

Level up: delivering nutritious nursery meals

Eating habits during the early years of a child's life really matters when it comes to lifelong health. NMT speaks with **Charlotte Stirling-Reed**, baby and child nutritionist about food innovation and her partnership with nursery catering company, Zebedees



What we eat can play a critical role in determining our health, whatever our age. Therefore, the food patterns established during the first few years of a child's life are critical and influence the relationship they will have with food in the future.

The amount of time that children spend in childcare has increased and parents are navigating their way through different working models and access to childcare.

That means that, at nursery, many children are getting the majority of their meals so settings play an important role in delivering the right nutrition.

Charlotte Stirling-Reed is a child nutritionist and a registered nutritionist with the Association for Nutrition as well as being an author.

Earlier this year, Stirling-Reed joined forces with Zebedees to collaborate on menu development and to help raise awareness of the importance of healthy infant nutrition.

Detail your background and your passion for child nutrition?

"My interest started during my childhood growing up with parents who loved food and cooking, and my mum was really interested in nutrition so when I went to university it was very easy to decide what I was going to do. I studied human biology and nutrition combined.

"Post university I carried on further with the nutrition side and did a masters in nutrition and public health which was really fascinating.

"After University, I was lucky to get a job within the NHS which was incredible. Essentially, I have worked in other areas with adults, but I have always come back to child nutrition and my career has really focused on that area, it's where my passion lies".

Why does child nutrition need more recognition?

"Early years is where it all begins with the development of eating patterns, so it is an incredibly important stage in a child's life. The variety of food and preferences is so relevant to the relationship with food that children will carry it through to adulthood.

"We know through research that nutrition is vital in early years and poor nutrition during these years is associated



with an increased risk of obesity, hypertension, diabetes and heart disease. Therefore, nursery providers have a key role to play in introducing children to a wide variety of foods and establishing a pattern of regular meals and healthy snacks".

So tell us, how has it been for you over the past 18 months?

"It's been an incredibly busy year. In and out of lockdowns with a new baby and working with Joe Wicks on his 'Wean in 15'. I have started working with a lot of new brands and published my book, so it has been a rollercoaster but amazing.

"Of course, the pandemic has had a lot of negative impacts on society. From my perspective and career, one of the biggest consequences was that new mums didn't have access to the services they needed to support them and their child. For example, many health care and midwife visits were postponed or cancelled and even being able to meet with other mums was limited.

"There really isn't any virtual replacement for these types of physical interactions but there is so much information online that more mums have been using and I've been able to reach more people virtually during the pandemic.

"Parents have really suffered during the pandemic, juggling work and young children and especially for new mums. I have been able to speak to so many parents over the last year and a half. The interaction has been so wonderful and there is almost this comradery amongst us all".

Why was Zebedees the right fit for you?

"When I focused my career on child nutrition, I really wanted to partner with a nursery supplier or setting and part of my work at the NHS was working with nurseries. However, I wanted to work more closely in that area. Many children spend most of the week in childcare and for some children, the majority of what they eat is consumed at nursery. If you can impact the nutritional intake at nurseries, more children will have a variety of foods in their diet.

"We've all seen the amazing work that Jamie Oliver did for schools with his school meals plan and that is my aim to do something similar with nursery nutrition because it can have a knock-on effect on children's food behaviour at home and when they start school.

"I've always known about Zebedees because they are very local to me. Randomly during the middle of lockdown they got in touch and I was thrilled. It has been a brilliant partnership and there is so much work we can do.

"Right now I'm working with Zebedees on future recipes and we are aiming to go above and beyond government guidelines. The guidelines are there as a basic standard but now we can do much more. The flexibility of Zebedees allows us all to share ideas and create new recipes. I'm very excited to see where the partnerships goes". ■