

10 steps to first-class nursery food

All good early years settings know the importance of a healthy, balanced diet for under-fives, but standards vary. *Annie Seeley* and *Jane Harrison* provide top-line tips to holistic food provision

1 Follow evidence-based nutrition guidance. The Caroline Walker Trust (CWT) was the first organisation to publish nutritional and portion size guidance for early years. Their CHEW! portion size resource offers a comprehensive guide (including photo cards with recipes) for the first year of life and for one- to four-year-olds.

The School Food Trust (SFT) has also now published *Eat Better Start Better – Voluntary Food and Drink Guidelines for Early Years Settings in England: A practical guide*. These comprehensive guidelines for children aged one to four include a menu planning checklist and visual portion sizes that nurseries are reporting to be particularly helpful.

While portion size guidance needs to be followed, settings can retain some flexibility as they are based on recommended intakes for the population as a whole. Children's individual dietary requirements differ depending on activity levels, growth and development needs and these can vary daily and weekly.

2 Write a comprehensive food policy. This formalises and communicates clearly your food provision and food education approach and needs to be given to new staff and parents. Update the policy annually. CWT, SFT and National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) all give guidance on how to go about this.

3 Train your staff. It is vital that they are engaged in your philosophy and vision as they directly influence the children. It is possible that their attitudes to food will differ and some may be at odds with the positive culture you are trying to instill. Some staff members may not be used to trying new foods or eating meals 'made

from scratch' and could be unaware of how negative comments about food influence children.

It can be a challenge to divert children (and staff) from the 'I don't like that' mindset, and good modelling and encouragement from staff eating the same food as the children helps address this. In practice, it can take time for some staff to develop the confidence to try unfamiliar foods. Some nurseries find that, alongside healthy eating training, promoting food through tastings can change mindsets. Staff given autonomy and ownership of their part in the delivery of good food provision, including food activities, will gain confidence. This is possible once they are relaxed about food in your setting.

Having a creative, enthusiastic caterer is crucial. Training approaches tend to differ from setting to setting. Investing in catering or nutrition training will increase confidence to create menus using fresh ingredients which are popular, tasty and nutritious.

4 Make mealtimes enjoyable. It takes planning to ensure that meal-

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times are calm and social and that children enjoy their food and eat well. Children who have been active outside tend to have good appetites. Lay tables in an appealing way and think about how to organise the children effectively.

Ideally, divide them into small family-sized groups with an adult (who understands individual children's needs) eating the same meal at the table. Serving dishes on the table enables the children to serve themselves – as well as helping develop hand-eye co-ordination, independence and the confidence to try new foods. This must be balanced with ensuring each child has a bit of everything on their plate.

5 Involve the children. Children who take part in preparing meals are more likely to eat the final result. You can involve them in various ways: harvesting fruit and/or vegetables from the garden; writing shopping lists (this can be done using pictures for younger children); using easy-to-follow recipes (again, pictures can be used); going shopping to local markets or shops and/or creating menus.



Key to engaging children is involving them daily in preparing meals. This can be integrated into everyday learning as it is at Red Hen Nursery where preparing meals is part of daily practice with children helping as they would at home. Not only does this impart food skills, it links into the EYFS, complementing all areas of learning and development.

Settings have different ways of using food in activities including messy play, vegetable printing and food tastings, which can be an effective way of helping children gain the confidence to touch foods and become used to different textures.

Consulting with children on meals and menus informs catering staff about preferences and provides opportunities to increase children's openness to trying food.

6 From farm to fork. Many nurseries provide opportunities to learn where food comes from. Aspects of the farm-to-fork experience can be embraced in any setting depending on available space – for example, keeping chickens; having a vegetable garden and fruit trees; using window boxes for growing herbs; tubs for growing potatoes, tomatoes, beans and other crops; or hanging baskets for growing tomatoes. Other ways include visiting local markets and shops (for example, butchers, fishmongers and greengrocers), working farms (including 'pick your own' and city farms), or allotments. These all help children make the connection with where their food comes from and how it is produced and again also links to aspects of EYFS.

7 Source food sustainably. Encompass sustainability in your food provision. CWT has published the excellent *Sustainable Food: A guide for early years settings*. Good practice includes sourcing from local suppliers, growing your own, buying food in season/from the UK and buying organic and Marine Stewardship Council approved fish.

The best nurseries try not to rely solely on supermarkets or large catering suppliers and devote time to finding local suppliers of free-range meat and eggs and fruit and vegetables. They buy either direct from the producer or from local farm shops, or from local butchers or greengrocers, where they can trace the foods back to the producer.

The time spent identifying new suppliers can reduce costs in the long term. There is also the added benefit that some arrange for the children to visit their farm or business. While such good-quality produce can be more expensive, there are ways to lower overall costs – for example, by growing some of your herbs, fruit and vegetables at the nursery; including vegetarian meals in the menu; and bulking up meat meals with pulses.

8 Engage with parents. Good relationships with parents enable you to share information with them. Settings can sometimes succeed in getting children to eat food that they refuse at home. Staff support parents in many ways – at weaning, in particular, as mothers can lack confidence and may be reluctant to reduce milk feeds through periods of faddiness.

MORE INFORMATION

- The Caroline Walker Trust, www.cwt.org.uk
- www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk offers advice and downloadable resources, including *Eat Better Start Better – Voluntary Food and Drink Guidelines for Early Years Settings in England: A practical guide*
- www.infantandtoddlerforum.org
- www.ndna.org.uk
- www.foodforlife.org.uk
- www.vegsoc.org

Displaying menus, recipes and information on suppliers, as well as photographs of food activities give parents an insight into your food provision – this information can be shared on your website too. Inviting parents to lunch and providing food tastings and cooking sessions with parents and children can all influence eating habits at home.

It is always helpful to back up your practice with official guidance and some parents like to access online information, so signposting them to useful websites or reading is helpful.

9 Ensure food provision is inclusive. Create a version of the main meals of children who are vegetarian or have allergies, so that all the children can enjoy similar meals. Alternatively, adapt meals so that they are suitable for all children. Ensure all staff know about the children's individual needs to avoid any child being fed the wrong kind of food.

While it is important that special dietary requirements are adhered to, it is also necessary to share information with parents when special diet requests are based on attitudes rather than a true allergy. This requires great sensitivity and knowledge on the part of the staff.

When a child does have an allergy, practitioners need to be in control of all food within the setting. Many nurseries, therefore, prohibit parents from bringing in birthday cakes, preferring instead to make their own healthy versions.

10 Engage with other organisations. Local authorities usually have dietetics and nutrition departments that could offer guidance on menus, although it depends on individual councils. Some, also, have their own healthy eating awards. There are also schemes like Food For Life Catering Mark and the Vegetarian Society that you can apply to for accreditation, and both indicate good practice. ■

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