

PUTTING FOOD FIRST



Staff at Surbiton Children's Centre Nursery have transformed their food, and children and families alike are benefiting, explains Nigel Denby...

THERE CAN BE FEW EARLY YEARS chefs facing as big a challenge as Lilly Judd from Surbiton Children's Centre Nursery (SCCN). Lilly is taking the lead in delivering a brand new food and nutrition project across the whole setting. It's a giant ask, but Lilly has everything going for her: a passion for great food and the right support around her.

After years of unsatisfactory and poor-quality food, SCCN's headteacher, Fiona Dearman, and business manager, Jan Lovitt, decided enough was enough. They invested in a new purpose-built kitchen, and Lilly, a qualified pastry chef, who joined the team to run the kitchen and be the face of food and nutrition throughout the nursery. In these days of austerity it's unusual to see a nursery take such a step, but as Fiona puts it "Getting nutrition right for children from the start is just too important. Make-do or second-rate options aren't good enough."

In all, seven per cent of children in the London Borough of Kingston upon Thames (responsible for SCCN) are starting Reception overweight or obese. "Parents are constantly asking staff for advice about feeding their children so

there's clearly a need for better knowledge," Jan Lovitt says. "This project is about so much more than just providing lunch for children in daycare; it's about a whole-nursery approach to achieving excellence in early years nutrition. Our philosophy must filter through to our families and the parents, and at the heart of all of this is Lilly, our number one early years nutrition ambassador."

The team at Surbiton are not alone in recognising the importance of good food in the early years. "We've been really fortunate to be awarded funding from the Big Lottery to help us develop resources and training programmes for staff and parents," Fiona says. "As well as the obvious practical help this has given us, it's really satisfying to have our vision endorsed by this kind of support."

Making changes

SCCN provides 78 part-time early education places, as well as 30 plus extended daycare places and 16 for two-year-olds. In all, the setting is obliged to provide meals and snacks for up to 134 children under five. While Kingston upon Thames is often thought of as an affluent area there are pockets of deprivation, with health statistics showing higher levels of childhood obesity than the national average. Many parents report feeling isolated and unsupported, since they rarely have extended family close by to offer help and advice about feeding their children. SCCN has a remit to provide responsive services, so is well placed to provide this advice and support. However, to do that staff required professional development to improve their knowledge and confidence around under-fives nutrition.

Historically, SCCN meals were supplied through the local school

meals catering facility. For a number of reasons this arrangement was unsatisfactory. Fiona and Jan identified some of the problems and difficulties:

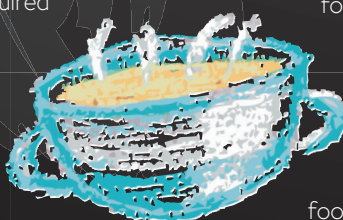
- * Menus and recipes were designed for children of primary school-age; that's just not appropriate for the under-fives as recommended salt levels, fat content and levels of vitamins and minerals are quite different for three-year-olds compared to older children.
- * SCCN had no input about how food was presented... and it often looked unappetising. It arrived in insulated boxes, so there was no room for any sort of personal involvement from the nursery staff. This inflexibility added to staff's difficulties in supporting children to eat and encouraging them to try different foods.
- * There was a high level of wastage because many children refused their meals.

"It was clear that the most effective way for us to serve the children the best food possible was to take our catering operation in house," Jan says. "Building the kitchen was expensive but relatively straight forward; getting the food and nutrition right was the really tricky bit. When we looked amongst our team, it became immediately obvious that none of us had the nutritional or culinary knowledge to lead the project."

That's when SCCN found Lilly. A mum herself, Lilly has an excellent pedigree in catering. A qualified pastry chef with an impressive CV, she was looking for a new challenge that would fit in with family life. "This opportunity was just too big a chance to pass up. It's the perfect combination for me: food and children are the



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two things I'm most passionate about," she says. "It's different from cooking for hospitality, but I'm loving learning about the nutritional aspects of children's food."

The final piece of the jigsaw was when SCCN approached Grub4life for the nutritional expertise the project needed. Lilly explains: "Working with Grub4life has increased my knowledge and confidence. I come up with a recipe idea and the Grub4life team adapt it for the children; they scale the recipe to make 10 toddler

portions and also give me all the guidance I need to adapt the recipe for special diets."

The nursery wants the project to reach out to parents. "We've identified that parents are most often worried about weaning, helping their children through fussy and problem eating, and also about how to manage food allergies and intolerances," Fiona says. "Grub4life are producing interactive video/audio training



packages that Lilly can use in structured parent support groups, and it's these resources and the menus and nutrition manuals that we've been able to produce with the Big Lottery funding."

Grub4Life have helped a number of early years providers access funding to support nutrition projects. Email feedback@grub4life.com

TODAY'S Special

Lilly's Fruity Chicken & Vegetable Curry

INGREDIENTS:

Serves 10

- * 10 (450g) boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- * 50g plain flour
- * 30g oil
- * 2 (220g) onions - chopped
- * 6 tbsp (90g) tomato puree
- * 2 tbsp (30g) mild curry powder
- * 900ml chicken stock made from kallo low-salt stock cube
- * 2 (300g) eating apples, cored and thinly sliced
- * 2 (240g) carrots, peeled and thinly sliced
- * 75g sultanas
- * 1 dessertspoon (10g) brown sugar
- * 50g chopped spinach (fresh or frozen)
- * 450g rice



METHOD:

Pre-heat oven to 180C/350F, Gas 4.

Coat the chicken in flour (3tbsp), and fry in 2 tbsp oil until golden brown. Drain and place in an oven-proof casserole dish.

Fry the onion in 1 tbsp oil until golden, then add the tomato puree.

Add the curry powder; continue to stir for a couple of minutes.

Stir in 2 tbsp flour, and then add 300ml of the stock, mixing well.

Add the apple, carrots, sultanas and remaining stock.

Season and add the brown sugar.

Pour the sauce over the chicken thighs, add spinach and stir in, cover and cook in the oven for 1/2 hour.

Serve with boiled rice.

Cook's tip:

Prepare extra carrot, spinach and apple to make a puree for weaning babies

Energy (kcal)	Protein (g)	Fat (g)	Carbs (g)	Sugar (g)	Salt (g)	Iron (mg)	Calcium (mg)
352	16	8.6	56	3.6	0.6	3.2	67