



Eat well **HERE!**

Fantastic food and careful attention to children's nutritional needs should be an integral part of your marketing toolkit, says founder of Grub4Life, **Nigel Denby...**

We all know that every successful business needs to be seen to be leading the way in standards of excellence - especially in the current economic climate. But, have you considered that your nursery's 'excellence' might be sitting right under your nose, or rather on your children's plates?

Food is something that everyone understands, and we all know what we believe to be good and bad when it comes to what we fill our stomachs with. For parents, there can be few issues that can spark more anxiety and concern than how their child eats. Your setting is perfectly placed to relieve those anxieties and concerns, if you know and care about what you're doing. Get it right and you'll have the best PR and marketing that

money cannot buy. Think about it. You'll rarely hear a mum telling her friend that the nursery helped her toddler match the triangle with the right hole in the shapes game, but just think what she'll be saying when it manages to get her son to eat Brussels sprouts, sardines or curly kale!

Under-fives nutrition

Nutrition for the under-fives is high on everyone's agenda - the media, politicians and your parents:

- the Children's Food Trust recently introduced their Voluntary Guidelines for Food and Drink Served in Childcare Settings in England;
- this followed pressure from a 2010 Parliamentary Motion signed by 72 cross party MPs, calling for early years childcare

nutrition guidance;

- on top of that, a recent Mumsnet survey of parents, found 66 per cent were unhappy about the standard of food served at their child's nursery.

With regard to that final point, can you imagine if the same level of dissatisfaction were found in parents about education or child safety standards? It's especially important as children attending full time daycare receive more of their nutrition from the setting in which they're placed than anywhere else. That means...

- their lifelong food preferences are established by their childcare provider - not at home;
- speech and language, hand-to-eye



find out more

If you would like help in planning your nursery menu or devising a food and nutrition policy, contact nigel@grub4life.com or visit grub4life.org.uk

coordination and, of course, physical growth and development are the provider's responsibility.

This must all be placed in the context of parents feeling increasingly isolated and unsupported when it comes to feeding their young children. The concept of a supportive extended family is increasingly rare, and the days of grandparents being just around the corner are few and far between.

Just as you in nursery management have a huge responsibility in most aspects of child development, your role in helping children to develop healthy relationships with food cannot be under-estimated. But your role is also an enormous window of opportunity for you to demonstrate your commitment to excellence and be 'the hero' to your parents. What follows is an example of how a small nursery group is starting to do just that...

Doing it right...

Zoom Nurseries is a privately owned group of four settings in South East London. Owners Sophie Hubble and Bella Landen started the business in 2001 with a simple philosophy. They wanted the children to be at the heart of everything. They believed that Zoom children would grow and develop in a safe and loving nursery that was structured to make the most of their natural thirst for learning. They also wanted their parents to enjoy an open and honest relationship with the nursery, ultimately ensuring that communication links were provided to enable them to feel that they were involved even though they weren't with their child during the day.

Mel Ferguson, Zoom's childcare director, has worked to ensure a cohesive 'brand

standard' across the nurseries. Mel explained, "We had no problem accessing expertise and support in most areas of childcare, but the one area where we kept hitting a brick wall was nutrition". She added, "I was very happy with my cooks' culinary abilities - their food is always delicious - but I could see that none of us had the necessary expertise in children's nutrition. I worked with the cooks to draft menus, but they all used their own recipes. I just didn't feel we had the same assurance of quality in our food that we guaranteed in other areas."

By chance, one of Zoom's cooks was invited to attend an Early Years Food and Nutrition training session facilitated by Grub4life, and supported by the London Borough of Lewisham. Mel said, "This was the first time I had seen anything that was specifically aimed at early years nutrition. We had great feedback from our cook and decided to work with Grub4Life across the group."

Within a few weeks, Zoom had...

- a 'food and nutrition' working party involving all cooks, fully trained in early years nutrition;
- a group-wide, four-week rotational menu;
- recipes in yields of 10, nutritionally analysed and also with adaptations for special diets.

Mel added, "The cooks loved being involved in the project, and our parents really love the food and continually ask for recipes to use at home. Our food has really given everyone something to talk about." Each nursery displays photographs and recipes for the dishes of the day in their reception area. The nurseries are all planning open days, at which prospective parents will be invited for

lunch as well as the usual tour of the nursery. Food has taken a new role in classroom activities, and the cooks are all involved across the nursery and supporting parents.

Mel told us, "Our food has been an investment for the business, and our ingredients costs have increased, but it's the right thing to do on every level. We have always been interested in the provenance of our food, and as part of the project we've just negotiated some competitive supply agreements with small local businesses, including a family butcher, fishmonger, baker and greengrocer. Part of these agreements include cross marketing of our businesses, to promote one another."

It's too early to say how this will affect the success of the business, but Mel told us, "We are confident in our food across the nurseries now. We thought it was good, but now we know it's excellent. We were recently audited by the LA against the new voluntary standards and passed with flying colours; in fact, they are actually looking to us for support now! The most important feedback has been from the children, parents and staff - everyone agrees Zoom's food is top notch!"

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Good food is always at the heart of bringing people together. If you've been inspired to use your setting's food as a selling point to show off your commitment to excellence, keep the following advice in mind:

- Make sure it's good enough - someone will soon pick up on it if it's not!
- Look at how you promote your food philosophy - do you organise notice boards, newsletters, recipe cards, weaning clubs, open days, summer barbecues, celebrations or 'learn to cook clubs'? All are good opportunities to show what you do.
- If in doubt, look for help! For a summary of the Children's Food Trust Voluntary Guidelines for Food and Drink in childcare settings in England, go to www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk
- For free practical support, training and resources, join www.grub4life.com



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NIGEL DENBY, GRUB4LIFE