

Hester Dark, director of a Bristol-based catering company, led by chefs whose pedigree includes top Bristol restaurants, shares her mission to provide tasty food that fuels the developing brainpower of under-fives



Who says children aren't adventurous?

Tasty – and nutritious

Does the way we feed our children in their early years affect their future academic performance? Research published this year in a study carried out by the University of Bristol's School of Social and Community Medicine, found that a three year-old's diet predominantly consisting of processed food was associated with a lower IQ at the age of eight years six months irrespective of whether the diet improved after that age.

The research also discovered that an early healthy diet was associated with a higher IQ at the same age. The brain grows at its fastest during the first three years of a child's life, and it seems good nutrition during this time has a significant effect on intellectual development. And this is where nurseries can make a real impact.

Overweight?

Given that over 600,000 children in England and Wales attend a nursery for up to 10 hours a day and that, for many of these children, their nurseries provide over half of their

food intake, then the nutritional impact of what they eat is a matter of vital importance. Add to this the suggestion that around 27 per cent of school-age children are overweight, with all the attendant health risks that this brings, and the issue becomes even more of a concern to parents – and nurseries, of course.

Statistics tell us that parents are now becoming increasingly concerned about what their children eat. Organic baby food sales were up 20 per cent in 2011, and it is claimed that one in four babies is now fed organic food. It is, therefore, essential that providers of childcare provide meals of a high quality, using fresh, organic and local ingredients.

Key concerns

In our experience as a company specialising in meals for the under-fives, some of the key concerns of parents include:

- provenance and methods of farming used in meat production
- that meals are freshly prepared each day

- that meals do not contain any artificial ingredients or salt
- that meals meet the nutritional needs of children under-five.

While much has been done in recent years to improve the standard of food provided in primary and secondary schools, the early years sector has been largely ignored. Primary school children have already developed their eating patterns. Therefore, it is essential that between the ages of one and five, they are introduced to a variety of tastes, textures and flavours which encourage and help them to develop healthy eating habits. This is what we do.

Food guidelines

A welcome move in the right direction came in 2010, when the Preliminary Review of Healthy Eating, Food and Nutrition in Early Years was published. As a result of this the Government is introducing guidelines for food and drink provision in early years settings with the aim of establishing best practice across England.

Sample Day

BREAKFAST

Porridge / Dried Mixed Fruit / Wholemeal Toast / Diluted Orange Juice

MID-MORNING SNACK

Fruit Platter: Banana, Mango, Pineapple, / Milk

LUNCH

Pollock, Sweet Potato & Spinach Curry / Tofu, Sweet Potato & Spinach Curry (V) / Served with Rice and Crunchy Salad / Black Berry & Apple Crumble Cake and Custard / Water

MID-AFTERNOON SNACK

Pita Bread & Carrot Sticks / Houmous / Diluted Apple Juice

TEA

Lamb & Root Vegetable Stew / Butter Bean & Vegetable Stew (V) / Served with Boiled Potatoes & Garden Peas / Organic Yoghurt & Fruit Compote / Water

Early Years Catering



Although the introduction of these guidelines will be a great start, we feel that there is a real risk that some nurseries may ignore them and continue to serve meals chosen for convenience and cost rather than nutritional benefit, as was the case in most schools until legal standards were introduced.

In 2006 when our two children started nursery, we found, from talking with other parents and seeing for ourselves, that nutrition was not a priority for many providers. I believe strongly that under-fives should have every day well-balanced meals that will provide the goodness they require for healthy growth and mental development, giving them the best possible start in life. So it is no coincidence that it was around this time that we started up our business supplying meals in the Bristol area.

Profile

- One of the first companies to achieve a Silver Catering Mark award from the Soil Association
- Five star Food Hygiene award from Bristol City Council
- Co-founder and chef, Gareth Douglas, worked at some of Bristol's top restaurants before setting up Early Years Catering
- Fellow director, Johnny Hazel's CV includes a cooking career in France & running the kitchen at award-winning Bell's Diner, Bristol

Fresh herbs

We practise what we preach: all of our meals are cooked without salt, artificial additives, flavours or preservatives. Surprised? Well, taste need not be compromised – and isn't – as fresh herbs and spices can be used. This, combined with some good old traditional cooking methods means that meals are tasty as well as nutritious. What's more, children can be adventurous: we have introduced children to meals such as pollock & sweet potato curry, Caribbean stewed chicken and a tomato sauce containing mackerel.

I think that nurseries sometimes struggle to provide consistent quality meals. High staff turnover, lack of experience or limited cooking ability and training and rising food costs can all make it hard to maintain standards. Our menus are designed with nutrition and taste in mind, and prepared by qualified, experienced chefs. We are specialists as are the readers of NMT.

Back for seconds

We believe nurseries are in a wonderful position to change the eating habits of tomorrow's adults, and we are working hard to achieve this. Children should be encouraged to try new foods and eat the meals provided as they watch their peers doing the same. Many parents say to us that they find it hard to get their children to eat adventurously at home, and we tell them that their children are eating meals like a nourishing lentil dhal and Moroccan lamb tagine at nursery - and asking for seconds.

We now supply many schools and nurseries around Bristol and Bath, and they love the fact that we are passionate about what we do. What they really like is that we automatically tailor what we provide to suit the specific dietary and cultural needs of their children, while maintaining our philosophy of a good, healthy diet.

It can be a challenge for nurseries to provide tasty meals, particularly



A social event

ones that children with different dietary needs will happily gobble up. The issue here is that inclusion is a key part of getting children to eat: put simply, meals are social events for children. So, if a coeliac child sees that their meal is different from what the child next to them is eating, it can have a really negative effect on their eating patterns.

Gluten-free lasagna

But we have found that it is possible to provide a very similar special dietary meal to the meal featured on our main menu, and, over the years, we have developed recipes which allow us to serve everything from dairy and gluten-free lasagna to egg, dairy and gluten-free cakes. The children love them.

We also work with an early year's weight specialist to ensure that each of our meals meets the nutritional needs of the children eating them and does not just build up unwanted weight. All this can be achieved by providing tasty meals that children love.

We think it is vital that the nursery gets a balance between meeting the nutritional needs of the children and providing meals which the children are going to eat and enjoy – and that is our mission. Do you agree? ■

- **Hester Dark is a founding director of Early Years Catering, Bristol.**
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