

Food for Thought



An Evaluation of a Cookery Pilot for Bristol Childminders Executive Summary

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Hands-On Cookery workshops for Childminders and Children

Executive Summary

Food is a vital part of everybody's life; in fact, the human race is dependent upon it for survival. In developed countries today, having sufficient food to survive is not the issue; rather the problem that is faced, is having too much of a good thing. Statistics and research tell us that as a nation we are becoming heavier. Between 1993 and 2011 the average weight of both men and women in England went up by around 5kg, more than half a stone¹. For children in England there was a similar trend, up until 2003, of a 3kg increase in their average weight¹. The good news is that between 2003 and 2011 this trend appears to be flattening out suggesting that some of the preventative strategies, perhaps especially raising public awareness, are having an impact¹. Campaigns, like that of TV chef Jamie Oliver, have also raised the profile of the importance of healthy eating for children in England².

This has had a positive impact on the nutritional content of school meals in particular. However, it is too soon to be complacent about all children's weight both national and local studies show that some children are still starting school with significant weight issues³.



'Fascinating food'

¹ Health & Social Care Information Centre (2012) *Health Survey for England: Trend Tables 2011* [online] Available from <https://catalogue.ic.nhs.uk/publications/public-health/surveys/health-survey-eng-2011-trend-tables/HSE2011-Trend-commentary.pdf>

² Oliver, J. (2012) *Jamie's School Dinners* [online] Available from <http://www.jamieoliver.com/school-dinners>

³ National Child Measurement Programme-England, 2010/11 School Year [online] Available from http://www.ic.nhs.uk/webfiles/publications/003_Health_Lifestyles/ncmp%202010-11/NCMP_2010_11_Report.pdf

The availability of food in England is at an unprecedented high and it is possible to purchase unnecessary snacks almost anywhere and at all times of day and night. This is very different to the food access of even thirty years ago. It is also dissimilar to access in countries where obesity is less prevalent⁴. In England today, many children have far greater access to snack foods and for some this supplements a diet which is neither balanced nor healthy. The result is that children, who are also more sedentary than their contemporaries of thirty years ago, are consuming more calories than they need which results in them becoming overweight and obese.

The importance of addressing this issue cannot be overstated. Children who start out life with weight issues are more likely to grow into adults who are overweight and obese. The implications for their health are detrimental with two possible issues from a longer list being an increased likelihood of heart disease and diabetes, as well as being linked with middle-age mortality¹. In



addition, for children to feel good about themselves now, behave appropriately, and be able to engage with learning, their brains also require a healthy, nutritious diet.

'Making a healthy snack'

One of the preventative strategies targeting childhood obesity in Bristol was a pilot programme of cookery workshops for childminders. NHS Bristol, as part of the BHF Hearty Lives Programme, commissioned Square Food to run the training. The sessions aimed to promote an awareness of healthy nutrition for children, provide practical ideas for childminders and encourage the

⁴ Pettinger, C., Holdsworth, M. & Gerber, M. (2008) All under one roof? Differences in food availability and shopping patterns in Southern France and Central England in *European Journal of Public Health*; Vol.18 (2) pp109-114

involvement of children in food preparation. The workshops ran from November 2011 until February 2012, offering a mix of hands-on adult evening cookery activities and lunch time sessions with children. Recipes used had to conform to the School Food Trust's *Eat Better, Start Better Guidance for Early Years*⁵ in order to meet current healthy eating and nutrition guidelines for children.

Beginning in May 2012, an evaluation was carried out to identify the impact of this small scale pilot for the nine childminders involved. The pilot targeted childminders specifically, because they often provide care for children under two years and the earlier healthy eating starts the better.



'A shared meal'

In addition, professional development opportunities run during normal working hours can be difficult for childminders to access. Finally, childminders were also asked for comments on children's packed lunches if they did not provide a cooked meal. Overall, the evaluation identified a positive impact for the childminders involved, both in respect of the evening and lunch workshops. The most valued benefits went hand in hand with each other; with childminders recognising that their as their repertoire of healthy recipes expanded, this had in turn encouraged the children in their care to try new food, especially vegetables at snack times.

The full evaluation report discusses in detail the importance of increasing children's exposure to different foods and especially vegetables. Research suggests that children have a preference for sweet flavours and typically will

⁵ School Food Trust (2011) *Eat Better, Start Better; Voluntary Food & Drink Guidelines for Early Years Settings in England: A practical Guide*, Children's Food Trust/School Food Trust

select fruit over vegetables⁶. For a diet to be properly balanced it is essential that children learn to want to eat vegetables too. Ongoing exposure to a wide variety of food from when children are weaned has been proved to increase their preferences for foods that are less sweet and perhaps harder to chew⁶. Arguably perhaps, the implications from this need sharing with a wider audience. All early years settings might benefit from auditing the proportion of fruit and vegetables that are offered to children during the course of any day. A wider impact of the workshops that many childminders recognised was how many aspects of children's learning could be developed through food activities, as an additional benefit beyond combating weight and obesity issues. Finally, the evaluation identified that childminders would welcome additional training both in respect of their own practice in terms of healthy food provision and also in how this could be shared with children's parents. The following recommendations have been made as a result of the evaluation findings.

Summary Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Research literature recognises children's healthy food preferences (for fruit) and the important effect of regular exposure to different foods. Alongside this the evaluation shows that when childminders increased the quantity and types of vegetables children were offered, particularly as a healthy snack, children's vegetable consumption was likely to increase. There is an argument that early years providers should offer more vegetables than fruit given that children will be more likely to eat fruit at home.



'Carrots for snack'

⁶ Cooke, L. (2007) The importance of exposure for healthy eating in childhood: A review; in *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*; Vol.20, No. 4, p294-301

Recommendation 1 supports childminders and other early years providers to consider the balance between fruit and vegetables offered to children at snack times and increase the variety and frequency of fresh vegetables that are provided.

Recommendation 2

Childminders' experiences suggest that contact with different foods, in meal and snack preparation, increases the likelihood of children trying and enjoying a wide range of food. In addition, childminders identified that they were more likely to let children use 'tools fit for purpose' since undertaking the workshops. Children lose interest and motivation when knives are too blunt to cut up carrots, peppers or apples.

Recommendation 2 highlights the benefits for children of regular involvement in food preparation at snack and, when possible, meal times and the importance of having access to the right equipment to do the job well. Thought should be given to risk benefit as well as safety.



'The right tools'

Recommendation 3

Seeing a wealth of potential for learning through food has also been highlighted with childminders explaining developments in their practice with children since undertaking the workshops. Opportunities to shop, examine food whole and transform it, to make connections with countries of origin and relevant cultural contexts for individual children are to name but a few possibilities.

The third recommendation suggests that childminders and other early

years settings consider the range of different opportunities food can offer, across prime and specific areas of learning. Identifying how food related experiences can be developed to reflect children's interests and lives.



'Interesting vegetables'

Recommendation 4

Supporting children to develop healthy eating habits is clearly a shared responsibility with children's parents and other primary caregivers. Children's experiences at home with food will be the most significant influence on their food choices and eating habits. The evaluation shows while some parents have a good understanding of what constitutes a healthy, balanced packed lunch that not all of them do. This is likely to be replicated in other early years' settings in Bristol. Work is already underway to develop packed lunch guidance to share with parents.

Recommendation 4 highlights the need to develop healthy eating



policies with children's parents for childminders and other early year's practitioners. This is to provide support as well as keeping healthy eating at the forefront of practice.

'Sharing ideas about healthy food'

Recommendation 5

Childminders have clearly expressed both personal and professional benefits of undertaking the cookery workshops. Their descriptions of the impact on their thinking and practice around food provision have clearly benefitted the children in their care in a variety of ways. Suggestions for continuing professional development (CPD) relating to healthy food provision have been made both personally and also for other childminders in Bristol. In response to these suggestions a recommendation for this evaluation should focus on continuing professional development for childminders.

Recommendation 5 for this evaluation acknowledges that ongoing CPD relating to healthy food provision for childminders in Bristol would be welcome and a charge for this acceptable. It is important to identify that childminders would need CPD to be run out of normal working hours as they have sole responsibility for children in their care. Cookery sessions with children would also be well received and there is scope to develop this through Children's Centres.

'Cooking together'



Final Thoughts

More and more we are coming to understand that children's physical health cannot be left to chance. What children eat clearly has a significant impact on their health now and in the future. The importance of what happens with food, early on for children, in laying down good eating habits for a lifetime cannot be emphasised enough. Early year's practitioners as well as parents are responsible for encouraging children to eat healthy, nutritious food that feeds their bodies and their brains. This clearly needs to be a shared responsibility, acknowledging that some parents require more help than others in understanding what constitutes a healthy, balanced diet for their children. From babyhood, children should have opportunities to experience a wide range of flavours and textures to develop their taste for healthy options as well as the new and unusual. As children grow this interaction with food should help them to expand their choices as well as their own understanding of what is good for them. Food preparation and cookery activities can be linked to all sorts of learning opportunities for children and we should understand that children are more likely to experiment with tasting new food when they have been involved in its creation or transformation. It is essential to recognise that providing a balanced, nutritious food is fundamental for good physical health and well-being. Children have a right to eat well but this should not be confused with eating anything they choose at the expense of their health. The right messages and interaction with concerned, responsible adults will help children to learn this for themselves.



'Trying something new'