

EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE PAMPHLET

Issue 5 – Food Glorious Food

Are we making the most of the learning opportunities provided by snack and mealtimes and are we ensuring that children have opportunities for learning through planting, growing and cooking?

Click here for a short video introduction to the pamphlet <https://clickv.ie/w/zAYu>

Introduction

Food is an important part of all of our lives and learning about food and healthy eating is an important aspect of an early years curriculum. In addition, as part of the National Standard, settings providing funded early learning and childcare “must have a clear and comprehensive policy for the provision of healthy meals and snacks for children...”(National Standard, Criteria 10)



With children in our settings for longer, it is important that we make the most of the learning opportunities presented during snack and mealtimes and through planting, growing and cooking. This pamphlet focuses on the possibilities for learning through a range of food experiences. However, it is important to bear in mind that settings have a responsibility to follow nutritional guidance and food standards as set out in NHS Health Scotland’s Setting the Table and to ensure that children are safe and appropriately supervised when eating. In addition, all settings must also follow local food hygiene guidelines when preparing, cooking and storing food. Whilst children eligible for funded ELC are entitled to a free meal and snack, some children may bring packed lunches from home and it is important to work closely with parents to support the provision of healthy meals and snacks.

Nutritional guidance and food standards for ELC can be found in Setting the Table at the following link: [Setting the Table - Nutritional guidance and food standards for ELC](#)

Supporting children when eating

- Snack and mealtimes should be risk assessed to ensure there are always enough staff to stay with babies and young children when they are eating.
- Children should sit down to eat and drink. They should not be lying down, walking or running as this increases the risk of choking.
- Babies should be sitting up, preferably in a highchair, with their feet supported to stop them slipping down.
- When driving with children or on public transport, they should not be eating or drinking. Sudden jolts or braking could cause choking and it is not possible to supervise appropriately while driving.

The Care Inspectorate has a range of support and guidance at the following links.

[Practice note - Keeping children safe - supporting positive mealtime experiences in ELC](#)

[Good Practice Guidance - Prevention and management of choking episodes in babies and children](#)

[Food Matters - practice exemplars](#)

Snack and Mealtimes

“Routines such as meal times, rest times and personal hygiene should be viewed as learning opportunities where we take time to support and encourage children to learn necessary skills for life. It may appear obvious to say that snack and mealtimes offer the opportunity for so much more than simply meeting a baby or young child’s nutritional needs. But managing the logistics of the planning, preparation and service delivery of food can overshadow many of the special and unique learning benefits that sharing a meal together provides.” **(Realising the Ambition, 2020: 57)**

Mealtimes are a relatively new experience for many settings and the logistics may have dictated the way that snacks and meals are offered, however it is important to reflect on whether this is being done in the best interests of children or in ways that are easier for us. Later on in the pamphlet you will find some case studies from a range of settings, who are all approaching this in different ways in order to provide a high quality experience for children.



Communication

- Eating together provides an opportunity for children to develop language and communication skills in a meaningful social context.
- When adults sit with children and enable conversations, they are supporting important literacy skills for life.
- From a very young age babies and children learn turn-taking and the importance of eye contact and gesture in communicating needs and wants.
- Young children practise sharing and become aware of each other’s personal space and points of view; skills crucial to effective communication.



Food preparation and serving

- The processes involved in mealtime preparation also provide opportunities for rich learning. Respect and responsibility is nurtured through the processes involved with setting up, eating and clearing away afterwards
- Even if the meals are prepared offsite, practitioners can use the daily menu as a stimulus for learning in many ways including thinking about where food comes from or learning about different types of food.

- Snack provides opportunities for writing shopping lists, visiting local shops or shopping online, selecting and preparing different foods and developing skills such as cutting, spreading and pouring.
- Encouraging independence at snack and mealtimes can require patience and lots of positive encouragement and reinforcement but it is a good opportunity for children to develop motor planning skills and personal responsibility.

Agency & Children's Voice

- As children explore both new and familiar taste experiences they are discovering their personal likes and dislikes, and how to express these.
- Menu boards enable children to understand what is on offer, learn about portion sizes and make choices.
- Involving children in menu planning and enabling them to make choices is important.



Relationships

- Snack and mealtimes provide a unique opportunity to get to know children better.
- Taking the time to enjoy feeding a baby or sitting with young children while they eat is both insightful and joyful.

Structure and routine

- Snack and mealtimes provide clear structure and rhythm to the day. Such times are of particular importance to children as they mark the passing of time in a predictable and reassuring way.

Working with families

- It is essential to find effective ways of working with families to make snack and mealtimes happy experiences children look forward to each day both at home and in their ELC settings and school.
- Snack and mealtimes may be a source of stress at home and parents/carers may be anxious about their child's mealtimes in the setting, so it is important to work closely together to develop an understanding about eating habits and preferences, to reassure both parent and child and to tackle any potential issues in a supportive and informed manner.

Cultural experiences

- It is important to embrace the cultural identity of the children in your setting and to promote diversity. Talk to your families and find out about what and how they eat at home.
- Meal and snack times are a great opportunity to introduce food and utensils from various cultures.
- Be aware of and respect the variety of cultural differences in cooking and eating for example making tea in a saucepan, eating with fingers, lifting a bowl and using chopsticks etc.

Cooking & Baking

Cooking and baking are important skills for life and should be part of the experiences offered for children. When planning cooking opportunities, consider how you might build children's skills progressively and give them lots of opportunities to practice.

Cooking and baking provides opportunities to:

- think about risk and how to handle tools safely.
- develop an understanding of food safety and personal hygiene.
- learn skills such as pouring, mixing, spreading, chopping and weighing.
- understand processes involving using and creating recipes, creating shopping lists and going shopping.
- work together, develop independence and link learning across the curriculum.
- explore foods from different cultures and represent children's own cultural experiences and knowledge.

“As a universal feature of daily living, ‘food preparation’ crosses all cultures and carries the potential for uniting families, friends, strangers and cultures in the promotion of shared learning at the deepest level. Such activities are significant in the lives of children.” (McCormick, 2012:153)

Planting and Growing

Planting and growing food enables children to learn about where food comes from and how plants grow. Opportunities to plant, harvest, prepare, eat and compost help children to understand the food cycle and to take care of the environment.



Play with food

There is much debate on the use of food in play. Food can provide rich sensory experiences but in a time of food poverty and food scarcity, should we be using food in sensory play or for arts and crafts?

There are no right or wrong answers, but it is important to reflect on and consider why you have chosen a particular stance.

- ⇒ Should we be using food in play that will ultimately be wasted?
- ⇒ Is it ok to make playdough or to use pasta shapes for threading or for art?
- ⇒ Does playing with food encourage children to become more adventurous with their food choices and more used to different textures and smells?
- ⇒ Do the possibilities for learning outweigh the disadvantages or not?
- ⇒ Can we use food mindfully, e.g. re-using items or only using those past their sell by date?
- ⇒ What conversations might we have with children and families? Do we consider their views?

Educational Visits

There are a range of places that you can visit with children to help increase their understanding of where food comes from, shopping, farming and the natural environment.

These include:

- Trips to local shops or a supermarket.
- There may also be opportunities to see how food is prepared eg bread making, filleting fish.
- Involvement in a local community allotment.
- Visiting a farm or a harbour to see fishing boats.

What Are the Key Features of High-Quality Provision?

Practitioners in Falkirk have developed an approach to snack and lunch called Marvellous Mealtimes. Watch the video at this link <https://youtu.be/2ijJAnBCwDc> and consider some of the questions below.



Interactions

Some questions to consider:

- ⇒ Are snack and mealtimes calm and unhurried?
- ⇒ Do practitioners have time to sit with children and chat?
- ⇒ Do children have opportunities to choose who they sit beside?
- ⇒ Are snack and mealtime experiences enjoyable and fun?
- ⇒ Are practitioners aware of the range of learning across the curriculum that can take place and do they observe and plan responsively and intentionally to build upon those experiences?

Experiences

Some questions to consider:

- ⇒ Are the routines for children relaxed and unhurried?
- ⇒ Do they promote independence and choice?
- ⇒ Do children have opportunities to develop life skills, including using cutlery, setting and clearing the table, serving themselves, working together?
- ⇒ Are snack and mealtimes linked to other experiences such as planting and growing, cooking, and visits outwith the setting?
- ⇒ Do all children have the opportunity to bake and cook? How do you include children with a range of needs?



Spaces

Some questions to consider:



- ⇒ Are the spaces for eating, homelike and attractive?
- ⇒ Have the spaces been planned with children?
- ⇒ Is there space for children to move and be comfortable?
- ⇒ Are chairs, highchairs and tables of an appropriate height?
- ⇒ Are real cooking utensils, metal child sized cutlery, china plates and glasses or cups provided?
- ⇒ Are there opportunities to eat and cook outdoors?
- ⇒ Do children with additional support needs have suitable equipment (eg. chairs, cutlery, cups) to enable them to eat safely and take part in snack and mealtimes with their peers?

Self-Evaluation

It is important to self-evaluate your provision on an ongoing basis so that you can be sure that you are meeting the needs of all the children in your setting.

The following case studies are from a range of settings from across SEIC.

Case Study One: Ormiston Nursery, East Lothian

Snack

Snack is served in the Nursery playroom as a rolling snack. Children sit along the counter which is at children's height and is right below the adult kitchen counter. At one end of the counter is the serving station where children refer to the snack chart to choose their snack and count the number of snacks on offer - thus providing rich numeracy experiences as children practice 1:1 correspondence counting and recognising numerals.



At the other end of the counter we have a washing up station for the children to wash up their utensils, this promotes independence and self-help skills. We have a basin of soapy water and brush, the children are encouraged to wash their utensils and then put onto a draining rack.

Children are encouraged to take their snack name card off the wall and put it into the red (sad) or green (happy) pots to vote on what they thought about the snack. We use this to evaluate our snack menu and make changes if necessary.



The staff member on snack helps support the self-serve process but also supports the children to wash up and create a lovely social experience through social conversation and praise. Regularly throughout the year we sit down with the children and discuss and change the snack menu appropriately in line with *Setting the Table*.



Children also get the opportunity individually to help write the shopping list weekly and choose fruits/vegetables for order. Children are supported with the staff member to choose foods from the snack book and practice writing it out. We often do regular floorbook pages for snack documenting the children's voice and experiences.

We try to bake once a week with each cohort of children. We have child friendly knives, aprons etc and we practice different skills e.g pouring, mixing, grating etc. Children help to set up for snack with tasks including - chopping up fruit/vegetables for snack, sticking up the snack names, baking for snack, cleaning up etc.

Case Study Two: Forrest Kindergarten, Edinburgh

Snack & Lunch

Forest kindergarten staff plan snack according to children's preference, seasonal foods, and nutritional guidance. Children are encouraged to help with the preparation of snack. The adult supervises and supports children to handle food safely and follow good hygiene practices. Adults sit at the table with children to be able to support them if needed. Children are encouraged to wash their own cup/dish/plate in warm water following snack. All snack dishes are then taken to nursery for hot wash and brought back for use the following day. Lunch dishes are sent back to kitchen to get washed and return with next day lunches in sealed boxes.

Sustainability



We forage for seasonal food, for example Wild Garlic, Leek, Brambles, or Dandelions. Children are also involved in preparing dishes with gathered food such as Garlic Bread. We discuss sustainability and safety around food foraging with children and parents. The Forest Kindergarten rules for sustainable forage are to "if there is a lot take a little, if there is a little leave", only pick foods under adult supervision and always wash carefully under running water what you found.



Staff attend CLP to gain knowledge and confidence around edible foods. We only pick what we are 100 % sure about!!!! Sustainability is strongly written within our ethos. On some Forest Kindergarten sites children are involved in planting vegetables, fruits and herbs. They are involved in harvesting and cooking with these from garden to table. We grow our own onions, potatoes, strawberries, corn, chives, rosemary any many other herbs.

Health & Safety

During forest kindergarten sessions, food will be prepared on clean, dry surfaces. Cable drums or foldable picnic tables are used, covered with a clean PVC tablecloth (marked food on underside) and wiped with antibacterial spray and a clean cloth.

A tarpaulin roof is created above the snack/lunch area to provide cover from rain, bird/animal droppings and a fly screen/lidded boxes are used to protect prepared food from flies and other insects. Drinking water is available and the drinking water container is filled daily and clearly labelled. It is emptied at the end of the day and stored in clean snack box with lid. The water container is hot washed in the dishwasher at nursery once a week.

Hot water is stored in large vacuum flasks and is kept away from children's reach.



Case Study Three: Wiggly Worms Day Nursery – Borders



Learning at Lunch time!

At Wiggly Worms Nursery, we wanted to create a mealtime that was enjoyable and relaxing for the children. We get the best out of our children when they are comfortable within their surroundings and have a well embedded routine, so getting lunchtime right was a high priority.



We used 'Setting the Table', our nursery ethos, children's own voices, parents/carers views, and the knowledge from our key workers to help plan the menu.

Key workers are allocated to tables and children are familiar with the routine of seating. Children share out the crockery and cups and use small tongs when choosing the food they would like. Children with dietary requirements have individual placemats so staff and children are aware of their allergies and intolerances. All children are aware of allergies and can talk about why some children eat different food.

Lunch is always food that children can choose and help themselves to. For example, if there are sandwiches, there are always at least two fillings and children can build their own sandwich. Children are encouraged to share dishes and drink jugs around the table and are also encouraged to think about how they need to share the quantities of food amongst the table. We finish by tidying up our rubbish and stacking our dirty dishes on the trolleys and then clean our teeth. Children support their friends well and are very independent in the whole lunch process.



Children express likes and dislikes of food during lunch time which key workers respond to by ensuring there is another choice available, as well as checking in with parents/carers to help form suggestions for future lunch times. Children are included in meal ideas when menu changes are needed. This is supported by presenting children with photos and questions to help them express their likes and dislikes.

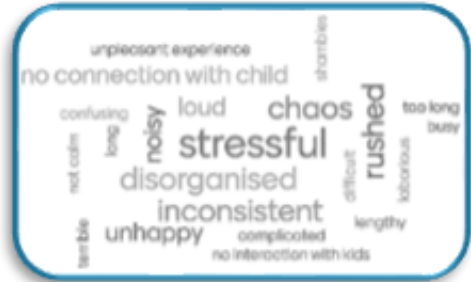
Before starting our journey, mealtimes were a stressful part of the day. Children were disengaged and noisy. Children focussed on foods they didn't like and we had more food wastage than ever before. As we have wiggled along our journey, children are now trying new foods and eating much larger quantities. They are engaged for long periods of time in conversations with both key workers and their friends around the table. Children and staff are comfortable with the new routine and clearly enjoy their lunchtimes.

Case Study Four: Newtongrange Primary ELC - Midlothian

Using the school dining hall

When we began offering full days, our lunches were served in two rooms within the nursery. However, this was not providing a quality experience for our children. ELC practitioners identified the experience as “stressful” and “rushed”. The children were not given the opportunity to be independent during lunch time and staff were not able to sit down and eat with the children as they were serving food.

There was agreement that lunchtimes needed to be a much more positive experience for both children and staff. After much discussion it was decided to split the children into two groups and move one group into the school dining room which is adjacent to the ELC. Key workers would support their individual groups through this change.



The younger children now stay within the ELC and the tables have tablecloths, centre pieces, tumblers and cutlery. Salad bowls are placed on the tables and children are able to serve themselves promoting their independence.

Practitioners were keen to replicate the ELC environment in the larger dining hall with the older children.

The dining room tables also have tablecloths and centre pieces with the cutlery in labelled jars in the centre of the table and the tumblers are set out on the table so as children can help themselves.

The ELC practitioners in both spaces, now sit and eat with the children and use this time to have calm, purposeful and meaningful conversations. We have noticed that the children are more independent and able to pour their own milk or water and serve their own salad and vegetables.



One of our concerns about using the dining hall was losing the children’s independence and ability to leave the table and return to their play when they had finished eating. However, the ELC and dining room are very close to each other, once a child has finished lunch they can go back through to the nursery. In addition, using the dining hall and welcoming ELC children into the school, has helped with transitions making the move from ELC to Primary 1 a more natural process.

ELC practitioners and children were asked how they felt about our new lunchtime routine and the general feeling was this is a much calmer, more relaxed and settled experience for all.

The lunch experience is now a lovely, homely and calm time with many opportunities for learning taking place.

Case Study Five: Lynburn Primary School Nursery - Fife

Improving our lunchtime experience

As part of our ongoing improvement work this session we identified a shared vision that aims to ensure all children experience a seamless and settled daily mealtime within a homely environment. To do this, we evaluated our current practice and created an action plan.

Spaces, Experiences and Interactions

Snack and lunch are usually served within our nursery playrooms. We have modified and extended the areas to facilitate accessible, relaxed and unhurried mealtime experiences. Recently, we introduced the option of having lunch indoors or outdoors.

We offer a self-served snack and a rolling lunch, offered buffet style to encourage children to view what is available and choose what they would like. It also encourages them to try different options. Some items, including fruit and veg, can be self-served which develops understanding of portion control and fine motor skills.

We encourage all our children to access the nursery lunches however we also consider how best to offer a similar mealtime approach for children who have packed lunches, we do this by ensuring packed lunches are plated and encourage children to select a couple of items to eat.

Our catering team support the delivery of the hot and cold meal options daily and nursery staff facilitate the organisation of this. Children are given the opportunity to set up for mealtimes, including setting the table and planning and organising the daily/weekly snack menu.



The nursery team are organised over mealtimes to ensure that additional staff are present to support social interactions, positive mealtime experiences and develop independence.

Children choose where to sit and independently organise themselves following routines supported by Boardmaker visuals and Signalong.

We recognise that our children benefit from smooth and seamless transitions, and we have considered how best to support this daily horizontal transition where we promote healthy eating behaviours that can last a lifetime.

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