

# Better nursery food now

In 2008 we revealed how our children are being fed junk food at nursery. Since then little has changed. It's time the Government took action



**E**ighteen months ago we published 'Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie: Exposing the truth about nursery food', a report that examined the quality of food given to young children in nurseries across England and Wales. We found that while most nurseries were serving nutritious, healthy lunches for as little as 80p a day, many nurseries were serving children ready-made and processed food, such as chips and economy burgers, that would not be allowed in schools. We found that colourings and additives not permitted in manufactured

foods for young children were regularly served in nurseries. We also found that the amount of money spent on ingredients in nurseries is sometimes pitifully low, with some nurseries spending as little as 25p on ingredients for a child's food.

The widespread variability in nursery food is explained by the absence of adequate regulation of the sector. Most nurseries want to serve healthy food, but with a lack of specialist training for nursery cooks and inadequate guidance on what 'healthy eating' means for young children, many are falling short. And the impact of these failures are serious: there are over 600,000 pre-school children attending nursery each year, and by the time they reach school age, 22% of children are overweight or obese. These children are likely to stay that way through their lives, meaning they are more likely to face serious health problems later on. If the Government is serious about tackling the growing obesity



Getting children to eat together at a table encourages healthy eating

epidemic, then the Department for Children, Schools and Families should put in place clear rules for the quality of food served in all nurseries.

## Inadequate regulation

Ensuring pre-school children are served healthy meals is certainly not a pipe dream. The experience of school food shows this to be the case: since the middle of the Noughties, the food served up at school dinner time has been transformed. The campaigning work of initiatives such as the Soil Association-led Food for Life Partnership has contributed, but change across the system has been driven by the mandatory nutritional standards put in place in 2008 (for primary schools) and 2009 (for secondaries).

So it's puzzling that pre-schoolers' food has been ignored, and we've been left with inadequate regulation in the nursery sector. While the mandatory standards for school lunches explain in detail exactly what the Government mean by 'healthy and nutritious', the single line of mandatory regulation for nurseries reads simply: 'Each day food from each of the categories below [fruit and vegetables, starchy foods, protein, and meat and dairy] must be provided as part of the school lunch.' The regulation says nothing about cooking methods, the proportion of meat in any meat products served, or what may not be served - for instance, food with high levels of fat, salt or sugar, and fizzy drinks. Consequently a meal of economy burger, chips and coke could be served and stay within regulation. And it also only applies to food served at lunchtime. We think this is unacceptable and we want changes to be made urgently. That's why we are calling on the Government to put in place nutritional standards that will cover all nurseries, guaranteeing better food in nurseries now.

## A better way

There is hope though. At a local level some nurseries have excellent food and are making huge efforts to ensure a healthy balance. For example, last year Vanessa Warn opened Little Green Rascals in York, having been saddened by the need to 'compromise' on food when she was looking at nurseries for her own daughter. 'One of the nurseries I looked at simply microwaved food supplied by parents from home,' she explains. 'I was particularly intrigued that Ofsted described this as "fantastic". Surely their assessment should look at the actual food being served.'

By contrast, Little Green Rascals serves organic fresh food, much of which is grown in the nursery's own garden. For Vanessa good food isn't just about nutrition: 'The pre-schoolers use napkins and place settings at meal-times, so it's about the whole social experience.' To demonstrate its commitment to healthy food, Little Green Rascals is being awarded the Food for Life Gold Catering Mark, and is also seeking Soil Association certification.

Providing good food at nurseries is essential if we are to educate children about healthy eating choices in later life. This is why we are recommending that the Government adopts Food for Life standards - used in 1,550 schools throughout England and several nurseries - as basic criteria for nursery school food provision. These standards represent the gold standard in food provision in schools, combining existing nutritional standards with requirements to serve food that is made from 75% unprocessed ingredients, 50% locally sourced ingredients and at least 30% organic. These standards can improve the diets and food habits of older children. Our younger and more vulnerable children deserve nothing less.



The quality of food served at nurseries is a lottery



## Take action

Sign our petition to demand better nursery food today  
[www.nurseryfood.org](http://www.nurseryfood.org)