

Dietician, chef and founder of Grub4Life, **Nigel Denby**, looks at how one London Borough has revamped its early years food offering...

In the autumn of 2010, the London Borough of Southwark embarked on a project with Grub4Life to review, update and improve the standard of food and nutrition offered to children under five in its Local Authority-managed children's and early years centres. The project will culminate later this year in the launch of brand new nutrition policies and a Borough-wide, four-week rotational menu for them all.

Food and nutrition in early years childcare and education has become increasingly recognised as a route to improving public health issues affecting children across the UK. The Coalition Government is currently passing legislation to 'reward' Local Authorities that are able to demonstrate quantifiable change in public health – particularly in the area of obesity amongst children.



Get Cooking!

Minced beef quesadillas with tomatoes and vegetable sticks

Ingredients (makes 12 portions):

1 (100g) red onion, peeled and diced
1 (100g) carrot, peeled and diced
½ (50g) leek, remove outer leaves and slice finely
½ (15g) stalk celery, washed and sliced
1 (6g) clove garlic, crushed
100g mushrooms, washed and sliced
20g tomato puree
450g minced beef

1x 200g can chopped tomatoes
100g/4oz frozen sweet corn
6 soft tortilla wraps
75g grated cheese
10g fresh coriander, chopped
1 egg, beaten
20 (300g) cherry tomatoes
Carrots and cucumber, cut into sticks (400g of each)

Method:

■ First make filling by sweating the finely chopped onion, carrot, leek, celery, crushed garlic and mushrooms until soft.

- Add the tomato puree and minced beef and cook for a further two minutes.
- Add the tomatoes and the frozen sweetcorn, bring to the boil and then simmer until the mince is cooked (approx. 15 minutes).
- Using two wraps make a sandwich with the filling, grated cheese and chopped coriander, then seal the edges with egg or water.
- Brush with oil and bake in the oven on baking parchment until brown and puffed (about 12 minutes).
- Cut into four triangles (one per portion) and serve with vegetable sticks and cherry tomatoes.

Three healthy recipes to try with your children...

The 'burden' of public health is therefore being shared between Health Services and Local Authorities.

As a result, Local Authorities across the UK are streamlining their public health commitment by introducing food and nutrition initiatives through their children's centres and nurseries. In effect, this means that Local Authorities are ahead of the private sector in setting standards of food and nutrition in the early years, but it's anticipated that a call for minimum standards for nutrition in childcare across the board will gain momentum in the media, in politics and certainly from parents.

An early start

Southwark is facing up to a range of challenges. It is ranked 17th most deprived out of 354 Local Authorities and has a high rate of infant deaths, whilst its proportion of children classified as obese in their Reception year is amongst the highest in England. However, the Borough has been addressing its social and public health problems, and when it came to nutrition was keen to tackle potential problems before children reached primary school.

To help meet this aim, Grub4Life was asked to provide nutrition and cookery training for eight early years childcare cooks, cook's assistants and one manager working in early years and children's centres in the Borough.

The trainees were encouraged to discuss the food and nutrition provision in their own centres and to share their experiences and issues which they had to cope with in their day to day work. Centre managers were also consulted to gain an understanding of their views on food served.

The results showed significant inconsistencies, which were hampering Southwark's efforts to improve children's health and, in particular, the prevalence of obesity amongst children entering their Reception year. The main issues were as follows:

- inconsistent food quality, including taste, presentation and nutritional value.
- inconsistent recipes were used across the Borough, which meant that there were no measurable Southwark Borough Standards in food and nutrition for the early years centres.
- poor standards of training in nutrition, which meant that cooks could not be effectively managed or supported by their managers.
- inconsistent communication to parents and the wider community about food and nutrition.

Our recommendations focused on three key areas:

- Early Years Food and Nutrition training, with ongoing support for children's centre cooks and managers, and practitioners.
- Standardised food and nutrition policies, menus and recipes.



- A programme of communication and evaluation strategies and activities to demonstrate The Borough's commitment to excellent food and nutrition to staff, parents and the wider community.

Raising standards

Following the setting up of a working party – which included a representative from the Local Authority, Grub4Life, early years practitioners and cooks, and parents – to respond to these recommendations, early years food and nutrition training has been delivered to over 100 centre managers and childcare practitioners to reinforce and support the initial cooks' training provided at the start of the project. A Borough of Southwark Food and Nutrition Policy Manual, focusing on menu planning, standardised recipes, weaning and snack foods amongst other areas, has been produced and formally delivered to each centre through staff training. Information on the nutritional requirements for under-fives, advice on managing faddy eating, and ideas for food-related activities to be used in the nursery to help children develop healthy attitudes towards food – all of which was included in the manual – is vital for managers looking to improve their setting's offering.

To help maintain standards across the Borough, a Borough of Southwark Menu has



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NIGEL DENBY

- ✓ For vegetarian diets, use veggie mince
- ✓ For dairy-free diets, use soya cheese
- ✓ For egg-free diets, omit egg and use milk to seal wraps
- ✓ For wheat-free diets, serve the filling with rice
- ✓ Make carrot and leak puree for puree diets

cook's tip

You can make individual quesadillas if you prefer, using half a tortilla per portion to make a samosa shape, although quesadillas are traditionally pasty shaped.

Energy (kcal)	Protein (g)	Fat (g)	Carbohydrate (g)	Salt (g)	Iron (mg)	Calcium (mg)
306	21	14	43	1.6	1.9	79



also been created. This is a two-cycle (one for spring/summer, another for autumn/winter), four-week rotational menu. Recipes were sourced from cooks working in the early years centres, and the parents whose children attended them, ensuring that they reflected the diverse communities in the Borough. Each is provided with guidance for suitable adaptations for children with special diets, and has been nutritionally analysed so that values for calories, fat, saturated fat, protein, carbohydrate, salt, iron and calcium can be declared (you can sample the three included here for yourself!).

As with any project of this scale, evaluation will be vital so that its effect against key public health outcomes can be measured. Those centres feeding directly into primary schools in areas where the prevalence of childhood obesity is particularly high have been identified, and will be used to track the impact the changes have – the results will be interesting to see!

Grub4life has worked with a number of Local Authorities to improve food and nutrition in the early years, but Southwark has gone the extra mile when it comes to training, resource development and adopting a cohesive approach across all of its children's centres.

Grub4life is also working with the private childcare sector, but in many instances it is clear that the public sector is leading the way in early years nutrition. With mandatory standards in food and nutrition expected soon, all early years providers should be turning their thoughts to what they're serving up for their children.

To find out more about the early years nutrition support services offered by Grub4life, contact Nigel Denby at nigel@grub4life.org.uk

The Denby Report



Get Cooking!

Apple muffins

Ingredients (serves 12):

125ml milk
4 tbsp (60ml) sunflower oil
1 egg
100g soft brown sugar
2 (225g) dessert apples
125g self-raising flour
50g wholemeal flour
1 tsp (5g) baking powder
1 tsp (5g) mixed spice



Method:

- Preheat the oven to 180c, 350F, Gas4.
- Line a muffin tin with 12 muffin cases.
- In a large bowl, beat the milk, oil, egg and sugar together. Peel core and grate the apples and stir into the mixture.
- In another bowl, mix the flours, baking powder and mixed spice. Make a well in the middle of the dry ingredients; gradually add the liquid combining it with the flour.
- Spoon the muffin mixture into the muffin cases and bake for 20 minutes, until they are golden. Transfer to a wire rack to cool.

- ✓ For wheat-free diets, use wheat-free flours
- ✓ For dairy-free diets, use soya milk
- ✓ For egg-free diets, use egg replacer

Chicken fajitas

Ingredients (serves 10):

2 tbsp (30ml) olive oil
4 (520g) medium skinless chicken breasts, cut into strips
1 tsp (5g) paprika
1 tsp (5g) ground cumin
2 (240g) medium onions, peeled and sliced
2 (320g) medium red peppers, de-seeded and sliced
½ (200g) a medium lettuce, shredded
110g mozzarella cheese
10 tsp guacamole
10 tortilla wraps

Method:

- Heat half the oil in a frying pan and cook the chicken strips over a medium heat until cooked through. Remove to a plate.
- Add the remaining oil to the pan and fry the onion and red pepper for approx. 10 minutes.
- Return the chicken to the pan and stir in the paprika and cumin. Stir everything well together.
- Fill the wraps with a spoonful of the chicken mixture, adding the shredded lettuce, the mozzarella and the guacamole. Fold over and serve.

- ✓ For wheat-free diets, omit wraps and serve with boiled rice
- ✓ For dairy-free diets, omit mozzarella and replace with dairy-free cheese slices
- ✓ For puree diets, make a fruit puree

Energy
(kcal)

497

Protein
(g)

23.7

Fat
(g)

38

Carbohydrate
(g)

67

Salt
(g)

3

Iron
(mg)

0.9

Calcium
(mg)

48

Energy
(kcal)

256

Protein
(g)

4

Fat
(g)

10

Carbohydrate
(g)

40

Salt
(g)

0.5

Iron
(mg)

0.9

Calcium
(mg)

117