

With focus increasing on nutritional standards in childcare, **Nigel Denby** looks at the support available to nurseries looking to improve the quality of their diet...



This is a time when nutrition can make a difference to toddlers' lives now and in the future

Back in October 2008 the Soil Association published a report entitled *Better Nursery Food Now!* which highlighted the extreme inconsistencies of nutrition standards within early years childcare. The report blamed a lack of regulation and called for the introduction of mandatory nutrition standards.

Over 600,000 children under five attend nurseries throughout England and Wales, some for up to as much as 10 hours a day. But, in some cases, as little as 25p per day is allocated to the children's food provision, and there are

no safeguards in place to cover nutritional standards.

Thankfully there are some great examples of good nursery nutrition, but there's no doubt that food in childcare is a lottery and that there's a distinct lack of clear direction for providers.

Not surprisingly, the media, local authorities and parents are now turning their attention to the food we serve the under fives so it's encouraging that many providers are stepping up to the plate to make improvements to the food they serve.

Nutrition in the early years

The pre-school years are a time of rapid growth and development – they are also the most nutritionally vulnerable of any stage of the human life-cycle, with under fives having comparatively higher requirements for certain nutrients. Iron, calcium and zinc are three minerals of particular importance.

Nutritional problems are common in this age group: iron deficiency anaemia is a growing problem, as are other nutritional deficiencies like rickets and failure to thrive. Constipation is common, dental caries is prevalent and rates of obesity are rising. Young children mainly learn by copying others. Their taste preferences are developed and motor and linguistic skills are both intrinsically linked with feeding development.

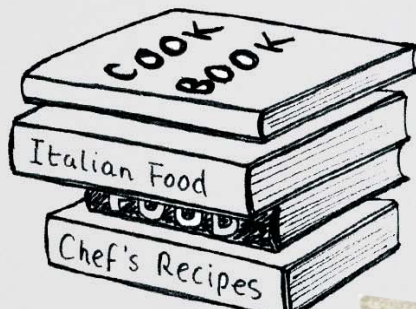
This is a time when nutrition can make a difference to toddlers' lives now and for their future health.



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NIGEL DENBY

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The state of play

Scotland has had its early years nutrition standards for some time (scotland.gov.uk), and they are widely accepted as being effective, practical and workable. Yet, there has been a complete lack of government commitment to nutrition for the under fives in the other home nations.

There have been several government reports which talk about it, but as yet no one has been willing to go any further. 'Every Child Matters', 'Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives' and more recently in 2008, the government cabinet office's strategy unit all identified nutrition in the early years as a critical element in achieving their wider health outcomes. However, none of the departments which produced these reports would become involved in the debate over introducing basic nutrition standards. We have yet to see if the new coalition government will take a different stance.

All we have to go on at the moment is a vague 2003 guideline from the DfES: *Children are provided with regular drinks and food in adequate quantities for their needs. Food and drink is properly prepared, nutritious and complies with dietary and religious requirements.*

This leaves nursery cooks and managers to decide what is meant by "nutritious" and "meeting dietary requirements". Can we expect all nursery care providers to have the knowledge about which vitamins or minerals are of specific importance to the under fives, or how much protein, fat or carbohydrate they should be having at each meal? Furthermore, do nurseries have the resources, skills and time to devise menus, and nutritionally analyse them, without training and support?



Under 5s have higher requirements for iron, calcium and zinc

What support is out there?

1. Grub4life was established by dieticians and chefs specifically to support early years childcare providers and parents, and provides nutrition policy documents, menus, recipes and training. (Health and childcare professionals can join for free at grub4life.org.uk) The recipes are simple, based on ordinary household ingredients, and have been tested on, and are loved by, over 40,000 children. The resources available include:

- Five week rotational 'cradle to table' menus and recipes for children from 0-5 years
- Complete nutritional analysis to comply with early years nutritional requirements for children as defined by the Caroline Walker Trust
- Comprehensive policy documents for breakfast foods, weaning, packed lunches, festival foods and ethnically diverse diets
- Full early years nutrition training and support including cookery and nutrition master classes covering fussy eating, weaning, food labelling and food allergy and intolerance training.
- Continued, interactive, multimedia family resources to continue healthy eating at home⁹

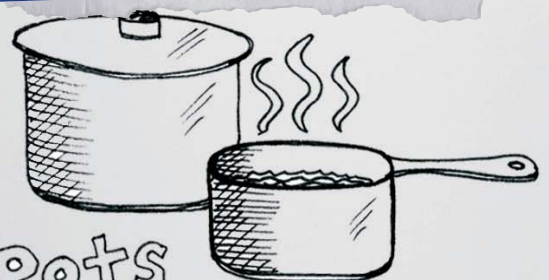
2. The Caroline Walker Trust (cwt.org.uk) is a charity specialising in initiatives to improve public health through good food. In 2006 the Trust produced Eating Well for under 5s in child care, which gives a comprehensive outline of the nutritional needs of this age group, and recommendations for the frequency with which each food group should be offered.

3. The National Day-Care and Nurseries Association (NDNA) is a charity which aims to enhance the development and education of children in their early years. The NDNA has developed two publications: *Your essential guide to Nutrition, Serving Food and Oral Health* and *Your essential guide to Cooking Healthy, Tasty Food*. Visit ndna.org.uk

4. The Infant and Toddler Forum (infantandtoddlerforum.org) is a multidisciplinary team of experts and practitioners with an interest in child nutrition, which aims to be an educational resource for health professionals. Its members are drawn from a range of organisations, including the NHS, universities, professional associations and the infant food industry.

Although there are distinct differences between healthy eating for the under fives and healthy eating for adults and older children, it doesn't have to be complicated or expensive to get it right. Help, support and practical resources are available. Increasingly food and nutrition is seen as an integral part of a child care provider's overall standard of care, and those who fail to make the grade may be left behind.

The Denby Report



Pots and Pans

What's cooking?

Three Grub4life signature dishes which have been tried and tested by over 40,000 pre-school children...

Banana breakfast loaf

(serves 10–12)

75g butter, softened
75g caster sugar
1 large egg, beaten
225g wholemeal flour
2 tsp baking powder
3 medium ripe bananas, mashed (250g)

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180c, gas mark 4.
2. Grease and base line a 1kg loaf tin.
3. Whisk the butter and sugar together until pale and fluffy, gradually whisk in the egg.
4. Mix the flour and baking powder together and fold into the butter mixture. Stir in the bananas.
5. Spoon into the prepared tin and bake for 40–45 minutes or until firm to touch and a skewer comes out clean.
6. Allow to cool slightly before removing from the tin.

Chicken piri piri with rice

(serves 10)

5 boneless, skinless, chicken breasts.
Pinch of dried mixed herbs
1 onion – peeled and chopped
50g (2oz) margarine
150g (6oz) mushrooms
2x cans chopped tomatoes 2x 400g
1 tsp dried oregano
90g (3oz) grated cheese
4 mugs of long grain rice
2 mugs of mixed frozen peas and sweet corn

Method

1. Preheat oven to 180c, 350F, gas mark 4
2. Cut chicken in half and sprinkle with mixed herbs
3. Place in an oven proof dish.
4. In a frying pan, soften the onion in the margarine, then add the mushrooms and cook for a further 3–4 minutes.
5. Add the chopped tomatoes and the oregano and simmer for about 12 minutes.
6. Pour the tomato sauce over the chicken breasts, add the grated cheese and cook in the oven for 25–30 mins.
7. Cook the rice according to the instructions.
8. 4 minutes from the end, add the peas and sweet corn.
9. Serve the chicken and sauce on a bed of rice.

*For vegetarian diets replace chicken breasts with Quorn fillets and use soya or vegetarian cheese.

*For milk-free diets exclude cheese from sauce topping.

Pasta prima vera

(serves 10)

450g (1lb) pasta bows
3 courgettes cut into thin strips
2 carrots peeled and cut into thin strips
1 head of broccoli cut into small florets
125g (5oz) frozen peas
1 can chopped tomatoes



The children enjoyed the piri piri chicken and would like to have it again

150g or 5 tbsp cream cheese
75g (3oz) grated cheddar cheese

Method

1. Cook the pasta in plenty of boiling water.
2. After 5 minutes add the courgette, carrot and broccoli.
3. Add the peas 3 minutes before the end.
4. Drain the pasta and vegetables.
5. Over a low heat stir in the tomatoes and cream cheese.
6. Stir until the cream cheese has melted.
7. Serve with a little grated cheese sprinkled over the top.

*For wheat-free diets replace pasta with rice.

*For milk-free diets replace cream cheese and grated cheddar in sauce with soya milk and soya cheese.

Nb. Recipe yields refers to toddler portions.

Tried & tasted

The proof of the pudding is, as we all know, in the eating – so we asked staff and children at Just Learning Nursery, Colchester (justlearning.co.uk) to test our featured recipes...

Kayleigh, 3–5s room leader: “The recipes were really easy to follow and the children were eager to try the new food. When sat at the table waiting for the dishes they were excited. Throughout the tasting the children kept commenting on how much they enjoyed the piri piri chicken and would like to have it again. We will definitely be considering putting these foods onto our menu.”

“We liked the smell of the chicken dish.”

The pasta and banana loaf were yummy.”

