

Force of habit

The personal choices practitioners make about their food and the messages they communicate to children as a result can have an impact on a setting's success with nutrition. *Karen Faux* reports



To effectively deliver a healthy eating policy in a nursery, all staff should ideally send out positive messages about food. While this means having a sound understanding of nutrition and a willingness to support a nursery's healthy ethos, does it also mean that staff need to eat healthily themselves?

Many settings would say yes. After all, staff are the ones who are on the

frontline of supervising food and activities around it and if they have issues themselves, they can easily communicate negativity.

Having an effective food management policy and investing in continuous professional development for staff can help to ensure that all-important emotional buy-in from every individual in the setting. At Moss Bank Nursery in Merseyside, which is part of Portico Day Nurser-

Good staff practice should ideally extend to drinks as well as food

ies, staff have benefited from the setting achieving Healthy Early Years Status, awarded by St Helens Council.

The nursery employs a range of young, newly qualified and more mature staff, many of whom are mothers themselves.

Manager Sarah Fillingham says, "To be honest, the eating habits of staff have never been a problem. We have one fussy eater at the moment who never eats much when we ➤



Dizzy Ducks promotes positive behaviour with food for self-esteem

go out for tea together, but it has never really impacted on the children as they don't see the staff eating their lunch that they bring in. Staff know through their induction process and their job description, and our policies and procedures, that they must encourage and support the children and not pass their habits and choices on to the children.

She reports that one of the things that staff have been most surprised about as part of the learning curve is the amount of salt and sugar in foods and drink. Many have also had to revise their idea of what an appropriate portion size is.

'In the past, I have had to speak to staff about this,' says Ms Fillingham. 'For example, I can remember when I had to keep ordering large quantities of breakfast cereal every week. When I looked into it, I discovered that staff were dishing up adult-sized portions.'

One thing all nurseries wish to avoid is talk of staff diets around children. Given that nursery staff teams tend to be predominantly female, this is often hard to circumvent.

Sian Nisbett, owner of the Dizzy Ducks Day Nurseries group in Essex, says that she has had to speak to staff about discussing dieting in the nursery rooms.

'This is especially to be avoided around the older children in our pre-school and out-of-school club. Older children become conscious of what the practitioners are saying and it is really important that they are not portraying negative body images or talking about food in a bad way.

'It's really important to promote positive behaviours towards food and also promote good self-esteem. We

had one three-year-old who used to be very fussy and picky. She used to say, "I'm not eating that, it will make me fat." It didn't come from us, but it came from home. She had quite clearly overheard her Mum talking like this and actually had a very negative relationship with food, aged just three. I can't help wondering what impact this has had on her now she is 12.'

TOO MUCH FIZZ

Good staff habits should ideally extend to drinks as well as food. Most nurseries will encourage children to drink only water, but staff themselves are not always keen to mirror this.

At Moss Bank, Ms Fillingham says, 'Staff are allowed to have cold drinks

MORE INFORMATION

Eat Better, Start Better's *Voluntary Food and Drink Guidelines for Early Years Settings in England* – a practical guide, www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/pre-school/resources/guidelines

in the daycare rooms. In the past they have had bottles of coke and fizzy pop and all sorts, and in the end I asked them to put them away in the cupboards rather than spreading them out on view. It didn't sit well with us telling parents that the children only have water or milk to drink.'

She says that staff now have their own water bottles in the rooms, which are left on the snack shelves where children access their own water. 'This works well,' she says. 'However, although staff have stopped drinking so many fizzy drinks during the day, they still do on their breaks so it hasn't really changed their habits.'

She points out that staff are entitled to eat and drink what they like on their breaks because they are not paid for this time.

'It would be hard to change this now without a lot of support – and staff would certainly miss their Coca-Cola,' she says. 'When we went to a no-smoking policy many years ago that was tough. However, for new settings, banning fizzy drinks is possibly something they could put in place from the start.'

HAPPY TO EAT TOGETHER

Clearly, it is vital that nurseries ensure staff enjoy positive interactions with children when they are eating.

The importance of this is certainly something that Red Hen Day Nursery testifies to. Director Jane Harrison says, 'It took time to give confidence to staff to eat with the children, but now this is embedded in daily prac-

THE HENRY APPROACH

HENRY (Health, Exercise and Nutrition for the Really Young) is a training programme that offers a two-day core course to practitioners and health professionals, to help them become effective and confident when working with parents on sensitive issues to do with lifestyle change and obesity prevention.

Leeds has rolled the training out in many of its children's centres, including the Cottingley Children's Centre, where family outreach worker Marie Thornton (pictured) says it has been highly effective.

'We always have a lot of new staff and students coming through our centres and historically they have not had the benefit of doing any practical activities around healthy eating. Food hygiene is always a big focus, but in the past practitioners have not been asked

to think about nutrition, their own attitudes to food and how they can work positively with parents to promote healthy eating and well-being.

'The HENRY programme is now embedded in our practice and through gaining an understanding of the factors that can lead to obesity, and those that can protect against it, practitioners have become effective in encouraging families' healthy lifestyles.'

She adds, 'The most important thing is that they gain confidence in working with parents to change habits at home. The approach becomes part of the physical dimension of the Early Years Foundation Stage, where both practitioners and parents understand that diet is important to children's physical development and to their energy levels.'

● www.henry.org.uk

tice and we are finding that they are enjoying the variety of meals at Red Hen.'

Red Hen, which was the recipient of *Nursery World's* Nursery of the Year 2013, says both staff and children have together developed a wide repertoire of tastes.

'Many staff are being more adventurous at home, often asking for advice and recipes,' Ms Harrison says. 'They are learning with the children, helping to harvest vegetables and preparing them, as well as developing confidence to try new ingredients when baking with the children.'

While staff at Moss Bank eat some of their own food in their own room, they are fully involved in the nursery's routine of healthy snacks.

'One of the benefits is that it gives staff more time with individual children, rather than having a whole group eating at once,' explains Ms Fillingham.

At Dizzy Ducks, Ms Nisbett is happy to accommodate staff who wish to eat their own food in their lunch break.

'I think that is fine,' she says. 'However, it is important that they understand that dinner time is a social occasion and full of opportunities to interact with the children and talk about their food – such as where it comes from.'

'Regardless of whether the practitioners eat with the children or not, I personally feel that the value of meal times is in the quality of the practitioner and child interactions.'

NO TO HONEY SANDWICHES?

Another reason why staff need to have a genuine love of good food is that they have to work with parents to promote it. Many find it is a challenge to counter parents who are perpetuating children's 'pickiness' and generally unhealthy eating habits.

How about the mum at Dizzy Ducks, for example, who insisted on sending her child to nursery with honey sandwiches for breakfast, lunch and tea, because that is all he would eat?

Ms Nisbett explains, 'His mum was very anxious that we fed him honey sandwiches, as she was terrified that he wouldn't eat. However, on her enrolment, we explained that this contravened our Healthy Eating policy and she could work with us on this and we would help.'

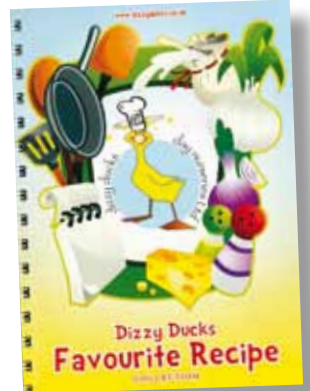
'At first, he rejected the meals and ate nothing, but gradually he started trying food. Eventually he realised that he was not getting attention by not eating and he was not getting the honey sandwiches, so he just got on and ate what was in front of him.'

'When we showed mum on the CCTV cameras, she couldn't believe it. However, she still gave in to him at home and fed him the sandwiches.'

Ms Nisbett recognises it is a difficult situation. 'As practitioners, we could see that he was behaving like this because his mum was giving in to it, but we can't control what happens outside nursery – she was the only one that could do that.' ■

On the menu

Recipes from *Dizzy Ducks Favourite Recipe Collection* book



APRICOT CHICKEN AND SWEET POTATO

Provided by Amelie Fairhead from Mayflower Nursery – a perfect recipe for weaning.

Suitable for six months; prep time six minutes; cooking time 25 minutes; suitable for freezing; makes five portions.

Ingredients

- 1 tbsp sunflower oil
- 40g chopped onion
- 2 chicken thigh fillets (approx 175g), trimmed and cut into pieces
- 200g sweet potato, peeled and chopped
- 8 dried apricots, chopped
- 400ml chicken stock

Method

- Heat the oil in a pan and sauté the onion for four minutes or until softened but not coloured.
- Add the chunks of chicken thigh and sauté for about two minutes. Add the sweet potato and sauté for one minute.
- Add the chopped apricots and pour over the chicken stock.
- Bring to the boil, then cover and simmer for about 15 minutes or until tender.
- Blend to a puree.

SHEPHERD'S PIE

Recipe from our Harlow nursery chef.

Ingredients

- 750g of potatoes
- 500g of lamb mince
- 1 chopped onion
- 4 chopped carrots
- 200ml lamb stock
- 200g tin of tomatoes
- 25g butter
- 1 tsp mixed herbs
- Dash of Worcester sauce

Method

- Brown onions then add mince. Once browned add tinned tomatoes, stock, carrots, herbs and Worcester sauce. Simmer for ten minutes.
- Cook potatoes and mash with a small amount of milk and butter.
- Add mince to an oven-proof dish and spread the potato over the top.
- Cook in the oven for about 30 minutes at 200 °C.

