



Hungry to learn

Teaching young children where food comes from, ways to prepare it, and how tasty a variety of dishes can be, is the best way to establish healthy eating habits. We take lessons from one London nursery

By Jerome Monahan Photography Claire Davies



It's 2.15pm at Hopes and Dreams Montessori Nursery in Islington, north London, and a group of three- and four-year-olds are getting ready to prepare a mid-afternoon snack for their friends. "Getting children at this age handling and preparing healthy food is a key way to ensure they'll become used to a variety of food and eager to eat it," says senior Montessori teacher Lek Teo.

Childhood obesity is rightly at the top of the health agenda: in 2006, 16 per cent of two- to 15-year-olds were obese and a further 14 per cent were overweight, reports the latest Health Survey for England. So Lek Teo's advice could not be more timely. And there is increasing evidence of how important early, positive experiences of nutritious food can be for children's later dietary choices and overall health.

In short, healthy eating, with exercise and active play, is essential for young children's development, and nurseries are on the front line of the campaign against obesity. As National Day Nurseries Association chief executive Farmina Tanuku puts it: "Day nurseries play a key role in ensuring children enjoy the benefits of nutritious foods and exercise through play. Getting it right in a child's formative years can help make sure they learn healthy habits that last a lifetime."

FINGERS ON THE PULSES

Hopes and Dreams children are used to focusing on food. They enthusiastically wield their knives, dicing up carrots and cutting wholemeal pitta bread into pieces. "This is a daily task," explains Lek Teo. "It's also an important way to reinforce messages about cleanliness." A quick glance around the room reveals how healthy food has been imaginatively incorporated into a range of activities. Bunches of pulses and grains are lined up for counting and sorting exercises, while a tray of spices is laid out for children to sniff before they try to match them to drawn outlines.

Hopes and Dreams, which has 35 staff and 123 children, has built a good reputation for its approach to food, especially as parents become more aware of what their children eat. Ruth Brown, the chef at Hopes and Dreams, says: "I am committed to providing a balanced diet and we offer vegetarian menus alongside the main ones. On top of this, I always make the food colourful and interesting in terms of shape and texture. On the

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

- Build children's confidence in unfamiliar foods by introducing new tastes gradually.
- If offering a choice of foods, ensure all options are healthy - carrots or courgettes, apples or raisins.
- Take time to eat with children and make meals an enjoyable experience.
- Show parents that healthy eating need not be difficult or expensive.
- See Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives, the Government strategy to fight obesity, which focuses on establishing good dietary and exercise habits from an early age. Visit www.dh.gov.uk



HEALTHY EATING

other hand, we keep puddings simple and healthy, offering fruit every day. And there's only ever water for the children to drink.

The nursery was commended in the 2007 Organic Nursery Food Awards. As well as scrutinising the nursery's menus, the judges investigated the extent of the children's participation in cooking and food preparation, and how effectively the nursery engaged with parents about food.

"Our menus are displayed outside each room, in reception and on our website," says managing director Susan Bingham. "We are very open to parents' views. We conduct a survey twice a year, inviting comments about all we do, including the diet we provide."

GETTING PHYSICAL

Nursery staff keep a careful watch on the children during meal times, recording how much they have eaten for detailed feedback to parents. "It's good to know what they have eaten," says dad Steve Bentley as he collects his daughter. "Recently, my daughter had lentil soup for lunch, which is not something it would have occurred to me to give her."

Physical activity is also essential here, with physical games, movement sessions, walks and trips to the park all part of the day. Senior Montessori teacher Mehbab Fazel explains: "We emphasise the importance of movement and exercise. We believe a healthy body promotes a healthy mind."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Healthy Body, Happy Me promotes healthy lifestyles for young children. Visit www.dh.gov.uk
- For 5-a-day ideas, see www.5aday.nhs.uk
- See www.standards-of-government/ef15 - click on Resource Index, then Unique Child for a Health and Wellbeing guide