

Europe, children and food^[1]

Editorial. An appetite for life: Young children, food and eating. Children in Europe, Issue 10, 2006

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Source: Children in Europe

Format: Periodical

Publication Date: 1 Mar 2006

AVAILABILITY

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Excerpts

The European Union's basic concern about food and catering, which includes nurseries and schools, is food safety and the quality of the foodstuffs. Crises arising from serious animal epidemics - such as mad cow disease, foot and mouth disease and bird flu - have influenced policies, with the main objective today being to protect health. With this concern for food safety, the EU started a major reform in 2000 that puts health and the consumer at the centre, and aims to increase the sense of responsibility of food producers at all stages of the food chain, from primary production to distribution and sale to consumers. This new European system of food safety, called "from the fields to the table", is founded on the principles of risk analysis, traceability of production and maximum transparency and information.

The European Food Authority, based in Parma in Italy, was founded in 2002. Its role is to give credibility to the new system and restore consumer confidence through independent and scientific guidelines formulated with maximum transparency by leading international experts.

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Controlling food safety with particular concern for catering

According to recent statistics, about 30 per cent of the population of industrially developed countries are affected each year by episodes of food poisoning. A growing number of cases are connected to eating outside the home, in restaurants and pizzerias for example, but also in canteens serving schools and workplaces. The objective of the EU's new food safety policy is to eliminate - or minimise - these risks, and it includes measures such as strengthening the systems for inspection and control of the food chain.

An EU Directive in 1993 on the subject of food safety draws no distinction between the various organisations dealing with food, treating large food companies and small catering companies or school canteens with the same rigour and rigidity. The Directive (and the associated regulations) led to national and local legislation about standards in all aspects of food preparation, including environments, equipment, procedures and the selection and training of workers. This had consequences for nurseries and schools. Some rather negative. It has become more difficult to create educational opportunities such as working with children in the kitchen or having parties to which parents contribute.

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Even building regulations have had a profound effect on the appearance of the premises, introducing precautions such as floor-to-ceiling tiling; while these are indispensable for industrial or commercial enterprises, this can be excessive in the case of a crèche or nursery school.

Prospects for the immediate future

The EU recently updated its legislation on food hygiene and control, in directive 852/2004 and associated regulations. This came into force on 1 January 2006. The good news is that in the future there should be more flexibility for the application of regulations, with individual caterers having greater autonomy in how they apply safety and hygiene rules. The European Commission has also recognized that in some sectors a more flexible approach is necessary.

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The Commission now emphasises that food safety is the most important objective, but points out that it is not the only aspect that has to be taken into consideration. In schools, in particular, the catering service fulfils other important tasks, educational and nutritional; it is essential to use this service as an educational opportunity and to guide food choices. The lunch eaten at school, replacing the lunch

traditionally eaten in the family, also assumes an important social value.

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It is certainly no longer the same situation as it was for cooks in the first Italian nurseries, who are now reaching retirement age and who remember when they used to do the shopping in local stores and prepared all the food, including filleting the fish. This is no longer the case because now the fish arrives at the kitchens already filleted and sliced. But removing the bones from the fish remains the symbol of the care with which the adult regarded the child.

'Taking out the bones' has to do with the attention necessary to ensure that food like fish, which may arouse fear and mistrust, can be prepared and made appetising. It means knowing that children will learn to eat a little of everything if food that may seem strange to them is prepared so as to make it safe and easy to eat. This is the fundamental guiding principle of preparing food for children and this depends on the sensitivity and competence of educators, including the cooks.

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