



Cost-cutting *without* COMPROMISE

We've all felt the pinch as food prices have been rising during the recession, so it's little wonder that families are looking for savvy ways to cut their grocery bills. As a childcare provider, you're no doubt feeling the squeeze on your food budget too, but I suspect you feel the need to be less overt about how you're trying to cut costs. The public has a different view when care providers are looking to make savings on food: less money spent implies lower standards. But saving money needn't mean reduced quality.

Efficiency in catering is nothing new. It's what any business which provides food to its service users has to practise in order to survive. Yet, when Grub4Life has worked with both private and local authority early years childcare providers (EYCs), we've been amazed at the absence of standard catering management practices. It's this simple: you cannot feed 30 or 130 children all day, every day without observing some simple rules on budget management. The good news is, you most definitely can have an efficient, flexible food procurement system, and a menu which reduces waste and enables you to accurately cost your meals without compromising on taste, presentation or nutritional quality.

Saving money on the weekly food bill needn't mean reducing the quality of your menu, says dietician and founder of Grub4Life, **Nigel Denby...**



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Looking after the pennies

The old adage of looking after the pennies so the pounds can look after themselves is not a bad philosophy to follow. There is no single strategy to save money when it comes to food, but by implementing a few simple steps you can save small amounts here and there which can make a real difference overall.

Menu planning

Before you start on the fine detail, you have to operate with a menu and standardised recipes in place. This should be a rotational menu which operates over 3–4 weeks with accompanying recipes that specify the number of portions they produce. The menu can, of course, be changed once or twice a year to reflect the seasons, and can be

flexible in order to take advantage of special offers – for instance, you may want to include a weekly roast on the menu but leave the meat choice optional to take advantage of changing meat prices. Similarly, fish pie can be made with a wide range of fish without adversely affecting its nutritional value.

This flexibility can be used in a wide range of dishes and accompaniments. Suggesting the colour of vegetable meal accompaniments, rather than specific vegetables, allows you to buy in season when vegetables are cheaper: e.g. Fish Pie with green and orange vegetables. This ensures the meal is providing specific nutrients (all green veg contains folate and iron, all orange veg contains beta carotene) but allows you to vary what is served according to price and season.

you use of an ingredient, you will always struggle to get a good deal. Waste can also be significantly improved using a portion-controlled recipe: it ensures you produce the right amount of food for the number of children, and acts as a very useful tool for child carers or dining room staff to serve the right sized portion for each child.

From a nutritional point of view, portion-controlled recipes and standard menus are essential. Nutritional analysis relies on accuracy of ingredient weights and recipe yields; without these it's impossible for you to demonstrate the nutritional value of your food.

Purchasing power

Whether you're an independent nursery, a local authority EYC or part of a national chain you have the power to negotiate preferential rates with your suppliers – providing you have standard menus and portion-controlled recipes.

Independents

You might be small, but have you considered approaching other independent nurseries to join forces in purchasing? Like cooperative retailers, cooperative purchasers can operate more efficiently than individuals in the marketplace. You don't all have to use the same menu, but by buying in bulk from local suppliers, discounts of 10–25 per cent are very achievable. Local suppliers are often keen to advertise their links with local businesses, too, so you might want to consider displaying your local food supply network in the nursery. It's a good marketing tool and USP for the nursery and goes down very well with parents.

Budget buys

Some settings are unsure about whether they should use supermarket budget ranges or stick to premium brands only. Budget fruit and vegetables are just as nutritious as premium or organic fruit and veg; they're just not a uniform size and shape. But processed foods such as cereals, fruit juice, cold meats and bakery goods may vary nutritionally from the mainstream brands. Fat, salt or sugar levels can also be significantly higher in budget ranges, so it's important to compare labels before choosing.

Portion control

There are some truly inspiring cooks working in the early years, and you'd be amazed how many produce terrific meals without ever referring to a recipe. However, when the cook carries all their knowledge in their head, a setting is vulnerable. What happens if the cook is sick or leaves? All that knowledge goes with them. From a budgeting point of view, you cannot cost a menu without a recipe – you need the recipe to tell you the quantity of ingredients needed to produce a specific number of meals. Grub4life.org.uk features free recipes which produce yields of 10 toddler portions, making it easy to produce meals for larger numbers if required. It also means you have all the information you need in order to negotiate discounts and special deals with local suppliers or wholesalers. If you don't know how much

Local authorities

The vast majority of local authorities have negotiated central food purchasing from contracted suppliers. While this can be effective at achieving discounts, it does restrict EYCs from taking advantage of any other opportunities. Grub4Life saw a prime example of this in one London children's centre which is situated next to a fantastic fruit and vegetable market. The borough had contracted fruit and vegetable suppliers who, at one stage, were charging over £2 for a pineapple when the next door market was offering three pineapples for £1. But the children's centre couldn't buy the cheaper pineapples because they no longer had a petty cash facility. We're glad to report this situation has now changed and a lovely range of different fruit is available at the children's centre.

Nursery groups

Grub4Life has worked with some of the major nursery groups in the UK. Originally, we were amazed to see that many had very comprehensive policies on education, CPD and child safety, but almost nothing established when it came to food. Some were using online supermarket shopping and delivery. On the face of it, this seems like a convenient idea, but many nurseries report problems with this approach. If an item is out of stock, inappropriate alternatives can be sent instead. This can be as simple as diet yoghurt being sent instead of full fat yoghurt, which affects the nutritional balance of a meal, but can be more serious: cereals and snack foods containing nuts have been sent as an alternative to nut-free brands. This could

very easily be overlooked by staff and have disastrous implications. Fresh foods, particularly cold meats, are often delivered with imminent use-by dates. This results in wastage, or the nursery having to alter menus to use up ingredients.

Grub4Life has worked with a number of nursery groups to help them plan and negotiate food supply from catering wholesalers. While this can be a big project, the savings that can be made with economies of scale cannot be ignored. The key tools you need are planned menus, recipes and very clear ingredients requirements. You'll also need an accurate estimate of your annual or monthly group food spend. Some wholesalers are clued up to the needs of EYCs, others are not. Some common ingredients to ask if a wholesaler can supply will soon enable you to sort the wheat from the chaff.

Ask a wholesaler if they can supply:

- Tuna in spring water
- Canned pulses in unsalted water
- Low-salt stock cubes

If you get a negative response to these simple requests, we'd suggest you move on.

Providing good quality, nutritious food that young children will eat is not easy; having skilled cooks is paramount to achieving this. Many cooks may not have the experience in managing budgets and suppliers in the same way other caterers do,

but this can be learned and shouldn't stop you gaining competitive suppliers who can provide what you need at a price that's right.

By combining common catering management skills with your cook's expertise you can provide excellence in the food you serve. Just in the same way as any other area of the nursery, you can also minimise the amount of money being needlessly wasted.



get COOKING! Try this tasty recipe...

Vegetable Curry with Rice and Cucumber Raita

Ingredients (10 servings)

The curry

50g unsaturated margarine
2 (200g) onions peeled and finely chopped
125g mushrooms, washed and quartered
2 (200g) carrots peeled and cut into sticks
½ (120g) cauliflower cut into florets
1 (120g) head of broccoli cut into florets
25g flour
1 tbsp (15g) mild curry powder
½ tsp (3g) ground ginger
½ tsp (3g) ground cinnamon
285ml milk
140ml Kallo low salt vegetable or chicken stock
1 tbsp (15g) mango chutney
1x 400g can chickpeas in water

The raita

150g natural yoghurt
2 tsp (12g) dried mint
200g cucumber, diced

300g Basmati Rice

- In a large saucepan, melt the butter.
- Add the onion and carrots and cook for 4–5 mins until the onion has softened.
- Add the flour, curry powder, ginger and cinnamon. Cook gently for a few seconds before blending in the milk and stock.
- Stir in the chutney.
- Now add the cauliflower, broccoli and chickpeas and bring to the boil.
- Simmer for 20 mins.
- Meanwhile, cook the rice according to the pack instructions and make the raita...
- Mix the yoghurt, dried mint and cucumber.
- Serve the curry on a bed of rice, with a tablespoon of the raita.

cook's tip...

Prepare extra cauliflower and broccoli to make a purée for weaning babies.

For milk-free diets, use soya milk in the curry and soya yoghurt to make the raita.

For wheat-free diets, use wheat-free flour to thicken the curry.

Nutrition analysis per serving
Energy (kcal) 137, Protein (g) 5.3, Fat (g) 4.4,
Carbohydrate (g) 19.4, Sugar (g) 3,
Salt (g) 0.2, Iron (mg) 1.7, Calcium (mg) 72

