

The good food culture



Jane Harrison, whose award-winning Red Hen Day Nursery is based on a working farm in Lincolnshire, shares with readers her approach to establishing a good-food culture

It is widely acknowledged that children's eating habits are formed in early childhood. As Dr Alex Richardson says, "They are what we feed them." So, in nurseries, we have a duty to ensure the children in our care enjoy healthy, balanced diets. Easy enough in theory, but, in practice, it poses many challenges.

Successful catering in a nursery pulls together our knowledge of food and nutrition, children's willingness to try new foods, practitioners' knowledge and attitudes, and partnership with parents. In my nursery, good food is integral to daily practice and is embedded in our culture and philosophy. As with everything, the enthusiasm of the manager or leader will filter through

the staff team, but, where knowledge is lacking, an experienced chef who knows about nutrition will help or you can get professional advice from a qualified dietician.

What does good food mean to your setting? Meals prepared from top-quality produce with no processed food or additives should be your priority when planning menus.

Amongst the wealth of information available, I advise reading research, particularly, on the dangers of trans-fats, aspartame or artificial sweeteners and the benefits of omega 3s and vitamin D.

Top-quality produce

Top-quality produce does not necessarily mean organic, especially

when 'organic' is not guaranteed, as in the case of foreign foods. (The National Farmers Union has research on this.) Knowing where it comes from and how it is produced is more important, and we should also take into account its ecological footprint.

It takes time to source locally, but you'll get the freshest seasonal vegetables and top-quality traceable meat from local suppliers and farmers, either direct or via farmers markets.

You may have to negotiate in order to get deliveries at suitable times, but it's worth it, as working directly with producers offers opportunities for visits to learn how the food is produced. This is invaluable not just for children, but also for staff, as there are often challenges when working with differing attitudes about healthy eating.

Many settings are now implementing real first-hand learning, involving children and staff in the whole process from soil to plate. The more children are involved, the more likely it is they will enjoy trying it.

The nursery kitchen

The nursery kitchen must be efficient and easy to clean. Record keeping is also vital, as is achieving the highest food hygiene rating from the local authority. If possible, the kitchen should not just be convenient for deliveries, but, as the heart and soul of the home, be centrally located so children can see what happens and be involved in preparing meals and



Food from the farm

snacks. The whole process of cooking is a real experience that stimulates all the senses and covers all areas of learning, but, in so many nurseries, this is often shut away.

Once you have decided how to source your food, then comes the task of planning nutritionally balanced menus. The Caroline Walker Trust, the Infant and Toddler Forum and the School Food Trust all offer guidelines. This needs to be balanced against your knowledge of the children's cultures so that you include familiar meals.

Enjoying their food

But it is no use planning and preparing good meals, if the children won't eat them. Keeping a record of how much they eat is useful evidence of the relative popularity of the meals, as well as providing information for the parents on their eating habits. In my nursery, we generally find that the under-twos enjoy everything, and, if they aren't eating, we look at the bigger picture.

Children often go through phases, but repeated faddiness has implications for young diets, and each case needs to be sensitively investigated. We find that faddiness in very young children (from about nine months to one year) is often because they've filled up with milk, and parents often need reassurance to reduce bottle feeds once they are eating a variety of foods at meal-times.

The move to baby-led weaning gives young children ownership of their appetites - and more time for the stomach to send the message to the brain that they are full. It has taken time in my setting to persuade practitioners to stop spooning food into their mouths and let the toddlers take as long as they need to feed themselves - and make a mess! But this is an invaluable opportunity for toddlers to further develop hand-to-mouth motor skills and co-ordination.

Many children go through a neophobic stage - often at around two years. This is the body's safety mechanism to protect it from foods that are potentially unsafe or unfamiliar. It is important not to offer alternatives, as children quickly learn how to ensure they

only have what they like, and this can result in a very limited diet.

Working with parents

Working with parents will help them understand how family influences and preferences impact on children's eating habits, and also enable them to set up sensible mealtime strategies. The more you involve parents, the better the link between home and nursery. Cookery sessions and sharing recipes are excellent, but it is often difficult to include the parents who would most benefit either because of work commitments or reluctance combined with lack of confidence. If possible, encourage parents to come in to help in the kitchen, join in with baking activities or eat with you at lunchtime.

Children are more likely to enjoy food, if mealtimes are social occasions. So, aim for a relaxed dining area with nicely laid tables with tablecloths and real but child-sized cutlery and crockery. In my setting, staff eat with the children, which means they provide a good role model of meal-time behaviour, encouraging conversation and good manners, while showing them how to use cutlery. But it has taken some time for everyone to feel comfortable with this.

In conclusion, as Sue Palmer says, enjoying good food is closely



Food is fun

related to the circumstances of eating, preparation and presentation. Nurseries play a vital role in ensuring the children have a healthy, balanced diet, while instilling good eating habits that will stand them in good stead for the future and help avoid the diet-related diseases that are becoming increasingly prevalent. On top of that, good food, growing vegetables, cooking and baking provide opportunities to extend children's learning and development, engaging in all aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage. ■

Websites of Interest

- British Heart Foundation: www.bhf.org.uk
- The Caroline Walker Trust: www.cwt.org.uk
- The Ecologist: www.theecologist.org
- Eat the Seasons: www.eattheseasons.co.uk
- European Food Information Council: www.eufic.org www.fabresearch.org
- Farming & Countryside education: www.face-online.org.uk
- Food Standards Agency: www.food.gov.uk/foodindustry/farmingfood/organicfood/#h_3
- Grain Chain: www.grainchain.com
- Healthy Start: www.healthystart.nhs.uk
- Infant & Toddler Forum: www.infantandtoddlerforum.org www.foodsmatter.com
- Start4Life: www.nhs.uk/start4life
- Sustain Web: www.sustainweb.org (The children's food campaign)

- Jane Harrison, who graduated with a first class BA(Hons) in Applied Studies in Early Childhood, runs Red Hen Day Nursery in Lincolnshire, which has won local and national awards for its food.
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