

For the first time, childcare providers have a nationally-recognised source of information about the foods they should offer young children, portion sizes, sample menus and recipes, advice on tackling fussy eating and involving children in food and cooking activities. Up and down the country, nurseries, children's centres and childminders are busy putting the School Food Trust voluntary guidelines on food and nutrition for under-fives into practice.

To make sure they were giving children in their care a healthy, balanced and nutritious diet, the Old School House Day Nursery signed up to test the guidelines for the charity before they were rolled out. A family-run setting based in the Cambridgeshire countryside, it caters for 120 children aged from three months to five years. Six months on, director, Linda Baston-Pitt, is still following the guidelines and says they have not only been a valuable lesson in portion control but that the information pack has become an important source of information and reference for all staff.

"Helping staff develop a sound understanding of the nutritional requirements of under-fives should be an integral part of early years training," says Linda. "With mixed messages from the media and key literature spread over various locations, there is a need for a one-stop source of vital information – which is exactly what the guidelines have become for us."

Into practice

Linda says implementing the guidelines took very little extra time – an important factor for larger settings with many children to care for and a large staff team, with different levels of ability and experience, to brief. "We entered the pilot with an open mind and as a whole team," she says. "We were prepared to cast a critical eye over the way the nursery operated. I think it's because of this approach that the process became a way for us to evaluate how we run."

"On a weekly basis, we compared our existing snack and meal-time menus against



It's been a wonderful way to engage parents, spark off healthy food discussions and learn about eating habits at home

LINDA BASTON-PITT, DIRECTOR, OLD SCHOOL HOUSE DAY NURSERY



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For the last six months, the Old School House Day Nursery has been trialling the School Food Trust's voluntary guidelines on food and nutrition. *TN* spoke to the setting's director about how they've been getting on...

the sample menus so we could make necessary changes, to make sure we were offered the right amount of fruit, veg and nutrients to meet the School Food Trust recommendations."

During evaluation discussions, staff learned of an issue they had with portion control, between

the chef and the staff members in charge of distributing meals and snacks to the children. "Early on, it jumped out to us that our portion sizes were quite inconsistent," says Linda. "Due to our size, we serve meals in three different rooms, for three different age groups. Since using the guidelines, we've found that our nursery workers managing the dining rooms were handing out different portion sizes to the children, even though the kitchen staff had supplied the right amount to begin with."

Using the chapter dedicated to portion control, Linda was able to improve the dining service to ensure each child was eating the recommended amount of food at meal times for their age. "The section on portion size has been invaluable to all staff – they've commented on the large, bright photos and have said they illustrate exactly what you need to know and that you can understand how much a portion constituted at a glance.

"We actually got quite a surprise with some of the advised portions and so spent some time over the first few weeks, accurately weighing foods to the recommended amounts. It was a really simple and easy step-by-step process to follow."

Linda's clear that she will continue to use the guidelines and urges other childcare providers to follow suit. "Displaying the Early Years Code of Practice is a clear sign to parents that our setting is committed to continually raising quality of food and drink standards for children in our care," she adds. "Communicating a consistent message to all staff and parents will ensure that the guidelines are not only embedded but also become an essential part of daily practice."

find out more

For more information on the School Food Trust's new guidelines, visit www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk