

“Bon appétit – we always said that first.”

Pip Titheradge calls on students’ memories and her own observations in this look at grace and courtesy at mealtimes.

For the purpose of doing some research for this article I asked two of my former pupils (now 17 and 14, but three when they started nursery) what, if anything, they remembered about having lunch at Seedlings. At first there was silence, and then came the recollections: “Table cloth, and flowers, always” and “we had the tables longways, I liked to be about third from the end looking towards the windows. We had picnics outside in the summer, and ate in the kitchen in the winter because it was the warmest place”. “We had sandwiches first, and vegetables, then sweet things last; and do you remember, we put things in a bowl to share around?” “And bon appétit, we always said that first.” The reminiscences started coming thick and fast, about having to be quite grown up to be allowed to stay (the children were invited to stay once they reached the grand age of four),



who might not stop pouring when their glass was full, or could not remember quite how many ‘two spoons of raisins’ actually were.

Some children would choose to have their snack as soon as it was set up, others either had a substantial breakfast or had too many other activities planned and would wait until the end of the morning or until their friend was ready. Many were very regular in their habits, which confirmed how important individual snack time really is.

would change, the structure of the snack routine was always the same, reliable and secure.

When I took the somewhat daunting step of moving from working in the nursery to becoming a foster carer, it had not really occurred to me that food would be such an issue for the children who came to me. When you have your own child people will ask “Does s/he like —?”, and you have a good chance of being able to answer. Foster children arrive, often, with little notice, and hardly ever with a list of likes and

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taking your plate and glass to wash up in the kitchen afterwards, and the excitement of Fridays, when they helped to make their own lunches.

They talked with real enjoyment about snack time too, posting their name cards in the post box when they chose to eat, using spoons and tongs to help themselves to fruit, biscuits and rice cakes, pouring their choice of drink and sitting with friends, chatting, until it was time to wash up. Visitors to the nursery always marvelled at these 2, 3 and 4 year olds going about these tasks so independently, knowing what was expected of them, but also knowing that help was close at hand should they need it, either from an adult or a more able friend. We, as staff, also got to know who might need to be reminded to roll up sleeves before washing up,

It was always really interesting and informative to observe the children’s growing physical skills of opening, closing, pouring, using utensils, and washing up. It also gave opportunities for noting their organisational and social skills, such as not taking more than their allotted amount, engaging in conversations with their peers or an adult, clearing up after themselves, eating appropriately, and helping others who might not be as able as they were.

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dislikes. You have to work it out between you, often starting with a trip to the supermarket (being glad if they are small enough to fit in the trolley seat, as you do not know, at that point, if they are likely to run off). Fruit – other than the most obvious apples, oranges and bananas – are often not recognised and are seen as rather suspicious. One child only got truly animated when we reached the ‘pot noodle’ aisle, as those and kebabs had been his staple diet up to that point.

Introducing new food is often done with an incentive system, with small rewards for firstly having the food on your plate, and then for tasting. I always sign my children up for school dinners as seeing other children tuck in to an unfamiliar dish can be reassuring. No huge expectations are there at the

start, often you are prioritising other aspects of behaviour, but just as in the nursery, correct modelling is always shown.

Meals are always eaten at the table, with china, glass and proper cutlery. Accidents do happen, just as they do in all households, but are not overreacted to (as they might have been at home), and are an opportunity to learn how to clean up, which is a skill many of them enjoy being trusted with. We try not to have the television on, instead we chat about our day. Asking about what the best and worst things that happened can be quite illuminating. Table manners are often non-existent at the start, and learning how to use a knife and fork begins early.

We are invited out for supper with elderly friends every weekend; it is part of our regular routine. There is always a delicious meal, with pudding (very important). The visits provide opportunities to taste new foods and to practice appropriate manners in the company of other people. Each child has gained so much from this experience, and each has established their own pattern of activities whilst

visiting. One always homed in on the little pewter coffee set, and would sell us cups of coffee for £20, then have a demonstration of a cordless screwdriver belonging to one of the friends (yes, every week). One would challenge us to a memory game and generally beat us all, another would drag over the kitchen stool to the sink and help with the washing up, and then would engross himself with the "Argologue" (the Argos catalogue which he found in the downstairs loo). They each established and stuck to their own traditions.

I am enormously proud of the progress each of them made over their time with me, each child learning how to eat healthily and well. Being able to behave in an appropriate and sociable manner at mealtimes is an important skill for life, and when you come from such a disadvantaged start it seems even more so. I am very aware that without my initial Montessori experiences and understanding, I would not have been able to support them in the way that I have. I am about to meet the next one – who knows what he will teach me?



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