others who lost out", and were careful not to gloat about their success, acknowledging the part played by luck. Others described how children who initially coped badly with losing had apparently learnt to be more stoical whilst playing, through the encouragement and positive behaviour of other children.

*If you got very angry when you lost, I think it would help you understand losing, 'cos you can't always win.*

Cheating was rarely a problem; although in one school pupils would have liked more help from teachers to enforce the rules, it was more common for any disputes to be settled amicably amongst the children involved.

### ***Attitudes and behaviour***

Although most staff expected the 'Feeling Good' themes to be familiar to pupils, they welcomed the reinforcement of these positive messages. However, a few teachers noted that while younger pupils found this pack stimulating, older children preferred the factual content typical of other cards.

When promoted, however, several pupils described how cards had stimulated changes in their attitudes or behaviour, for example in relation to saving money or recycling.

*I used to get angry when my cousins came round and were spending their money in front of me. But now I save up!*

More often, children reported feeling *encouraged* to do things, such as get more sleep, tidy up, be more active, help out at home and appreciate their friends and family and a small number shared their learning with family members. The majority felt that even if the ideas were familiar, the 'Feeling Good' cards were fun to use and encouraged them to make healthy choices, or in some cases, simply to feel more positive.

### ***Round 1: The Tournament in schools***

Teachers were generally complimentary about the cards, instructions and supporting materials they had received from Top Trumps for the 2011

Tournament, although some had specific suggestions and requests for improvements/additions for 2012 (see below).

Generally speaking, both teachers and children enjoyed using the Tournament Pack and preferred this to playing with standalone card packs. Indeed, almost without exception, children described games focused around the 'hub' as much more exciting and varied than 'normal' play.

*It's really fun. It mixes it up! There are lots of different ways to play.*

### **Round 2: Top Trumps online**

Mixed views were expressed about the online Round. While they enjoyed this stage of the Tournament, Champions said they would have preferred playing with a variety of card themes rather than focusing solely on 'Feeling Good'. There was also a preference for playing against other children, rather than the computer.

Few teachers were able to comment on the online round, though one who had observed play on the computer felt that the unique online features, such as time limits, provided added stimulation. One Deputy Head felt that it would be helpful if schools were able to 'vet' the online element before signing up; another teacher suggested modifying the site to limit the time children were able to spend playing in any 24 hour period in response to excessive levels of play by a few individuals.

### **Round 3: The Final**

Teachers generally saw the chance to travel to London and represent the school in the Final as something children in their school aspired to, and for those who were successful, as providing a significant boost to their confidence.

*The kudos that the winner got, from getting to the final... that was great. We did a presentation in Assembly... they were all really proud of him.*

The vast majority of Finalists greatly enjoyed the London event. Those interviewed were very proud to have represented their schools, and delighted to have received 'goody bags' containing Olympic Games cards and Tournament packs. There were a few reservations, however; some, for example, preferred playing with friends as this was seen as more relaxed than in the Tournament scenario and there were some complaints about waiting times between games.

Three quarters of parents were 'very satisfied' with the Tournament (32 of 42), praising elements such as the catering, organisation, and atmosphere. A small number also voiced concerns about organisational elements such as waiting times between games/ rounds, the 'arbitrary' enforcement of rules, and the lack of subsidy/ cost of travel and accommodation in London.

### **Looking forward to 2012**

Children were excited at the prospect of an Olympic-themed Tournament and staff in all case study schools anticipated signing up to the 2012 Tournament.

*As an experience it was very positive. We'll definitely go for it again.*

Although generally happy with the materials provided for 2011, teachers said they would like some additional resources next year. Suggestions include more online resources ranging from certificates available to download, to a Top Trumps template to enable schools to create their own packs. A few also recommended basic improvements to the Tournament Game materials to enhance the durability of the cards, packets and spinner.

When children taking part in the Final were asked to suggest improvements to the format for 2012, eight of the twenty who responded told us that 'no changes' were needed at all. Others offered ideas focused mostly on organisational aspects of the event, including a request to add more rounds, shorten waiting times between games/rounds and include more entertainment for those not playing at any particular point.

### **New packs**

Looking beyond the Tournament, teachers said they would welcome new packs which could be linked to classroom activities and subjects such as geography, science, PSHE, history, RE, maths and literature.

*I think there's probably quite a lot of potential for introducing new themes using the cards.... Quite a lot of kids love that sort of factual knowledge.*

Children also came up with many ideas for future Top Trumps themes, including authors or books, cats, jobs, and a 'DIY' pack for designing their own set. Some also advocated changes to the cards themselves; including increasing the font size to improve readability; distinguishing playing cards from those with adverts; and avoiding use of 'N/A' against categories, the latter two because they disrupt play.

### **Conclusions**

Although in a study of this size and scope it is not possible to prove any causal link between playing Top Trumps and educational and social benefits, the universally positive interviews with pupils, teachers and parents are very encouraging in this respect. Not only did the 2011 Tournament prove thoroughly enjoyable for participants, but it was said to have facilitated learning in a number of different ways. Benefits were noted by both teachers and parents in core areas such as learning, decision-making, social skills, confidence, attitudes and behaviour. Moreover, participation in the Tournament is seen to bring something *different* to the classroom; not just fun, but the speed of play, encouraging positive interactions between pupils of different ages and abilities, opportunities for pupils to monitor, supervise, organise and guide other pupils are all variously mentioned as important yet largely unexpected aspects that contribute to these positive outcomes.

The extent to which these benefits will be sustainable beyond the Tournament period is unknown. However the fact that there has been *any discernable* shift in behaviour is notable. As such, there is clearly scope and encouragement for Winning Moves to build on this success and promote the Tournament and the game itself as a teaching resource, more actively to schools in the future.