

A Finnish first

In Finland, pre-school children have become the focus of nutrition guidelines for the first time.

Finland's National Nutrition Council has issued advice on serving 'nutritionally adequate and health-promoting' meals and providing food education in early years settings. Advice had previously been released for higher education institutions and schools only.

Research professor and Nutrition Council member Suvi Virtanen, of the National Institute for Health and Welfare, says, 'Finnish children eat far too few vegetables. Early years education provides an ideal opportunity to promote the use of vegetables in meal planning.'

The report says that while the majority of Finnish children enjoy high standards of nutrition, school-age children eat just one half of the recommended five portions of fruit and veg a day. Their diets deteriorate significantly after their first year at school as they start sharing family meals and consume more sugar, salt, saturated fat and animal proteins. The guidance adds that families with low incomes, little education or where the parents are very young were most likely to lead unhealthy lifestyles. It highlights the importance of early years settings in levelling out nutritional inequalities caused by family background.

HOME AND AWAY

The guidelines suggest children attending nursery often have healthier diets than those cared for at home. However, shrinking budgets have meant many Finnish care providers struggle to meet the highest nutritional standards, particularly with special dietary requirements.

Ms Virtanen explains, 'Ministers' children and children with unemployed parents get the same services. There are practically no private kindergartens. In Finnish schools and primary education services the food is free of charge and should be planned according to our criteria. The same goes for the three meals in primary education services. The price is the main challenge for childcare providers.'

The recommendations provide recipe suggestions to help practitioners put together balanced meals for young children, and emphasise the importance of helping children develop positive eating habits and get used to new foods.

In the Finnish system, food plays an important role in the curriculum, with home economics and health education as school subjects. Education Ministry senior advisor Pia Kola-Torvinen says, 'Mealtime is an important part of early childhood education. It is part of day-to-day pedagogical activity, but also a key element in a child's healthy growth and development. Taste preferences and eating habits are formed early on and extend far into the future.'



PHOTOS ADOBE STOCK



On the cards

The head of Scotland's Active Healthy Kids Report Card discusses obesity with *Meredith Jones Russell*

John Reilly is professor of physical activity and public health science at the University of Strathclyde. The focus of his research is interventions for the prevention of child and adolescent obesity worldwide, the consequences of obesity and low physical activity in children and adolescents, and global monitoring of young people's physical activity and sedentary behaviour.

He is involved in compiling Active Healthy Kids report cards (see box) and serves on two World Health Organization committees.

What prompted your interest in obesity in the early years?

The release of national statistics on obesity in 2000-2001, in which it was clear there was an obesity epidemic affecting pre-schoolers. This was a bit of a surprise at the time as there had been a general assumption that young children were active and generally healthy, and it was something there hadn't been a lot of research on.

What is going wrong?

Over the years, the number of calories pre-schoolers are expending has

been going down, but national data tells us the number of calories they are consuming is not. Diet goes wrong early on, particularly with things like sugar-sweetened drinks, which are often introduced at a very young age. It's about the balance between intake and expenditure. That has become as wrong in young children as it is in adults.

Tell us about the physical activity guidelines you produce.

In 2011, I chaired the early years working group on UK-wide guidance from the Chief Medical Officer on how much physical activity people should be doing. At that time, the advice was a minimum of three hours a day for three- and four-year-olds. I suspect only a minority actually achieve that. This year, I will be chairing the update. We hope to be reporting by the end of the year.

What do you think the update will consist of?

We haven't yet had our first meeting, but I suspect the UK guidance may end up similar to Canada's, which looks at sleep and time spent sitting

down in relation to physical activity rather than considering each of these in isolation. I can't pre-empt the UK discussions, but I think there is a fair possibility that producing these kinds of integrated guidelines is the way we might go.

What do the guidelines in Canada look like?

Canada has specified at least one hour of recommended activity per day should be 'energetic play', ideally outdoors, as children have been found to be generally more active outside.

Canadian guidelines also suggest time spent sitting should not exceed one hour. When children do sit, some behaviour has been proved to promote good child development, like storytelling and shared reading, but some is not so good, such as screen time, which should be restricted to a maximum of one hour per day.

Three- and four-year-olds are advised to sleep for between 10 and 13 hours, which can include a nap. There is a lot of evidence supporting the mental health and well-being benefits of consistent bed and wake-up times.

How does the UK fare in the international comparison of the Active Healthy Kids report cards?

Of the 38 countries that produced the most recent report cards in 2016, it was clear that higher-income Western countries were much of a muchness in terms of their results. The real contrast in grades came in comparison with developing countries, where children are much more active. In Africa and some countries in South America,

children are outdoors more and play more. We generally see a clustering of Western nations at the bottom of the league tables and poorer nations at the top.

What about within the UK?

The difference between home nations is pretty negligible. We all have low activity levels and high obesity levels. What is a surprise is we all have good environments for activity, especially in Scotland. Perceptions of the local area are better than expected.

We also have good national policies. We promote sport and PE and walking to nursery and school, but although all our governments have made a good stab at strategies, we still have inactive children. This can lead people to think governments should leave well alone, but in my opinion other countries just haven't detected there is a problem yet. In the UK we have, but policies tend to follow after the event. We haven't had time to make them work yet, or to truly understand how to turn them into results.

How can we improve?

I am aware this all sounds very depressing, but the positive spin is that we do have good governmental policies and good environments for activity. If we can get this message across, we might get more outdoor time for children. That's why we produce guidelines, in the hope people won't file them away, but those who read them, be they early years practitioners, health professionals, parents, grandparents or carers, will be encouraged by them. ■



- www.activehealthykids.org
- www.activehealthykidsscotland.co.uk

Cookery corner

Fruity fish

Young children are more likely to try new foods when dishes look appealing, so try this quick and simple recipe that will tempt even your fussy eaters.

Ingredients

- ✓ 2 large spoons of cream cheese/peanut butter (check for allergies)
- ✓ 1 slice of brown/white bread
- ✓ 3 strawberries, sliced
- ✓ 4 raisins
- ✓ 2 chives

Method

- ✓ Cut the shape of the fish from the slice of bread, using a diamond shape for the body and remaining corners as the tail and fins.
- ✓ Arrange the bread on the plate in the shape of a fish.
- ✓ Spread the cream cheese over the tail and body of the fish.
- ✓ Place the strawberry 'scales' onto the body of the fish.
- ✓ Cut and arrange the chives at the end of the plate as grass and add raisins as bubbles.

Mouth-watering?

For more ideas on how to make nutritious food look appealing, see 'Hide the peas?' at www.nurseryworld.co.uk

The recipe is courtesy of the Wellbeing and Nutrition team at the Early Start Group, London, www.earlystartgroup.com

REPORT CARDS



Professor Reilly leads the Active Healthy Kids Scotland Report Card, a 'state of the nation' report on the physical activity and health of Scottish children and adolescents. He also participates in the Active

Healthy Kids Global Alliance's summary of all the international report cards in the form of a global matrix.

The report card assigns grades to nine health indicators based on an assessment of data and academic research designed to make the information digestible and accessible. The nine health indicators are:

- overall physical activity

- sedentary behaviour
- active transportation
- active and outdoor play
- organised sport participation
- school
- family and peer influence
- community and the built environment
- government policy, strategy and investment.

In the 2016 report cards, for example, China, Estonia and Scotland scored an F for both children's overall physical activity and sedentary behaviours, while Slovenia emerged top in each category, scoring an A- and B+ respectively.

The full results of the report cards are at: www.activehealthykids.org.

The next set of biennial report cards will be produced by 51 countries later this year.

