

Chef, dietician and founder of Grub4Life, **Nigel Denby**, explores whether it makes sense to prepare your setting's menu organically...

# GOING organic



**N**urseries operate in an increasingly competitive environment, so it makes sense to consider opportunities that might give your business that little extra something and ensure an advantage over the competition. More settings are looking to their food offering as a means to gain an edge, and many are considering the organic route as a potential way forward.

Since the introduction of the voluntary guidelines for the nutritional standards of nursery food, parents have had a reference to help them rate the food their children are being given, and many use this when choosing a nursery. In a 2010 Netmums survey, 66 per cent of parents said they were unhappy with the food their children were served in nursery; so,

those nurseries who are overhauling their food offering are responding to the market.

But is the organic approach really any better for our children, our environment or your profits?

## What does 'organic' actually mean?

- Only four permitted chemicals are used on organic crops as opposed to over 400 in non-organics. They're sprayed less often too.
- Livestock is drug free, has more space to live and is fed predominantly on organic feeds.
- Additives like hydrogenated fat, aspartame and monosodium glutamate are forbidden in organic foods.
- No battery hens are allowed, only free range.
- There are fewer pesticide residues than in non-organic food.

■ No genetically modified crops or feeds are permitted.

■ And, as a result of all of this, more wildlife is protected.

## Organic doesn't mean...

**Additive free** - over 30 additives are permitted; some are used to fortify food with vitamins and minerals. In the UK, for example, white flour has added calcium and iron, whether it's organic or not.

**Better taste** - celebrity chefs might think organic means extra flavour, but research shows that consumers can't taste any difference between a wide range of organic and non-organic produce.



**Residue free** – studies in the US found organic produce has around 66 per cent lower residues than non organics; but they are still there. The health risks of residues are unclear, but it's thought the lower the exposure, the lower any risk.

**Less risk of food poisoning** – some experts believe that organic methods make food more prone to contamination, for instance, organic eggs without a 'Lion' stamp have not been protected against salmonella.

**A more nutritious meal** – a review of 41 studies found organic fruits and vegetables contained some extra vitamin C and antioxidants, and organic milk had higher levels of essential fatty acids, but the increases were insignificant. In 2003, the Food Standards Agency stated, "The current scientific evidence does not show that organic food is any more nutritious than conventionally produced food." The extra nutrients just aren't enough to give a measurable health benefit.

**A guarantee of locally grown food** – around 44 per cent of organic foods are imported into the UK, but there's nothing to say how it's transported. The ingredients to make a roast chicken dinner could have accumulated over 16,000 air miles to get to the UK.

**Cheaper food** – a survey by Datamonitor showed in 2008 that a simple seven-item shopping list cost £5 more for organic items than their non-organic counterparts, and the price divide has increased year on year.



You will struggle to meet all the **nutritional** needs of the **under-fives** if you **insist** on a completely **organic** policy

**NIGEL DENBY, GRUB4LIFE**

## Going organic

When it comes to planning a nursery menu there are some specific considerations to make before choosing an organic policy:

■ Organic breakfast cereals are not fortified with vitamins and minerals. Iron is a very important mineral in the diet of young children, particularly vegetarians. Through fortification, non-organic breakfast cereals are a very good source of iron, B vitamins, folate and vitamin D. We're seeing a growing number of under-fives with low vitamin D status, which increases their risk of rickets. It's thought that children who receive little unprotected exposure to sunlight are most likely to have low vitamin D stores. With so few foods providing vitamin D, fortified breakfast cereals are a vital source.

■ It's recommended that children who are cow's milk intolerant are served soya milk which is enriched with calcium to ensure they meet their requirements. Dairy products are the main source of calcium in the diet. Soya doesn't naturally contain calcium, but non-organic brands tend to add calcium to their soya products so there is no detrimental effect on nutrition. Children following a dairy-free diet are likely to compromise their calcium intake in an organic nursery because organic soya products don't have calcium added.

■ It's difficult to obtain organic white or oily fish in many areas. This issue limits the frequency and variety of fish that can be served. In our experience, we have never found an organic nursery which achieves the recommended two servings of fish per week.

■ There are also limited varieties of organic vegetarian protein options available such as Quorn and tofu. Organic beans and pulses are readily available, but children need a larger range than this to achieve their requirements of essential amino acids. Tofu and Quorn are rarely served in organic nurseries.

In short, it's a tricky choice for the nursery manager: you want to consider the environment; you want your food to reflect your standards of excellence in child safety and education; you have to manage budgets.

## Is there a preferable choice to organic?

In my view, exclusively organic poses more restrictions than benefits to a nursery. There is nothing wrong with ordering organic fruit and veg boxes or organic meat from a local butcher, but you will struggle to meet all the

## find out more

If you would like help in planning your nursery menu or devising a food and nutrition policy, contact [nigel@grub4life.com](mailto:nigel@grub4life.com) or visit [grub4life.org.uk](http://grub4life.org.uk)

nutritional needs of the under-fives if you insist on a completely organic policy. You will almost certainly see your food costs increase. The question is then posed, "Should this only be justified if you are guaranteeing improved nutrition?"

Perhaps a better option is a 'local and free range (where possible)' policy – it's a bit of a mouthful, but this approach enables the nursery to:

- support local suppliers;
- potentially introduce some cross-marketing with suppliers (reciprocal advertising between suppliers and the nursery);
- reduce your carbon footprint;
- provide an opportunity to promote the provenance of your food;
- provide a seasonal and well-balanced menu;
- still obtain the 'difficult to obtain' ingredients from mainstream suppliers when necessary.

Whether one category of food is 'better' than another is, of course, subjective, but in order to choose the right way forward for your nursery you need to consider a wide range of markers; these are different from those of a restaurant, a family home or a business that is not geared towards children.

Ultimately, children need the most varied and balanced menu possible to meet their needs. In my view, exclusively organic food just doesn't measure up.

