

BRIEFING PAPER

How day nurseries in York contribute to Healthy Food and Exercise

Background information

There are currently 43 day nurseries operating across the city. Private providers operate most, others are operated under voluntary management arrangements and there is one that is operating under the extended school legislation and is governed under the school governance. All of the nurseries are registered under Ofsted for full day-care. Ofsted do not inspect against Healthy Eating in nurseries, however recently they have shown interest and asked questions around this area.

Method used for evidence gathering

The Early Years and Children's Centre Service undertook a telephone questionnaire to establish a greater understanding of the way in which the different daycare settings offer meals and outdoor opportunities for children who attend their provision. An analysis was undertaken to establish the ways in which healthy eating and physical exercise was offered across each of the day-care settings. In total 42 settings made themselves available to answer the nine questions. All of the questions were fully answered and some offered additional comments. These are included in this briefing paper. Anonymity for the settings was agreed in order that they could be frank and open.

The analysis

Of the 42 nurseries that replied, 37 provided hot meals; the remainder asked families to provide packed lunches for their children although they were prepared to heat up food such as soup. Of the 37 nurseries most had cooks/chefs who held cooking qualifications that included child nutrition, a small minority did not employ cooks and nursery staff carried out this task.

Over 95 % of the nurseries had Healthy Eating policies, these policies made reference to monitoring levels of sugar, salt and fat. However they also showed that nursery providers understood the necessity of providing young children with sufficient calories during the day to meet their requirements. Many of the Healthy Eating policies showed that the majority of food cooked on the premises, was 'cooked from scratch' and statements included reference to not providing pre-prepared food from cash and carry outlets. Where hot food was offered on a campus site, for example, a school site, a central canteen provided meals for the nurseries.

About 60 % of nurseries answered that most of their food was locally sourced where possible. There were also references to the importance of mealtimes being 'social events' where children were served meals at tables with tablecloths and flowers in the centre of the table and staff sitting and interacting with the children. The requirements of individual children were also catered for, these could include reference to allergies or parental beliefs or cultural needs.

All nurseries provide snacks during the day, which include fresh fruit, toast, scones, teacakes, home made granola bars. In some nurseries these are offered at set times and in others, there is a café-bar arrangement so that the children can help themselves whenever they feel hungry.

Recently the government has altered advice about providing semi-skimmed milk for children over 2 years of age. Only 50 % of nurseries had received this advice, mostly through the milk provider, the advice had not come down from the Department of Health to Early Years Departments in Local Authorities.

All nurseries replied that the children were currently or in the immediate future, planting and growing food. Some nurseries have taken advantage of a grant known as Quality and Access Capital to provide or enhance growing areas such as raised beds to cultivate a wide variety of crops. These crops include peas, beans, potatoes, carrots, sweet corn, strawberries and butternut squash (with varying success). These crops were harvested and children helped to prepare the vegetables before eating them.

Also over 60% of nurseries have areas set aside for 'kitchen gardens' One nursery has chickens in the outside area and others are investigating this opportunity.

All children have the opportunity to play outside on a daily basis and are encouraged by staff to do so. They also have quiet spaces or rooms in which they can rest or sleep.

Conclusion

This full survey shows that in the City of York, the promotion of healthy lifestyles for children is taken seriously by the day nurseries.

This picture compares well to some other local authority areas where similar surveys have shown a differing picture.

The survey also shows that the provision of main meals, lunch and tea varies considerably in the way in which they are offered. Although menus varied there was insufficient time in this exercise to go into greater detail. Parents are given information about meal times and all are required by Ofsted to provide parents with copies of the menus as part of their registration requirements.

One nursery has received a Gold Award from the soil association that has required them to evidence a high level of food cooked from scratch and food from local organically grown sources.

The survey does not highlight the complexity faced by cooks in the demands of offering an increasing demand for catering for children who have allergies.

Further reading.

Research report on nursery food. www.soilassociation.org link Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie. Please note this is a 120 page document and has been funded with links to a commercial food company providing organic baby food. However it highlights the importance of good food in full day-care settings.