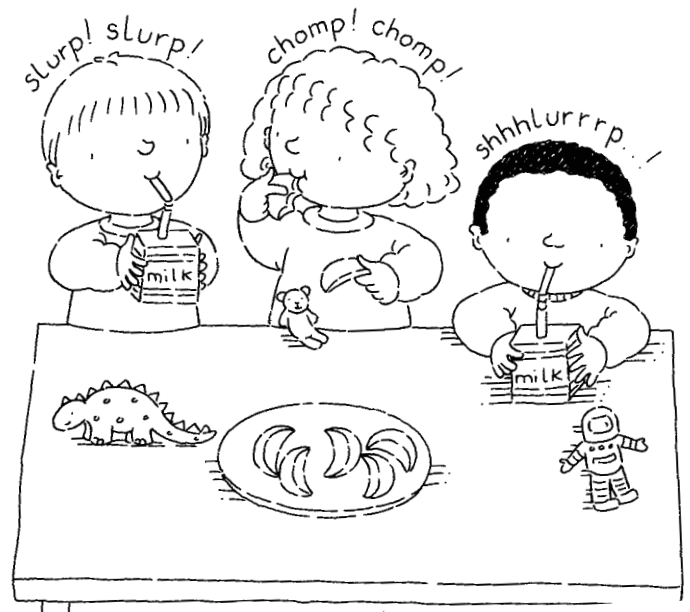


Healthy eating

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The importance of snack and mealtimes

Most pre-school groups sit down together and share food – whether it be a meal or a slice of apple. This may be a break from play but it’s certainly not a break from learning. Chris Heald explains why it’s so important to plan and prepare for this time as much as you would any other activity

Imagine that you are in a restaurant, but instead of tablecloths, the tables are bare. When you try to choose your seat, the waiter tells you to sit next to a stranger. There is no choice, you get what you are given and you must eat it.

When the food comes, it is piled in a bowl. When you ask for bread, one of the waiters picks up a piece from a central plate and throws it across the table for you. There is only a spoon to eat with. When you try to make conversation with the person sitting next to you, the waiter tells you to be quiet. When you can’t eat all your food, because you don’t like some of it, the waiter tells you that you can’t go back to work until you’ve finished it.

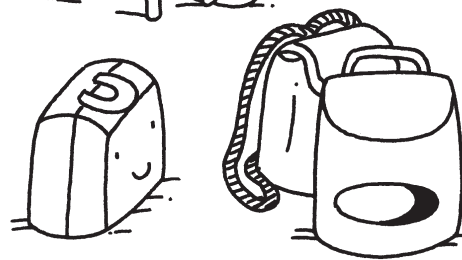
Have you stepped onto the set of *Fawlty Towers*? No, you are just experiencing what some young children experience every day during their snack or mealtimes, simply because the adults in charge have not taken time to think about what it is like to be a child in their setting.

Eating out is a social occasion and establishes all sorts of understandings about making choices and talking and listening to one another in a relaxed and pleasant environment, where time has been taken to make sure that the tableware, cutlery and linen contribute to a sense of worth and well-being on the part of the diners. It also establishes that we belong to a community which values eating as a social activity.

Whether you offer children a small snack or provide full meals, there are opportunities for learning - for developing personal, social, emotional, intellectual and language skills, along with independence and a strong sense of self-worth and capability.

What do you want children to learn?

Eating food is not just about satisfying hunger - there is much learning which



can take place, some good and some bad. Your children can learn how to make healthy choices or unhealthy ones; they can learn that they are capable and have many skills, such as pouring liquid from a jug, or they can learn that they are too unimportant to be allowed the time to learn this vital skill. They can learn that snack times are times for social interaction or for being made to feel powerless and uninvolved in their own care. The choice is yours because you are the adult and can choose to empower the children in your care.

The principles of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* encourage practitioners to support

Messages in Birth to Three Matters

Birth to Three Matters supports an approach to mealtimes which develops children's independence and sense of self-worth.

The 'Making Meaning' aspect of 'A Skilful Communicator', for instance, asks practitioners to 'Respect young children's choices'.

'Healthy Choices' in 'A Healthy Child' encourages you to 'Discuss options so that children really do have choices; for example whether they will drink water, juice or milk', while 'Growing and Developing' in the same aspect urges you to 'Support, supervise and become involved as babies and children try out their developing skills', such as pouring their own choice of drink or spooning their own food onto their plates.

children in making choices and developing their independence.

Because children don't learn skills in isolation, and because skills learned in one area are likely to be used in quite a different context when needed, it is perfectly possible to address aspects of all six areas of the curriculum in any snack or mealtime.

- Offering a choice of snack and allowing children to choose when they have it is developing a child's sense of self-esteem.
- Interacting with others, negotiating and taking turns in conversation happens naturally over food. Communicating likes and dislikes, asking to swap places, and asking questions about the food available will develop skills in oracy. Writing or drawing menus on boards or sheets of paper will develop literacy.
- Opportunities to use mathematical language will occur when sandwiches are cut into different shapes. Counting and matching the pieces of fruit needed to give everybody a piece, and then cutting the fruit, makes the need for accuracy clear. Using positional language to help lay the table is another way to take any opportunity to develop concepts in maths.
- Children need to be aware that a healthy diet is a varied one, that lots of recipes from other cultures are healthy, and that traditional English food is not the only food available to us.
- Physical skills of dexterity are developed by practising pouring, cutting and moving food and drink using appropriate tools and containers.
- To develop children's sensory awareness, they need to know the language of taste – words such as 'salty', 'sweet', 'fruity', 'spicy', 'sour' and 'bitter'. They also need to have the opportunity to experience all these flavours and talk about them.
- Children need to be creative in their approach to food, exploring colour and texture with their sense of taste and their senses of sight and smell.

Your role

The role of the adult is crucial in making meal and snack times into a significant event which enhances independence and learning for children.

Many adults have strong views about food, often linked to the concept of waste. Some adults have been brought up with an attitude to food which links it to behaviour management, in other words 'If you eat all your dinner you can have your sweet/pudding/ chocolate biscuit'. Using food, including sweets, lollipops or even fruit as a reward for good behaviour is engrained in our culture but should be avoided if at all possible.

Using food to exert power over children can lead to them getting this message clearly and using it in their turn to exert power over adults. In its extreme form, it can lead to bulimia and anorexia, but can also lead to faddy eating habits, such as the child who will only eat fish finger or only ever eat one type of chocolate biscuit. They can then have a controlling effect on parents, who will often buy only what their child will eat because they can't face the uproar that the child will make otherwise.

The question we need to ask is why some children feel the need to behave in this way. Is it because they have no other way of expressing their opinions and making the adults around them listen to what they are trying to say? Such behaviour is a cry for help, a cry for their voice to be heard and their wants and needs to be taken into account in all areas which affect them.

Listening to children – really listening to what they have to say, their opinions and their understanding of what is happening around them - is what the role of the adult should be at mealtimes and snack times. If children know that you will listen to what they have to say and share their thinking process, you will be able to make the most of any learning experiences which present themselves at mealtimes.

Manners – socially acceptable behaviour for everyone

You have a crucial role in showing children the importance of good manners by providing a good role

'Eating out is a social occasion and establishes all sorts of understandings about making choices and talking and listening to one another in a relaxed and pleasant environment.'

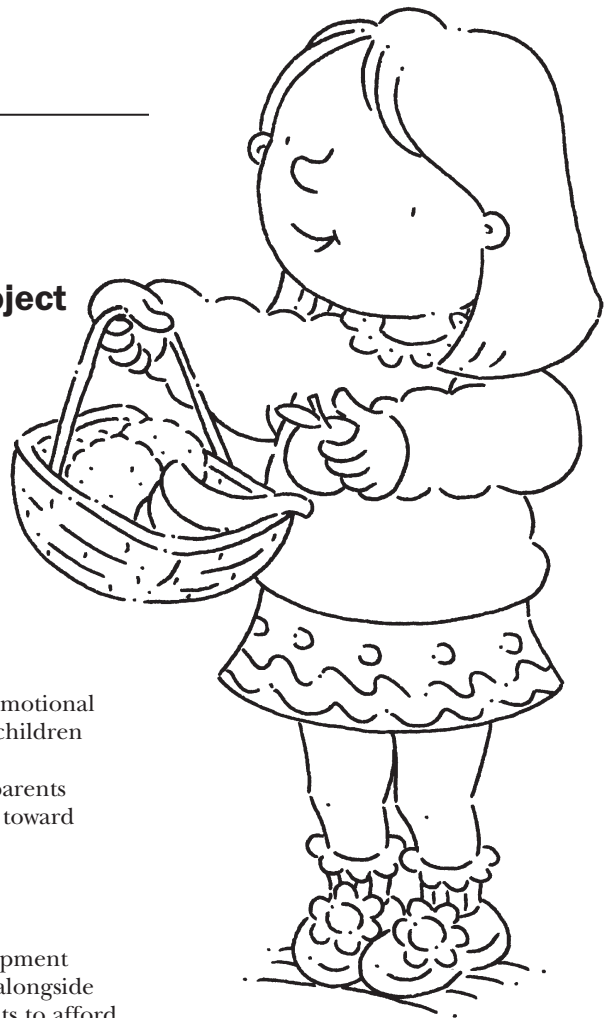
model in your interactions with other adults and with children in the setting.

Children learn by imitation far more than by being told about something. Yes, of course we should help children to understand the importance of good social interaction, and the effects that it has on relationships, making communication easier and smoothing the path for future interactions between people. Of course, saying 'please' and 'thank you' is an important skill to learn. However, this is a two-way process with the greater responsibility lying with the adults involved.

Chris Heald is quality assurance co-ordinator and advisory teacher for the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership in Bury, Lancashire.

Healthy eating schemes

Planning your own healthy eating week or project is always useful, but it's a good idea to have an idea of what is happening elsewhere in your local area and nationally. When your health event coincides with a national event there may be press coverage to support whatever you are trying to achieve, and this will improve the impact of your work.



There are an ever increasing number of schemes funded by the Government, and independent organizations and charities that aim to improve the health of children, and many of them are aimed at combating health inequality. There is a wealth of information that demonstrates clearly the relationship between poverty and health. For example, the death rate of unskilled men is now three times higher than in professional men. Research has also shown that socioeconomic environment in childhood is a useful predictor of cardiovascular disease in adulthood. People in low-income groups eat fewer fruits and vegetables. Their children are about 50 per cent less likely to eat fruit and vegetables than those in high income families. In addition, poorly nourished children, particularly those who are overweight or obese, often experience significant social and psychological problems.

The government schemes which specifically aim to improve the health of children are:

- Sure Start
- Healthy Start
- The School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme

Sure Start

Sure Start is a Government programme, operating in England only. It aims to achieve better outcomes for children, parents and communities by:

- Increasing the availability of childcare for all children

- Improving health and emotional development of young children
- Supporting parents as parents and in their aspirations toward employment

To do this they are:

- Helping services development in disadvantaged areas alongside financial help for parents to afford childcare
- Rolling out the principles driving the Sure Start approach to all services for children and parents

Sure Start acknowledges “diet and nutrition are fundamental to health throughout life. A good diet can help reduce the risk of a number of health problems including obesity, heart disease, some cancers and type 2 diabetes.”

Sure Start aims to encourage parents, carers and early year’s practitioners to inform themselves on how to give children the healthiest start in life. In addition from April 2008 local authorities will have to conduct Childcare sufficiency assessments and will have a duty to secure sufficient childcare for parents in their area. This in combination with nutrition guidelines for under 5’s and the impact of OFSTED inspections to survey registered day care will serve to ensure an adequate supply of pre-school care providing quality food provision, age appropriate nutrition and introducing children to a good diet whatever their prior home experience.

Every Child Matters is linked with Sure Start. The “Every child matters” report (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), introduced a new focus on quality services for children in the UK.

The Government’s aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic wellbeing

This means that the organizations involved with providing services to children – from hospitals and schools, to police and voluntary groups – will be teaming up in new ways to help achieve children achieve what they want from life.

The health aspect of Every Child Matters is linked with Standard 8 of the