



# Better nursery food now

What we need and  
why we need it

Organix



Soil Association

# Better nursery food now

Young children are especially vulnerable to the long-term effects of poor diet and nutrition. Almost one in four children are overweight or obese by the time they start school, meaning they are more likely to develop serious health problems later in life



Over 600,000 children in England and Wales go to nursery for up to ten hours a day. In many cases, nurseries are providing the majority of their daily food during the working week.

In 2008 the Soil Association and Organix produced a report called 'Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie: Exposing the truth about nursery food', which for the first time examined the state of food served in nurseries and children's centres in England and Wales. The report found widespread variability in the quality of food given to children in early year's settings. In particular:

- ▶ Foods that are now banned or restricted in schools still regularly served to under-fives,
- ▶ Colourings and additives that would not be allowed in manufactured foods for young children still on offer in nurseries.
- ▶ Nursery food was largely unregulated; the only legally enforceable rule that existed didn't apply to the nine out of ten nurseries that weren't state-maintained.

The report also found:

- ▶ No compulsory training for staff serving food.
- ▶ No clear nutritional standards.
- ▶ No agency to monitor the quality of food provided.
- ▶ No Government department giving a lead or promoting good practice.
- ▶ No Government funding available to help nurseries improve provision.

That's why we are campaigning for **better nursery food now**. We want:

- ▶ **Better regulation** for the food served to children in all early years settings.
- ▶ **Better inspection** to make sure nurseries stick to these rules.
- ▶ **Better training** in early years nutrition for nursery care and catering staff.
- ▶ **Accountability** from one Government department for nursery food, to provide better nursery food now.

## What parents think

In February 2010, in partnership with Mumsnet, we asked parents with children in nursery what they thought of nursery food

Their responses demonstrate how important parents consider the quality of food served to their children at nursery, and showed us that parents want better nursery food now. Here's what they said:

Nine in every ten parents (89%) want **legally enforceable rules for the nutritional standards of food** in all nurseries. At least nine in every ten parents were 'strongly' or 'somewhat' in favour of:

- ▶ **Compulsory nutrition and cookery training** for nursery staff preparing and serving food (94%).
- ▶ **The banning of additives** that are linked to behavioural problems or other health issues in nursery food (95%) and
- ▶ **Government funding** to help nurseries improve food provision (88%).

In addition:

- ▶ Nine in every ten parents (88%) want government funding available to help nurseries improve food provision.
- ▶ Eight in every ten parents (82%) want foods like chips, sweets and chocolate, which are banned or restricted in secondary schools, also banned in nurseries.
- ▶ Seven in ten parents (69%) want to see a government department made responsible for monitoring the quality of food provided.

## What we need

We need clear rules for the quality of food served in **all** nurseries

### Better regulation

Mandatory standards for the quality of food served in all nurseries (not just the state maintained minority). These should restrict or forbid the same foods currently not permitted in schools, and should be based on established nutritional standards for young children (like the Caroline Walker Trust standards for under-fives).

### Better inspection

Rigorous criteria should be established for Ofsted (or Estyn in Wales) to inspect the nutritional quality of the food on offer in nurseries, as well as taste and appearance. Inspectors should ideally share a mealtime with the children to assess the nursery's 'whole school' approach to food and dining, and to teaching the children about food.

### Better training

Funding and support to develop a qualification and to train nursery catering staff in nutrition and key cookery skills. Without training, they are unlikely to have the skills or knowledge needed to improve nursery food in line with the new nutritional standards. All nursery managers and care staff should also be required to undertake training in basic nutrition for under-fives.

### Accountability

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) should maintain responsibility for nursery food, and be held accountable for improving nursery food and early years nutrition.

We also recommend that the government takes a 'whole supply chain' approach to food quality in nurseries, and sets standards that take into account the way the food was grown or produced.

## Why nursery food matters

The younger the child, the more vulnerable their health is to the effects of poor quality nutrition. Children's eating habits are formed at this young age so the choices, tastes and nutritional quality of the food they eat have a far reaching effect on their food preferences and health later in life



Paradoxically, while many young children may be consuming too much energy and becoming overweight or obese, many children, whatever their energy intake, are also malnourished – i.e. they are not meeting daily vitamin and mineral requirements. Early results from the most recent phase of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey of children aged between 1½ and 3 years, published in 2010 by the Department of Health, found that children's eating habits had improved little since 1995, when on average children ate too much added sugar, too much salt, and not enough iron, zinc, oily fish, vitamin C or vitamin A.

In 2008, the Government Cabinet Office's Strategy Unit said that 'existing patterns of food consumption will result in our society being loaded with a heavy burden of obesity and diet-related ill health' and that 'ill health is already costing the NHS £10 billion per annum' – estimated to rise to £50 billion by 2050.

A Government-funded report on obesity published in autumn 2007 identified 'eleven critical opportunities for intervention to prevent obesity later in life'. The first three are breastfeeding/ bottle-feeding (zero to six months), weaning (six to 24 months) and pre-school age (two to five years). In other words, nearly a quarter of opportunities to prevent obesity occur when a child is at nursery. The National Child Measurement Programme found in December 2009 that almost one in four children (22.8%) were already overweight or obese by reception year in primary school.

The Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has done commendable work over the last five years in implementing the nutritional standards in primary and secondary schools, which has seen great improvement in the quality of food served. Evidence of the benefits of better school food is accumulating: advanced concentration and ability to learn, better social skills, improved physical health and increased wellbeing. While regulation has made positive changes to food and the dining experience for primary and secondary school children, nursery food has been left behind, **which is why we need change now.**

## The truth about nursery food

When the report 'Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie: Exposing the truth about nursery food' was published, more than 600,000 children attended day care in England and Wales. The report found that food and food culture in nurseries varied dramatically, as did the amount of money spent on ingredients

The report found that food and food culture in nurseries varied dramatically, as did the amount of money spent on ingredients. There was a lack of clear rules for nursery food and inadequate inspection of their food provision, despite the fact that there is (and was) detailed mandatory standards in place for the food available in primary and secondary schools and the baby food market is tightly regulated. Although nursery care workers are obliged to undertake childcare qualifications, nursery cooks and catering staff are not required to have training in nutrition or cookery. Our research found:

### Evidence for poor quality nursery food, particularly in children's centres

- ▶ The report found that while it is possible to feed children good quality, nutritious food for as little as 80p a day, many nurseries are serving children processed food such as chips and economy burgers that would not be allowed in schools.
- ▶ Colourings and additives not permitted in manufactured foods for young children were regularly served in nurseries.
- ▶ Despite parents paying on average £35 a day for day care, 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.
- ▶ Although Sure Start Children's Centres are part of a long-term government programme to 'deliver the best start for every child', the report found that only 40% of children's centres (or 27 of the 67 surveyed) served fruit or vegetables at snack time, compared to 70% of the state-maintained nurseries, 69% of private and 75% of voluntary nurseries. A child's chances of developing diet-related disease in later life are greater if they come from a low-income background. Nurseries could be playing their part in reversing this trend.

### Existing regulation for nursery food is inadequate

- ▶ Since September 2008 the sole legislation for all nurseries in England (private and voluntary as well as state-maintained) has been the Early Years Foundation Stage. EYFS makes it a legal requirement that 'Where children are provided with meals, snacks and drinks these must be healthy, balanced and nutritious.'
- ▶ There is guidance (which is not a legal requirement) for childcare workers, suggesting they should 'encourage children to try healthy food, involve them in the preparation of food and reinforce messages about healthier choices through, for example, discussions about children's food choices'
- ▶ However, EYFS provides no definition of what the government means by 'healthy and nutritious' for children in early years day care, and finds 'babies and young children' responsible for 'making healthy choices'.
- ▶ The regulation says nothing about cooking methods (i.e. frying), does not restrict provision of highly processed meat products nor – importantly – state what may *not* be served; for instance, food with high levels of fat, salt or sugar, and fizzy drinks. It also only applies to food served at lunchtime.

### There are proven benefits to healthier food in schools

- ▶ According to research by the School Food Trust, the benefits of better school food include advanced concentration and ability to learn, better social skills, improved physical health and increased wellbeing.
- ▶ The implementation of nutritional standards in primary and secondary schools by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), has seen great improvement in the quality of food served. Nurseries are being left behind.

# The truth about nursery food

## We have a culture of inadequate inspection

- ▶ Ofsted inspectors have no criteria with which to judge the nutritional and other qualities of the food served in nurseries. Instead, the inspectors must decide: 'the extent to which children *make healthy choices* about what they eat and drink.'
- ▶ Instead of assessing whether or not the food on offer meets the nutritional needs of babies and young children, inspectors are expected to deem a nursery 'outstanding' if children 'show an excellent understanding of healthy eating and make healthy choices at snack and meal times.'
- ▶ A nursery may serve highly processed food that is high in salt, fat or sugar, so long as there is a healthy option for a child to choose. To achieve 'good' status, children are not required to choose the healthy option, but should only 'understand the importance of healthy eating.' Is it acceptable that the responsibility for making healthy food choices falls to children as young as two?

## No government agency or department takes responsibility for nursery food

- ▶ There are encouraging signs that the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is now accountable for the food served in day care to the nation's youngest children; Dawn Primarolo, the Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, currently has responsibility for food and nutrition standards in the early years.
- ▶ The Department have commissioned the School Food Trust to review food and nutrition standards for nursery food as part of a review of the EYFS framework. We would urge the advisory panel to consider the recommendations made in our report.

## No food and nutrition training for staff

- ▶ There is no requirement for nursery cooks or catering staff, or nursery managers, to undertake training in nutrition or cookery or to demonstrate a level of competence in the kitchen.
- ▶ There is no sector-specific cookery qualification for nursery cooks and to date, no national training scheme has been made available to help early years workers enforce the new requirements.

# What you can do now

Given the weight of evidence showing the inadequacies of the current systems governing our nursery food the Soil Association, supported by Organix, is calling for better nursery food now



We need your help to create the change needed in nursery catering – because we believe that every child deserves the best nutritional start in life, and this represents a **good investment in the long-term health of the nation.**

In order to make change a reality, we need your help. You can:

- ▶ Join thousands of parents and nursery care and catering staff and **sign our petition** for better nursery food now at [www.nurseryfood.org](http://www.nurseryfood.org)
- ▶ Ask your MP to sign up to our Early Day Motion to show their support for better nursery food. Details of how to do this are on the website, [www.nurseryfood.org](http://www.nurseryfood.org)
- ▶ Write to the Secretary of State for DCSF asking that their Department take full responsibility for nursery school food, and maintains that responsibility throughout the inevitable changes after the forthcoming election.

- ▶ Ask the right questions of your local nursery – look at the menus and snack time treats; sit in on a meal time. A list of questions to ask can be found on the website, [www.nurseryfood.org](http://www.nurseryfood.org)
- ▶ Get other parents and nursery catering and care staff involved in a 'food advisory group' – to monitor but also support and develop your nursery's food culture.
- ▶ Encourage your child's nursery to apply for the Soil Association's Food for Life Catering Mark. The scheme can support and encourage nurseries who want to use more fresh, local, seasonal and organic food. See [www.soilassociation.org/cateringmark.aspx](http://www.soilassociation.org/cateringmark.aspx) for further details.
- ▶ Join the debate and keep up-to-date at [www.facebook.com/betternurseryfood](http://www.facebook.com/betternurseryfood)

Read the full version of the 'Better nursery food now' campaign recommendations at [www.nurseryfood.org](http://www.nurseryfood.org)



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