

healthy eating: *THIS WAY?*

New voluntary guidelines have been launched for food and drink in England's early years settings, but they don't go far enough, says **Nigel Denby...**

January 12th, 2012 saw the launch of the new Voluntary Guidelines for Food and Drink in Early Years Settings in England by the School Food Trust. The guidelines were eagerly anticipated and heralded as the definitive document for all early years providers. But, are they able to fulfil their promise, and make a real difference to the health of the next generation?

There have long been calls for new National Guidelines in England. The previous guidelines, which examined good and bad practice around the country; the level of knowledge about early years nutrition amongst the early years sector; and how this was being used at grass roots level, were outdated, having been drawn up a decade before in 2001. Recent data and research has shifted the focus from school meals onto the food we serve the under-fives in daycare. In short, early intervention is increasingly recognised as the key driver to improving public health. And little wonder when you consider:

- we've known for some time that food served in early years settings is too high in fat, salt and sugar, and too low in important nutrients;
- children under five have been getting steadily heavier: at least one in five children are obese by the time they enter Reception year;





- overweight and obese children are likely to become overweight and obese adults;
- poorer children have poorer diets, health outcomes and life chances;
- more children are in some form of daycare than ever before and the figures grow year on year.

The review and subsequent guidance applies to all forms of daycare – from children's

Assessing progress

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to mandatory standards is how they could be monitored. Ofsted currently monitor and evaluate the School meal standards, a task they accomplish with the aid of assessment tools developed by The School Food Trust. Schools have self-assessment tools to help them produce their evidence for meeting the standards – again provided by the Trust – so why could the same not have been produced for early years inspectors and providers?

centres to day nurseries to childminders. Trying to provide 'one size fits all' guidance is perhaps the first stumbling block in the way of delivering higher standards. Put simply, should a lone childminder who is responsible for every aspect of childcare really be expected to deliver the same level of planning and detail in her food provision as a chain of nurseries? The childminder can, of course, deliver excellent, highly nutritious food, and many do. But the tools to help the childminder deliver, and the means by which they demonstrates their standards, surely need to be different to those used by the nursery chain with its management infrastructure and teams of dedicated cooks and kitchen assistants.

The results

So, what did the review discover?

- There's a huge amount of guidance relating to food, nutrition and healthy eating in the early years already in the public domain.
- The availability of this information does not improve knowledge in key early years workers. Those key workers who demonstrate good knowledge have actively sought their own training; it was not part of their general childcare training.
- There's widespread confusion about appropriate portion sizes, managing food allergies and intolerances and hidden

ingredients in pre-prepared foods, e.g. additives, hidden salt and sugar.

■ Poor awareness about the Healthy Start Vitamin Scheme is widespread.

■ Despite there being a lot of guidance, most of it is very theoretical – there's an acute need for practical training and examples of workable menus, recipes and menu checklists.

■ Support and guidance for parents is patchy and localised.

■ Large variations exist in local authority policies supporting early years nutrition.

■ No accredited specialist qualifications for early years catering Staff exist.

■ While childcare staff (including childminders) receive plenty of training and CPD, very few receive any training in food and nutrition.

■ Most early years catering staff are neglected when it comes to CPD and training beyond food hygiene and health and safety.

■ The best placed organisation to review food and nutrition provision in the early years is Ofsted. However, Ofsted inspectors do not have the necessary experience or tool kits to carry out these reviews efficiently and accurately.

While these findings may not have been a great surprise, they added fuel to the optimism that the School Food Trust guidance would bridge the gap between where early years nutrition is currently, and where we'd all like it to be.

But whilst the 107-page guidance document is packed with good quality information, in my opinion it's not practical enough. The guidance includes a lot of the original work laid down by the Caroline Walker Trust, *Eating Well for the under 5s* (2010); there's more detail and guidance about portion sizes but that's the most noticeable change. Elsewhere, there's little support around managing allergies and intolerances and no guidance on where to access specific training. Most disappointing of all, adhering to the guidance remains voluntary – early years providers can choose to totally ignore it if they want to. If you do choose to follow the guidance to the letter, there's no stamp of approval process to acknowledge and recognise your commitment to the wider community. So where's the incentive?

To be effective, the guidance needed to inspire an "I can do that" response from both childminder and large corporate nursery group alike. Most of the providers (large and small) I have spoken to have had a more "where do we start?" reaction.

Where can you start?

It's pretty simple, actually: you can, if you wish, work to food-based standards where you commit to include different food groups in different amounts and frequencies on your menu, e.g. fruit and vegetables served at every meal and snack. Or you can follow nutrient-based standards where you commit to providing a specific amount of calories and nutrients at each meal and snack through

Too few cooks?

Kangacook provide catering support in the form of cooks, kitchen assistants and porters. They ensure all kitchen staff complete skills tests in line with current legislation and will have completed food hygiene training. All candidates will have an enhanced CRB disclosure and will have undergone a face to face interview and registration. For more info, visit kangacrew.com/kangacook

Training is being developed to give key staff the skills they need to understand, interpret and deliver better food. Most importantly uptake is excellent and it's working.

A commitment to excellence

In my view, the School Food Trust guidance for food has been a missed opportunity. Healthy eating never has been and never has to be rocket science, not even for the under-fives. In my experience, support, practical training and accessible resources are the key to building the confidence of the staff on the front line.

The likelihood is that it will be many more years before there is another opportunity to review or enforce food and nutrition standards for the under-fives in childcare. Until then, it's up to you to step up to the challenge. For those of you who are ready, we would encourage you to seek support and promote and celebrate your commitment to excellence. Sooner or later, those who choose to ignore the issue will either fall by the wayside or be exposed for failing the children in their care.

standard, analysed recipes. Both can work in practice.

It was hoped the guidance would support both food-based and nutrient-based approaches, and offer practical menu checklists, nutritionally-analysed menus and recipes that all providers, no matter what size, could immediately start to use. Furthermore, we wanted the guidance to have an affiliate programme or award scheme for providers to sign up to. This would have been a valuable marketing tool and a way to show their commitment to meeting the standards. It would have served as a real incentive to put the effort in and lead the way.

Raising the standards of early years food and nutrition doesn't have to be expensive, and it doesn't require an army of nutrition experts. In Wales, providers actively opt in to meet the Welsh national standards. There are portion-controlled, analysed recipes to use if required, or there is support to upgrade in house recipes to this level of detail.



get COOKING!

Try these tasty and nutritious recipes

Shepherd's Pie

Ingredients (4-6 servings)

1 onion

1 red pepper

2 carrots – peeled and grated

2 tsp dried parsley

2 tbsp Oil

450g (1lb) lean minced lamb

250ml (8floz) chicken stock

1 tsp Marmite

100g (4oz) mushrooms – washed and sliced

450g (1lb) potatoes – peeled and chopped

2 tsp margarine, dash of milk

- Preheat oven to 180c, 350F, Gas 4
- Soften the onion, pepper, grated carrot and parsley in a frying pan with a little oil.
- Add minced lamb, brown and drain off any excess fat.

- Add chicken stock and Marmite and simmer for 20 minutes.
- Add the mushrooms to the mixture and cook for a further 5 minutes
- Spoon mixture into a large dish.
- To make the topping, boil the potatoes for mash. When soft, mash with margarine and milk. Spread over the meat, and make peaks by running a fork over the surface.
- Cook in the oven for 15 minutes.
- Serve with vegetables.

Mixed Berry Compote with Crème Fraîche

Ingredients (4-6 servings)

500g (16oz) frozen fruits of the forest

50g (1/12oz) sugar

Crème fraîche

- Put all the fruit into a heavy saucepan, and sprinkle the sugar over the top. Simmer for 10-12 minutes.
- Serve hot or cold with vanilla ice cream.

