

**Autonomy with Food:
How the social, emotional and physical environment may promote wellbeing
during mealtimes.**

Action research in a childminding setting.

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As part of the Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Years I was tasked with undertaking a research project in my childminding setting. As the project progressed, the significance of its impact became apparent to the extent that it is worth sharing with a wider audience. It is hoped that it may inspire other childminders and larger settings to examine the central theme: wellbeing during mealtimes.

Global issues

The early years of childhood are when dietary habits and food preferences are established so it is important for practitioners who feed children to understand the many factors that influence these and the potential long-term impact of how we approach this task. The way humans eat is linked with wide-ranging social, environmental and health issues. Global problems such as health, poverty and climate change are inextricably connected to how food is produced and consumed. These issues are rife with stark juxtapositions. For example, there are thought to be 795 million people in the world without adequate food, whilst conversely there are an estimated 600 million obese adults and a further 41 million obese or overweight children (World Food Programme, 2016; World Health Organisation, 2016). The problems arising from obesity and malnutrition, including diabetes, stroke and cardiovascular disease, are predicted to place increasing strain on healthcare systems around the world (World Health Organisation, 2016; NHS Choices, 2011).

Another global issue associated with the way we eat is the demand, production and waste of food. There is mounting evidence connecting food profligacy in the Global North with poverty in the Global South. In the UK, for example, millions of tons of food are discarded each year (Waste and Resources Action Programme, 2016; Stuart, 2009). Over-demand of food in wealthy nations leaves poorer parts of the world unable to feed their own populations (Stuart, 2009). This imbalance also has a significant negative impact on the environment through unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions, over-production of packaging, over-use of natural resources such as water and the clearance of diverse ecosystems for growing monocultures such as soya (*ibid*). Ultimately, scientists predict this will impact negatively on the long-term sustainability of global food production (Stuart, 2009; Baird, 2006).

The significant of early childhood education and care

It is during the early years of childhood that life-long attitudes and habits with food are established. Thus, early years settings have a key role to play in addressing the wide-ranging environmental, economic, social and health issues that are associated with food (Children's Food Trust, 2015; Atik & Ertekin, 2013). The key concepts that support children in this area are complex and interconnected. Practitioners must have a sound understanding of nutrition, but emotional, social and cultural factors are significant too (Wilson, 2015). As children are situated in unique contexts, there is value in exploring the emotional, social and cultural factors through small-scale research that is led by practitioners (Brown, 2016; Walker & Solvason, 2014).

The project

In my childminding setting I felt that food provision had some areas of strength. With my strong understanding of nutrition, all meals were homemade from scratch using ethical and sustainably produced ingredients. Parents often cited this as an area of strength for the setting. However, I felt that some children experienced mealtimes as stressful, so I set out to investigate and make changes. Using Leuven wellbeing scales, data was collected which highlighted that while overall wellbeing levels during mealtimes were not low, there was room for improvement. Furthermore, a small number of children consistently experienced mealtimes as stressful.

Additionally, I sought the views of fifteen childminders through questionnaires. Childminders reported on their experience of what promoted or inhibited children's wellbeing during mealtimes.

Following extensive reading and attending relevant training sessions, I introduced the following changes with the view of increasing children's autonomy and wellbeing during mealtimes:

- Children began taking responsibility for preparing the lunch environment with a strong focus on aesthetics (setting the table and creating centrepieces).
- A self-service model was introduced so that children served food onto their own dishes.
- Children began helping with menu planning.
- Children were invited to participate in weekly 'Experimental Cookery' sessions.
- More time was allowed for mealtimes, making this a central part of each session.

Four weeks after the changes were introduced, further wellbeing observations were conducted in order to assess whether there had been an improvement in children's experience of mealtimes. The findings show that there is likely to have been a

positive impact on each of the children who participated. The key outcomes of the research are summarised below:

- **Improved wellbeing:** All children experienced an increase in wellbeing levels. The children with the lowest wellbeing experienced the biggest increase following the changes that were implemented. Thus, the wellbeing gap between the highest and the lowest children was diminished.
- **The social and emotional environment:** Childminders cited a range of factors that can be characterised as relating to the social and emotional environment during mealtimes. The most common reference was to the absence of 'pressure' (pressure to try new foods, pressure to make a clean plate or time pressure). Childminders recognised that applying pressure to children reduced wellbeing during mealtimes. Similarly, childminders also cited coercion and bribery related to desserts as problematic. The action research reflected this as children responded positively to serving their own portions and the allocation of more time for meals. Childminders cited the importance of adults and children sitting together, eating the same food and interacting during mealtimes as a key factor in promoting wellbeing. Literature on this subject indicates that children prefer eating in family-style mealtimes (in small groups where children and adults sit together and with an atmosphere of care). Childminders are ideally placed to offer this kind of experience. As the project progressed and children's wellbeing levels improved, interaction during mealtimes increased.
- **Autonomy and choice:** Closely connected with the emotional environment, childminders recognised the importance of the child's autonomy and frequently cited 'choice' with food as being key to promoting wellbeing. The project focused strongly on this aspect, with the changes that were introduced focusing on autonomy. This appeared to contribute to the overall more relaxed atmosphere during mealtimes. In particular, the children appeared to thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to engage in 'Experimental Cookery' sessions and this seems to have played a role in boosting children's confidence, familiarity and sense of autonomy with food.
- **Symmetry, order and beauty:** The aesthetic environment, routine and ritual emerged as being more significant than I had anticipated. Children appeared to relish the opportunity to create beautiful centrepieces with flowers, candles and items found in the outdoor environment. They also enjoyed setting out plates, cutlery etc. A few childminders cited routine and ritual as important in promoting wellbeing, such as giving thanks for the meal, lighting a candle or singing a song together before the meal began.

While the project cannot be generalised, it does highlight that there may be value in early years settings scrutinising mealtime practices and perhaps bringing about positive changes that are uniquely suited to the children in their care. In my setting,

the project was an empowering and positive experience for all participants which has been the foundation for other improvements, such as introducing a dedicated allotment area for growing food on site.

To find out more please contact Millie Colwey on millie-colwey@live.co.uk.

Recommended reading:

First Bite: How we Learn to Eat. By Wilson (2015).

The Languages of Food: recipes, experiences, thoughts. By Cavallini & Tedeschi (2008).

Recommended training:

Experimental Cookery at Redcliffe Children's Centre

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