

Home cooking

Childminders are in a unique position when it comes to providing food across the day and age ranges. *Gabriella Jozwiak* meets some of them to discover how they plan, shop and cook

While trained catering staff usually support nursery-based practitioners at meal times, childminders often have the sole responsibility of providing three healthy meals a day to a range of different-aged children with varying taste buds. And getting the right nutritional balance, as well as preparing food safely, is vital for growing children.

Childminders are not required to complete formal food and hygiene training in order to register with Ofsted. But the education watchdog's early years and childcare registration handbook states that childminders must ensure they prove they have suitable facilities for food preparation, and that any food and drink is 'properly prepared, wholesome and nutritious'. They must also comply with food hygiene legislation. Upon registration, a childminding business is automatically listed as a food business with its local authority, which may carry out a food safety inspection.

TRIED AND TESTED MENUS

Many childminders, like Bonny Hedgecock, based in New Malden, do complete food-related training. She undertook an NVQ3 in childcare that covered food preparation. 'In the beginning I found the cooking stressful, not knowing if the children would eat the choices I was making,' she says.

Since then she has set up a menu system of tried and tested meals. The two-week cycle is included in a starter pack that she gives to prospective parents, and forms the basis of an initial conversation about what their child likes and dislikes, what allergies they may have, and foods to avoid for religious or cultural reasons. The menus also help Ms Hedgecock to plan the shopping, which she does online.

Breakfast and two hot meals a day are offered, with snacks in between. Despite having three children of



different ages – 15 months, two years and three years – they all eat the same food. 'Generally I try and begin food preparation in the morning before they arrive, then I'll finish it off at lunchtime when they're having their nap,' she says.

For breakfast she offers cereals, porridge, toast, fruit and yoghurt. Lunch could be Bolognese sauce blended with red pepper, carrots and tomato, with pasta. A typical dinner is roast chicken with mixed vegetables and mashed potatoes. The youngest child joined Ms Hedgecock at the start of the weaning process, so she provided the same foods cut into small pieces for the baby to choose itself.

Ms Hedgecock explains that if a child has an allergy, she adapts her cooking. She once cared for a child who was allergic to milk so, for example, she mashed his potatoes separately with soya or rice milk.

The children at childminder Debbie Southern are given a range of healthy food to choose from (see Case Study)

Puddings include stewed fruit with yoghurt, fruit or banana muffins. But Ms Hedgecock does not serve puddings every day. Snacks include fruit, rice cakes or cracker bread. She provides seasonal vegetables by receiving an organic vegetable box delivery every week.

'Now I've got my menus I know exactly what the children like and dislike, and that they will get all the goodness they need,' comments Ms Hedgecock.

OUTINGS TO THE SUPERMARKET

Childminder Dominique Shirman, in Northamptonshire, has also completed a food and nutrition course offered by her local childminding association (see Resources).

Having started her business in August last year, Ms Shirman follows a guide provided by the course to plan meals.

She currently looks after six children, all aged four years, before and after school. They eat breakfast before they arrive, have a cooked lunch at school, and eat an evening meal cooked by Ms Shirman. 'This makes it tricky to create a menu, because you don't know what they're eating throughout the day,' she says. In order to balance the children's diets, she checks the school menus online and plans lighter suppers to complement what they have been offered during the day. 'I don't know exactly what each child has chosen, but I get an idea,' she says.

Her typical suppers include sandwiches, vegetable sticks, sausage rolls, baked beans, jacket potatoes, or toast. 'I buy the sausage rolls, but if I offer soup, I make it myself,' she explains.

In the summer holidays, when the children eat three meals with her, Ms Shirman makes more substantial dishes, such as lamb curry and rice, chicken and sweet potato, or steamed salmon with broccoli and new potatoes. Puddings include banana and custard, and a lemon and yoghurt cake, which she often bakes with the children.

Ms Shirman says her children's favourite meals are pasta, jacket potatoes with beans, pizza and chips. They love fruit, especially mixed with jelly, and rice pudding and custard. If a child does not like something, Ms Shirman encourages them to keep trying it in small amounts.

When the children are at school, Ms Shirman cooks during the day. In the summer holidays they help her

prepare meals. She says she recently renovated her kitchen to include an island with a hob so it would be easy for children to stand around and watch the cooking.

Ms Shirman also takes the children shopping with her to the market or supermarket. 'We talk about all the foods as we're going around and if they see something they've never tried before, we get it to try it,' she says.

To ensure she does not waste food, Ms Shirman shops twice a week and only buys what she knows she will use. 'In the school holidays when I provide a full day's menu, I will cook a bigger batch of food which I use for the children, and then my family, such as curry or casseroles,' she says. Ms Shirman also saves money by buying tinned goods in bulk, and shopping in value supermarkets such as Lidl.

MAKING THE MOST OF MEAL TIMES

Childminder Julia Deakin, from Cullercoats in Newcastle, contributed to the Children's Food Trust's national, voluntary guidelines on early years food and drink, before its publication in 2012. This offers information on what foods all early years settings should offer young children, as well as advice on portion sizes, sample menus and recipes.

Ms Deakin says the process made her question whether the children she cared for were eating too much. 'My lunchtime meal is now more substantial than the tea-time meal, because a lot of the children still

RESOURCES

- Food Standards Agency, <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/caterers/startingup/childminders>
- Children's Food Trust, www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/childrens-food-trust/early-years/childminders
- PACEY, <https://www.pacey.org.uk/working-in-childcare/spotlight-on/nutrition>
- Northamptonshire Childminding Association, www.childmindinguk.com/nca-is-leading-the-way-in-childrens-nutrition

have something to eat when they go home,' she explains. 'I learnt a lot from the Children's Food Trust about portion sizes.'

Her lunches, served between 11.45am and 12.15pm, could be roast dinner, with a vegetarian option such as quorn. Tea at 4pm is often a rice or couscous dish, with salsa, peppers, tomatoes and cheese. She also offers puddings such as yoghurt, jelly, ice-cream and fruit salad. Snacks include pitta bread, crackers and fruit.

She usually prepares her meals the night before they are due to be eaten, and often makes batches for freezing.

Ms Deakin likes to involve parents in meals and asks them to share recipes and ideas. She also observes cultural festivals, such as Eid. 'We did naan bread, curry, rice, and one of the parents showed us how to scoop the curry with the naan rather than eat with a knife and fork,' she says. The same parents also lent the children, and Ms Deakin, traditional outfits for a party.

Other food-based activities include harvesting fruit from a nearby allotment, and helping to clean and prepare the fruit for cooking. 'We've made apple and blackberry pie, and strawberry flans,' says Ms Deakin. 'You can get so much out of mealtimes.' ■



CASE STUDY: DEBBIE SOUTHERN, SWINDON

Childminder Debbie Southern, Swindon, has 24 children on her books aged from 16 months to four years. A typical day features the following meals:

7.45-8.05am: The children arrive and eat breakfast. They tell me what they want and can choose from fruit and cereal, fruit and yoghurt, toast or tea cakes. They carry the bowls and spoons through from the kitchen to the dining room, where they eat together. I make the toast for them and help them pour the milk. They drink water and afterwards help clear the table.

Morning snack. They can help themselves to the fruit bowl.

11.30am: Lunch. We have a picnic, such as sandwiches or sausage rolls, with crackers and cheese, or wraps. They choose from ham, cheese, corned beef or turkey. Once a week they might have crisps. For pudding they have a piece of cake or yoghurt. The children bring me the plates in the kitchen and I put them in the dishwasher.

Nap time. While the children are sleeping I prepare their tea. I buy in food for lunch, but prepare fresh dishes for the afternoon meal. If the children are over four years old and not sleeping, they might help me.

Afternoon snack. The fruit bowl is available.

4pm: Tea. I have a five-week menu plan, with different dishes for summer and winter. In summer I might serve roast chicken with potatoes, stuffing, vegetables and gravy followed by fruit and yoghurt. Or lasagne with garlic bread and salad followed by jelly and ice-cream. In winter I serve meatballs with pasta, vegetables and gravy followed by doughnuts and cream, or stew, dumplings and gravy followed by strudel and custard. I tweak recipes to suit the different children's tastes.