

Dietitian, chef and founder of Grub4life, **Nigel Denby**, offers advice on ensuring your setting's food offering is the best that it can be...



*Parents are paying increasing attention to the food their children are served*



**F**ood served to children under five in childcare has never been higher on the political, media and parental agenda.

Since nutrient-based standards were introduced in 2006 for food served in primary and secondary schools, momentum has grown behind campaigns to do the same within the early years sector. This momentum has attracted significant media attention and is causing parents to demand greater information about the food served to their children. The public sector is making significant steps to improve

nutrition standards in Local Authority children's centres and nurseries. In addition, the Coalition Government is currently passing legislation to 'reward' Local Authorities who are able to demonstrate quantifiable changes in public health – particularly in the area of obesity amongst children. The 'burden' of public health is therefore being shared between the Health Services and Local Authorities.

Grub4Life is delighted to have been working with several Local Authorities and London Boroughs within this framework, to train cooks and childcare

staff in nutrition and cookery, and provide them with resources to put their training into practice.

We're also working with the private childcare sector, but in our opinion it's clear that the public sector is leading the way in early years nutrition. Those public or private sector settings who are identified as excelling in food and nutrition provision will undoubtedly become respected role models within childcare. The commitment from private sector settings to excellence in food and nutrition is also, of course, a key USP and an opportunity to communicate and market the business to parents and the wider community.

### A matter of taste

It's well-established that children's taste preferences are formed during the early years and can last a lifetime. Children are more 'nutritionally vulnerable' during this period than any other phase in their life



**With up to 600,000 children in full-time childcare, it could be argued that child carers have a greater influence over food choice than parents**

NIGEL DENBY



# MENUS



cycle, and there is huge potential for both over and under nutrition. As such, the role of early years settings in shaping the eating habits of young children cannot be underestimated.

However, a recent study in one London Borough found that by the time children reached Reception, 30% were overweight or obese. Equally worrying was that the same study showed that 21% of children at Reception were malnourished. These findings reflect similar patterns of nutrition issues found in a wide cross-section of diverse socio-economic communities across the UK. They illustrate the underlying failure to meet the nutritional needs of young children.

Childcare providers (cooks and cook's assistants in particular) have a crucial role in improving this trend, and yet the only current nursery food legislation states, "Where children are provided with meals, snacks and drinks, these must be healthy, balanced and nutritious". In practice this can (and generally does) mean almost anything.

Thankfully, calls for improved standards in nursery food quality are increasing:

**2008:** The Soil Association launched its campaign for nutritional standards for nursery education along with a minimum head spend for meals and proper training for kitchen staff.

**2010:** A survey of 1,000 MumsNet users found that approximately 66% were unhappy with the food served at their child's nursery.

**January 2010:** BBC1 *Panorama* 'What's really in our kids' food' aired, with a special programme devoted to poor quality nursery food.

**March 2010:** The School Food Trust report suggested that food served in childcare is too high in fat, sugar and salt and lacks essential nutrients.

**April 2010:** 72 MPs signed an Early Day Motion calling for proper guidelines on nursery food.

**May 2010:** Liverpool Hope University published a study calling for more advice and training for nurseries in early years nutrition. The study found nursery food to be high in salt from the use of ingredients containing hidden salt, and deficient in fats, oils, carbohydrates and several vitamins and minerals which are essential in the early years.

It's anticipated that mandatory standards in food and nutrition for the early years will be introduced and those who are 'ahead of the game' will have a strong influence on other settings.



*Managers and cooks must take responsibility for the quality of food served*

## What affects food nutrition standards?

The nutritional content of food served to children is, of course, the critical element to improving health outcomes, but helping children develop an enjoyment of a healthy balanced diet is far less scientific and requires a centre-wide philosophy and approach to food. It's important to look at the entire eating experience to evaluate exactly how seriously an early years setting takes its role in encouraging children to eat well.

### Training

- With the absence of mandatory food and nutrition standards for nurseries it's largely down to managers and cooks to decide what food is served. Therefore, the quality of food served is often dependent on their level of cookery and nutrition training.
- There's very limited nutrition training currently in the NVQ Level 2 and 3 Childcare qualifications.
- There are no nutrition or cookery minimum qualification requirements for nursery cooks or cook's assistants.
- Often the healthy eating principles for older children and adults are applied to the under-fives; these are not appropriate and have implications for inadequate provision of iron, zinc, B vitamins, calcium and vitamin C. Adult healthy eating guidelines can be interpreted to provide meals which are high in fibre and low in fat, again, not appropriate to meet the needs of the under-fives.

### Recipes and procurement

- Standard recipes and menus are essential tools to ensure nutritional balance. They also guide less experienced cooks and assistants in healthy cooking practices, food presentation and time management.
- Standard recipes are also essential to help manage food budgets.
- Central purchasing allows for the use of standard, specific ingredients, e.g. low-salt stock, yoghurts with appropriate levels of sugar, which take into consideration the special nutritional needs of children under five. However, central purchasing is only effective if the supplier understands the special nutritional issues affecting the under-fives and has the flexibility to source suitable ingredients.



# The right ingredients



## HOW DOES YOUR ORGANISATION'S FOOD OFFERING MEASURE UP...

CHECKLIST	SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS
Where do you refer for information about nutrition for the under-fives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grub4life.org.uk offers a range of early years nutrition and cookery training modules and resources specifically designed for nursery managers, cooks and their assistants.</li> <li>The Caroline Walker Trust (cwt.org.uk/pdfs/Under5s) offers excellent guidance for early years childcare providers</li> </ul>
Does your cook use standardised recipes which have been nutritionally analysed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grub4life.org.uk provides free, downloadable menus and recipes in yields of 10 toddler portions. All have been tried and approved by over 40,000 children under five.</li> <li>cwt.org.uk/pdfs/Under5s.pdf The second edition of 'Eating well for under 5s in childcare' offers practical advice about how to put eating well into practice.</li> <li>www.nutmeg-uk.com offers nutritional analysis programmes specifically designed for the under-fives in childcare.</li> </ul>
Kitchen equipment and procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talk with your cook to see what basic equipment is needed in the kitchen; many items will be inexpensive and will extend the range of dishes which can be prepared.</li> <li>Speak to suppliers to see what ingredients they offer to suit the under-fives.</li> </ul>
The dining area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you have a clear and comprehensive food and nutrition policy?</li> <li>Does your food and nutrition policy include provision for special diets?</li> <li>Have your staff received any nutrition training?</li> <li>Do you display menus for parents to see?</li> <li>Does nursery food appear on your staff meeting agenda?</li> </ul>

### The kitchen and eating environment

- Cooking for large numbers requires adequate equipment. Insufficient oven or grill space, domestic-sized saucepans etc. limit the range of dishes which can be prepared.
- The eating environment needs to promote relaxed mealtimes to allow children to develop healthy eating patterns. Many children may only have the opportunity to eat around a table at nursery.
- Children should be involved in table laying and other food related activities, e.g. preparing fruit for snacks, growing produce in nursery gardens or grow bags.
- Staff should eat with children, should be trained to understand how their behaviour towards food influences the attitudes of children in their care.
- The use of table mats, cloths, serving dishes etc. all have an impact on the ambience needed to facilitate successful mealtimes.

### Communication

- Effective communication between managers, childcare staff and cooks is essential when catering for the varied dietary needs of young children. Portion sizes, special diet provision, menu planning and stock control can all be adversely affected if communication lines are not open.
- There must be continuous communication with parents about the food and nutrition philosophy, including:
  - verbal communication regarding feeding issues and special diet;
  - displays of menus and recipes; and
  - less obvious communication about the provenance of the menus, recipes and ingredients used in the preparation of children's food.



The  
Denby Report

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