

THE BACKGROUND

Having completed the first section of this award and confident that as a setting we were giving the children a healthy start in their lives, we now wanted to take it further to really focus on how we could improve the children's attitudes towards food and their active participation in food activities and meal times at nursery. We also wanted to explore how parents and families could be included in this holistic approach.

OUR FOCUS

COOKING.

Although we included cooking experiences into our planning and had been using the table top cooker to increase children's interactions, we noted that:

- Planning for cooking was sporadic and usually only done by certain members of staff so some children may be missing out
- The food that was being cooked was largely limited to basic fairy cakes
- Cooking activities could become disorganised and chaotic as children were waiting for their turn and so staff would choose not to implement them.

MEAL TIMES

We observed that:

- Again, meal times (including snack times) could be noisy, with children becoming bored and so resulting in unwanted behaviour.
- They became sessions to "get through" rather than enjoy with the children.
- Whilst some of the older children were able and were experiencing levels of independence, the younger children were still relatively "helpless" and being given food to them.

WHAT WE DID

COOKING

- Cooking activities were now timetabled so every week included a cooking time and all staff members shared the responsibility to ensure all children shared in the experiences.
- We purchased more cooking utensils and equipment so that all children could have their own bowl, their own rolling pin etc.
- We would weight/ share out ingredients to enable them all to have their own and so they could take ownership over their own bit of cooking.



"You need to be very careful using the grater. You might slice your finger!"



Having their own sets of equipment reduced waiting time and allowed the children to all take ownership of their own work.

- We implemented "themes" to our cooking so that children could build up a set of skills and knowledge, for example one term concentrating on bread making, another on pastry or vegetables as ingredients, so that the children could all know what they needed for each type of cooking.
- We looked at as many ways as possible for the children to become involved in their cooking and to extend their knowledge:
 - Providing child "reader friendly" recipes
 - Opportunities to use a wide variety of different utensils, such as cheese grater or potato peeler.
 - Going shopping for the ingredients, after writing our shopping lists.



Identifying numbers, words and pictures on our specially created menus; incorporating counting and developing techniques such as kneading dough.



Home learning

In order for us to share this with families, we not only sent home copies of the recipe cards (also posting the information for them to use on the web site) but also sent home ingredients to help them participate at home.

We were pleased that many parents then shared pictures with us of their home baking experiences that we recorded in learning journals:



"We've loved having these recipe ideas to share together at home. Jacob loved kneading and showed me how they did it at nursery!"

Island mango bread recipe



1/2 cup sour cream
4oz / 100gsm butter or margarine



4oz/ 100gsm caster sugar



1 teaspoon vanilla extract

2 teaspoons baking soda

2 eggs



2 ripe chopped mangoes



50gsm dessicated coconut



250gsm/ 9oz Self raising flour

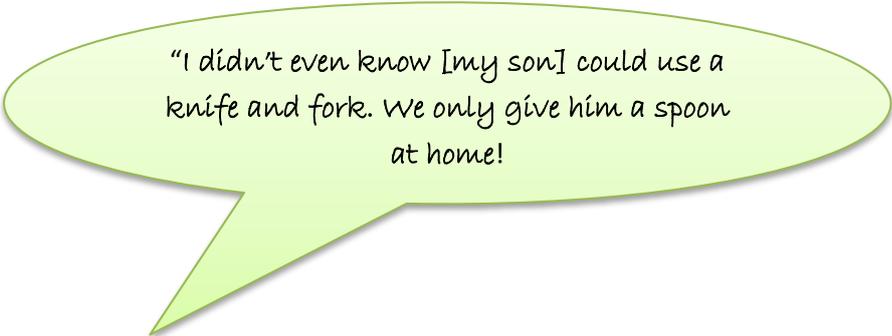
Mix cream, butter and then mangoes.
Add eggs, sugar, vanilla and coconut.
Mix flour and baking soda
Pour into a large loaf pan and bake at 180 C for approx 1 hrs

Our specially created recipe cards for the children to read.

Meal times

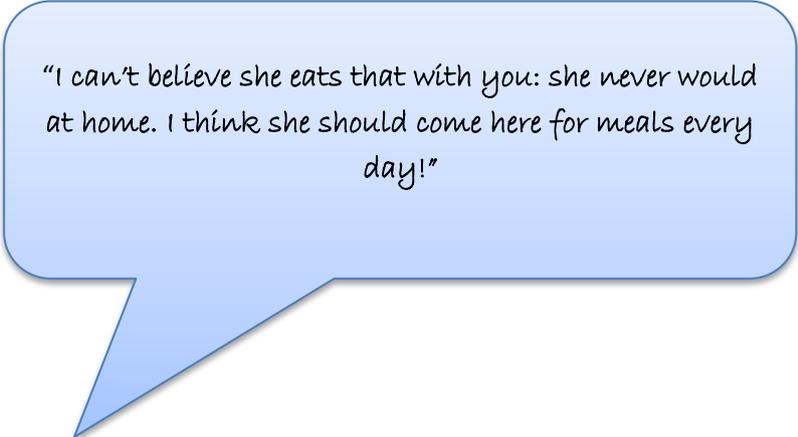
We had always served food at the tables but now wanted to see how we could ensure more involvement from the children so we implemented the following changes:

- We provided the food with serving spoons so the children could select and take their own food (whilst an adult was present to advise if they had too much or needed more vegetables!).
- Children were all given the appropriate cutlery and helped how to use it.



"I didn't even know [my son] could use a knife and fork. We only give him a spoon at home!"

- Snack times, and breakfast times were given thought to as well, so we found ways of the children:
 - each having their own piece of fruit to cut and prepare themselves
 - Other opportunities to prepare their own food, such as buttering bread
 - Baking/ cooking their own snack: such as pizzas, scones, pancakes or hummus.
 - Considering how we could make them learning opportunities and fun: such as having it around the camp fire in the garden or taking orders for each other.
- Meal times were split between age groups so adults could lend the appropriate level of support.



"I can't believe she eats that with you: she never would at home. I think she should come here for meals every day!"

Snack and meal times



We found opportunities to make all meal/ snack times more interactive: making our own pizzas, preparing batter for pancakes and having an indoor picnic



Children become independent with even the youngest serving and feeding themselves, using the correct cutlery

IN CONCLUSION

We all find that meal times and cooking activities are now more enjoyable for both adults and children.

- Conducting the 'Leuven' scales of observation at meal times, children's well being and involvement is much higher.
- Staff are now approaching meal times with a more flexible approach: for example acknowledging when one child has finished eating before the others and they are either allowed down from the table or given something else to occupy themselves with.
- Parents send us information and pictures of cooking they are doing at home with their children, even unprompted by menu cards.
- Children are developing a mastery over knowing what food is and how to prepare it: recognising the key ingredients and how to combine them.

Ultimately it is about responding to the children as individuals and listening to their needs; giving them the chance to learn things for themselves, rather than be "given it on a plate"!