

Taking it home

Running cookery classes for parents and carers is one way that nurseries can help promote healthy eating beyond the setting. *Charlotte Goddard* reports

The UK has one of the highest levels of childhood obesity in Europe, with 23 per cent of under-fives overweight or obese, according to a Leeds Beckett University study. One way in which nurseries can help to tackle obesity and improve children's health is by running cookery classes for parents and carers.

'Early years settings have often got kitchens, and parents coming in on a regular basis,' says Laura Whiting, nutritionist at the Children's Food Trust. 'Children's centres are particularly suitable since their remit is to support families.' The Children's Food Trust runs training sessions for early years settings to help them deliver cooking classes to parents.

Initially subsidised by Government grants, the sessions are now paid for by local authorities.

There is also the option to buy in expertise from outside: Michele Newton, for example, runs the Four Seasons Cookery Academy on the Isle of Wight, and has delivered classes in conjunction with many of the island's children's centres, including those in East Cowes, Ryde, west Newport and West Wight.

'You have to get to know the parents first, as they can be defensive,' she says. 'I never call the sessions "healthy cooking" because that sounds patronising.' In terms of course content, it is a good idea to consult parents themselves about what they want to learn. Ms Newton



CASE STUDY: IMMINGHAM CHILDREN'S CENTRE, NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE

Immingham Family Hub, part of Immingham Children's Centre, is in the process of revamping its Let's Get Cooking Classes, delivered by Family Hub advisor Hannah Trigg. The classes will now be longer, but the programme will run over two weeks instead of four, as parents found it hard to commit to a four-week programme.

'If a session is missed, it can be difficult to get those messages across again in the next session as many of the key messages on nutrition and healthy lifestyles are conveyed in the practical cooking and interactive tasks,' explains Ms

Trigg, who has received training from the Children's Food Trust, as well as specific training on delivering classes to children and parents with additional needs.

The aim of the classes is to improve cookery skills and promote healthy eating, through interactive activities. 'We go back to basics in making homemade sauces, teaching basic chopping techniques, using seasonal foods and also use hints and tips for cooking on a budget, such as bulk cooking, using frozen and tinned fruit and vegetables and using leftover food wisely,' says Ms Trigg.

'We also target fussy eating, even in parents. We loosely base the food tasting format on *Come Dine with Me* – we encourage parents to taste all the dishes cooked by each other, so this brings the group together,' she says. 'The dishes are scored and then the winning dish receives a certificate in the next session, which is added to the kitchen wall for all to see.'

The centre also holds monthly themed cooking sessions, where parents who have completed the course can try more complicated recipes.

Children can stay in a crèche while parents are cooking, and

are invited to eat with their parents to the end of at least one session.

Comments from parents who have taken the course include: 'I now choose different foods when shopping' and 'We are trying to eat a lot healthier.'

Alison Jollands, cluster co-ordinator for Immingham and the Wolds Family Hub, says classes such as those offered by Immingham are having an effect.

'In Immingham and the Wolds, we have seen a three-year decline in the percentage of children classified as very overweight,' she says.



offers informal sessions on weaning while parents are already at the centres for stay and play, as well as more formal classes, sometimes targeted at specific groups such as young dads. The classes sometimes allow parents to earn qualifications such as Level 2 Food Safety certificate.

In general, a course could start by introducing basic skills such as how to peel and chop safely, as well as health and safety issues, such as keeping food at the right temperature. Batch cooking, storing and freezing, and how to shop, budget and plan menus are also important topics. Activities get the message across better than just talking at parents, says Ms Whiting. 'You can look at the amount of sugar in a product then convert it into teaspoons, weigh it out and create a sugar mountain,' she says.

Classes often focus on ways to cook foods that parents might ordinarily buy ready prepared, such as

Immingham begins by going back to basics, before running cooking and tasting sessions

takeaways, which come with high salt, sugar and fat content. Versatile recipes are useful – a simple scone mixture can be made sweet or savoury or used as a pizza base, allowing parents to experiment with different herbs and spices.

Ms Newton says popular recipes include paella, fish pies and chicken and mushroom crumble – and birthday cakes. Equipping parents with the skills to experiment in the kitchen is important, as this will allow them to adapt recipes to meet their own needs, or incorporate seasonal produce.

In practical terms, a setting must have an area they can use for the classes, where everyone can see when different skills are being demonstrated. However, Ms Newton says that even if a centre does not have a kitchen she can still deliver a class on her own induction stove. Nurseries also have to think about when to schedule the classes – in the daytime parents might be at work, but in the evening there may be a need for childcare.

Ms Newton adds, 'The centres nearly always put on a crèche, but if they don't I can adapt things to suit – for example, making meatballs around a table with their hands.'

An evaluation of the Children's Food Trust's initial training scheme found some settings encouraged parents to use their new skills to support the delivery of community events – cooking recipes for a large number of people, getting involved in a 'ready, steady, cook' style events and also, in one nursery, helping the cook in the nursery kitchen to prepare the children's lunch.

In some cases, such as Ladybird Nursery in Glenrothes (see box), parents are so enthused that they take on the mantle of training other parents. This is a great way to extend the life and reach of a nursery initiative and truly start to make a difference to children's health in the local community. ■

CASE STUDY: LADYBIRD NURSERY, GLENROTHES

Cooking Up a Stir is Ladybird Nursery's free cooking group for parents and others in the local community. 'We have had a very successful dads' group, mums' group and mixed groups,' says Elizabeth Hunter, deputy head.

The sessions cover practical skills for cooking, including food hygiene and weaning, information on healthy eating, and wider information about supportive organisations such as the local learning centre.

'This group is primarily for parents, but two of the six sessions include baking with their children,' explains Ms

Hunter. 'Our aim is to help build confidence in cooking and working with recipes, as well as in numeracy, literacy and socialising.'

As well as helping parents develop healthy cooking skills, the group has supported them with opportunities to volunteer or to move into education. 'We have one parent who through this cooking programme has taken various courses such as elementary food and hygiene,' explains Ms Hunter. 'She has gone on to deliver other cooking groups in the local community for primary children of six and seven.'

The nursery has received funding from NHS Scotland and Health Inequalities Funding 2014/15. 'This funding has helped us buy equipment,' says Ms Hunter. 'Each participant receives a certificate of attendance and a gift to help in the kitchen.' Gifts have included scales and measuring spoons, and the nursery has made recipe books for parents.

'Parents have reported the course has made a difference to how they now cook, and it has really helped their confidence in trying different things, meeting people and in making plans for their future.'