

Dinner date

One nursery group has made its food provision into a grand social occasion, as *Annette Rawstrone* hears

The staff at Treetops Nurseries are so proud of the food they serve to the children that they invited parents to join them for dinner.

Isabel Garvey, director of childcare, explains, 'All the nurseries cook the food on the premises from fresh ingredients. The nurseries use local ingredients and purchase them from butchers and greengrocers wherever possible. We thought it was something that we should be shouting about and that it would be lovely to invite the parents in to sample the food and experience dinnertime at their child's nursery.'

'We call it our five-star dining experience. The nurseries put fresh flowers on the tables and coloured tablecloths. The food is decanted into large dishes so the children can self-serve. Mealtimes are a big social occasion for the children. They help encourage manners and good behaviour and prepare them for moving on to school.'

All Treetops' 20 nurseries took part in the dining event. It was decided to just invite the parents of pre-school children, because it might be confusing and unsettling for the younger children to have their parents come for the meal and then leave. Dinner was such a success with parents, children and staff that the chain has decided to make it an annual event, with some nurseries already having repeated it for Christmas and Mother's Day.

ON THE MENU

Pre-school children at Treetops' Dudley nursery in the West Midlands made invitations for the parents, asking them to come in and sample the cooking. This had an overwhelming response, with at least one parent or grandparent attending for each child. They joined



them for a story and song while the food was being prepared and then sat together to enjoy chicken casserole followed by apple crumble and custard.

Nursery manager Karen Hemmings believes the event helped to further good relationships between the staff and parents, enabling them to chat in an informal and relaxed situation. It was a good opportunity to discuss healthy eating and to let the parents see their children enjoying nourishing food. Many of the parents chatted to the chef and asked for the recipes.

'They were able to see who the children's friends are and watch them interact with each other and with the staff,' says Ms Hemmings. 'The children were all very happy and chatted away. They were proud to have their parents attend. As soon as their parents walked in they showed them where they play and where to sit.'

Many of the parents were amazed to see how confident and independent their children were during the meal and said that they would encourage them to do likewise at home.

Deniece Pendlebury, manager of Carlton House Nursery, Irby in Merseyside, says, 'The children learn so much during mealtimes – social skills, for example turn-taking and table manners,



Everyone enjoyed the chat as well as the food at Dudley

and maths skills gained from laying out cutlery and selecting portions of food. There is also opportunity for language development with the children talking to each other and staff as they eat. The children gain great independence from serving themselves and deciding what and how much they want.

'Spending a lunchtime with their children only took an hour out of the parents' day, but everyone gained so much from the experience. The parents were able to see for themselves how much we encourage the children and how the nursery day is organised.' ■

PARENTS' COMMENTS

'I thought the lunch was lovely, and very organised! Lucas and Keegan both enjoyed the food. Lucas had three helpings! Thank you for inviting me.'

'Lovely experience getting to know the other children a bit better and to see everyone in their daily routine.'

'Good company, lovely meal. Compliments to the chef.'

'First, I would like to say what a wonderful idea it was to invite parents to lunch. Freddie was excited about it all week. It is lovely to see the lunchtime routine and how independent the children are at serving themselves. Compliments to Carol the cook, as the food was very enjoyable and of a high standard.'

'Lovely to be here with the children. Great food!'