

Making a good start

Eating nutritious and fresh food is important both for the child and the adult he or she will become; **Helen Barber** takes us through some of the current thinking about helping children understand the importance of eating healthily.

Let me paint you an idyllic picture. It is the early 1960s, and the sun is shining on me and my best friend Isabel. We are sitting on a picnic rug on the back lawn of my childhood home. My family are keen gardeners so we are surrounded by flowers, vegetables and plenty of ripe fruit of all descriptions. We are happily engrossed with the treat my mum has given us to eat while she and Isabel's mum drink tea. Now, let us take a closer look, and examine this treat I hold so dearly in my memory. To me it is a familiar and regular one – sometimes I have it at Grandma's house and sometimes here at home. Isabel and I each have a cup of sugar with a stick of rhubarb. The rhubarb, you understand, is just to get the sugar in our mouths as fast as we can manage. Then it will be discarded. Our parents' memories of war-time hunger and domestic food rationing remain all too vivid for them to see a cup of sugar as anything but a good thing; the longed for sweet treat they had missed out on as children.

Food and eating has acquired a symbolic importance beyond the need for adequate, even suitable nutrition. Young children in our nursery settings



health in adulthood" (Albon and Mukerji, 2008, p18). Therefore food and nutrition have influence on policy and practice in the early years. The history of this policy and practice reveals an evolving view of children and childhood. Albon and Mukerji (2008) cite some wonderful historical

Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2014), the Safeguarding and Welfare Requirements set out the legal requirements for the operation of an early years setting. Settings must have, and implement, a Food and Drink policy which emphasises nutritious

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are members of families, all of whom carry memories – formed by culture, traditions and heritage – in which food and attitudes to food are deeply ingrained by previous experience, of which we often know nothing. Food and nutrition influence all areas of a child's development. For example, a hungry or unsuitably fed child will not be able to concentrate well, which will affect cognitive development and the child's self-esteem (Albon and Mukerji, 2008; Macleod-Brudenell and Kay 2008). Healthy eating for children of all ages has been recognised as a key factor for promoting healthy growth and development, and "...it also prevents ill

examples of meals considered suitable for infants in the UK when the main concern was to fill up hungry children.

Today at an international level, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states the entitlement of all children to adequate nutritious food, clean drinking water and a clean environment: "The UNCRC is important as it forms the basis for working with children, which include[s] children as participants rather than passive recipients of services" (Albon and Mukerji, 2008, p9). At the national level, taking England as an example, in the

eating: all meals provided must be healthy, balanced and nutritious, and drinking water must be available to the children at all times. Such a policy is particularly important for young children in full time day care, with some taking all their main meals and snacks at the setting several days per week. The health and self-care aspect of Physical Development, one of the EYFS prime areas of learning and development, contains an Early Learning Goal which states "...by the end of reception year the child should be able to know the importance of exercise and healthy diet for good health."; on the way to this goal, at 40

to 60+ months a child "...eats a healthy range of foodstuffs and understands need for variety in food" (BAECE, 2012, pp.25-27). Policy and practice have now evolved to focus on educating children to make informed choices about health and eating for themselves so they are able to develop good eating habits for the future.

Comprehensive, clear, practical guidance for early years practitioners (and parents) on how to provide a healthy balanced nutritious diet for young children (from 1 up to 5 years) is available in *Eat Better, Start Better* (The Children's Food Trust, 2012). This guidance is endorsed by the Department of Health and the Department for Education. It has been developed specifically to help early years settings meet the statutory welfare requirements mentioned above. It contains nutritional guidance, food and drink guidelines for snacks and each meal of the day, advice on frequency of meals (due to young children's small stomachs they need to eat more frequently), menu plans, illustrations of portion sizes, examples of seasonal menus, advice on the content and operation of a suitable food and drink policy, information on food labelling as well as ideas on how to encourage children to eat well.

Children's health and wellbeing depends on a healthy diet and regular physical activity. Intervention in the early years is crucial in addressing health inequalities across the whole of a child's life. *Eat Better, Start Better* states that a balanced nutritious diet is essential for young children in order to:

- ensure they get the right amount of energy (calories) and nutrients needed while they are growing rapidly
- ensure that they do not consume too much energy (calories), which may lead to them becoming overweight or obese
- encourage them to eat a wide variety of foods and develop good dietary habits to take with them into later childhood and beyond. Healthy eating habits in the years before school influence growth, development and academic achievement later in life.

The same source details the current health status of young children in England showing the following areas of concern:

- over one fifth of children are either overweight or obese by the time they join primary school reception class (their final year of the EYFS)

- type 2 diabetes is starting to be seen among some overweight young children; this usually appears in adults
- many young children have poor dental health
- cases of rickets are seen more frequently
- more than 1 in 4 young children in the UK may be at risk of iron deficiency, which is linked to slower intellectual development and poor behaviour in the longer term.

The urgent concern around young children's nutrition and confirmation of adult responsibilities is all too obvious. So what should young children be eating and drinking? The current guidance *Eat Better, Start Better*, uses the food group approach. In order to get the best balance of nutrients and to meet their high energy requirements, young children (aged 1 up to their 5th birthday) need to consume as wide a variety of foods as possible from the four food groups shown.

The only drinks which should be provided between meals are water and milk as they do not carry the risk of dental decay. Current guidance recommends that full fat milk is given to 1 to 2 year olds as the main drink to ensure sufficient energy and nutrients. Young children over the age of 2, who are growing well and eating a healthy balanced diet, can have semi-skimmed milk. Fruit juice should be offered diluted (half juice, half water) and only at meal times. Fizzy drinks, fruit juice drinks, flavoured water, squash and drinks containing added caffeine or other stimulants should not be given.

The low fat, high fibre diet based on the proportions of the four food groups set out on the UK Food Standards Agency 'eatwell plate' (Albon and Mukerji, 2008) is not appropriate for children under 2 years old. Between the ages of 2 and 5 children should be moved gradually towards the diet recommended for older children and adults as seen in the eatwell plate, which contains more fibre and where



The four food groups

Starchy foods – bread, potatoes, sweet potatoes, starchy root vegetables, pasta, rice, noodles, other grains and breakfast cereals. The main nutrients provided are carbohydrate, fibre, B vitamins and iron. It is recommended young children eat four portions each day.

Fruit and vegetables – includes fresh, frozen, canned, dried and juiced fruit and vegetables and pulses. The main nutrients provided are carotenes (a form of vitamin A), vitamin C, zinc, iron and fibre. Five portions a day are recommended.



Non-dairy protein – Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein. Includes poultry, meat alternatives, pulses and nuts (see www.allergyuk.org for information about food allergies and developing an allergy plan). They provide the following main nutrients: protein, iron, zinc, omega 3 fatty acids and vitamins A and D. Two portions per day are recommended, with two to three for vegetarian children.

Milk and dairy foods – cheese, yoghurt, fromage frais, custard and puddings made from milk. The main nutrients provided are, protein, calcium and vitamin A. Three portions per day are recommended.

less energy is provided by fat.

So, how is my family progressing? Recently, mum and I ate lunch with her great grandson Charlie, at 15 months the youngest member of our family. He was offered, and ate, some little squares of bread, cubes of cheese, choice of thin circles of carrot or banana (he chose banana), a few raisins and the treat of one chocolate button. No cups of sugar with rhubarb were provided – we are moving in the right direction.

Bibliography

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