

Call for nursery menu guidelines to promote healthy lifestyles ^[1]

Report highlights that a fifth of children starting primary school in England are overweight

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EXCERPTS.

Children under five should be given nationally agreed meal menus when in regulated childcare to ensure they receive sufficient nutrition, according to a government-backed report.

Getting children to help lay tables, use knives and forks and behave sociably could also help cut the number of "fussy eaters" in later life, the Advisory Panel of Food and Nutrition in Early Years recommends.

The panel, established by the former Labour government, suggests a central bank of menu examples should be established to provide more detailed voluntary guidance on healthy, balanced food for babies and toddlers from the age of one until they go to school. Its report includes examples of menu plans, types of food to use and portion sizes.

The panel said there was "limited evidence" that children in nurseries, Sure Start centres or with childminders had diets with too much sugar and salt and not enough energy, fat, iron and zinc. It said some children moved between types of childcare in the day and were not always fed appropriately.

The report found that by the time children went to reception class at primary school in England more than a fifth were overweight or obese. Children generally did not eat recommended levels of fruit and vegetables, dental health was deteriorating and rickets and diabetes in children was increasing.

Under-fives in England are already expected to be provided with a balanced diet through meals, snacks and drinks, and fresh drinking water must be available at all times, but although advisers believe this has brought improvements, the devolved UK administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have more practical guidance. The panel says Ofsted, the children's services watchdog, should monitor developments.

It also suggests carers and teachers engage with parents and children in promoting healthy lifestyles and cooking and gardening skills.

Rob Rees - chairman of the School Food Trust, which established and managed the panel and is part-funded by the Department for Education - said: "One of the most important ways to help children to eat more healthily as they grow up - both at school and at home - is by getting them used to good food habits way before they reach reception class ... Ultimately, learning how to make healthy choices and to enjoy good food is essential for every child's health and just as important as learning how to read and write. It can never begin too early."

Sarah Teather, the children's minister, said: "It's important we help every child develop healthy eating habits early on that can last them a lifetime ... The panel's report is a valuable contribution on how best to support childcare providers in doing this."

There was support too from Michael Marmot, author of a report on health and wealth inequalities. "The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development - physical, intellectual and emotional - are laid in early childhood. What happens during these early years, starting in the womb, has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and well-being - from obesity, heart disease and mental health to educational achievement and economic status.

"Later interventions, although important, are considerably less effective if the child has not had a good early foundation. Spending on early years is therefore vital to ensure children are equipped with the control, for example, to make healthy eating and drinking choices."

But the Soil Association, which campaigns for organic food and farming, has said voluntary measures are not enough. "Mandatory standards for the quality of food served in all nurseries are required. These should restrict or forbid the same foods currently not permitted in schools, and should be based on established nutritional standards for young children," said Emma Hockridge, its head of policy.

-reprinted from The Guardian

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