Food for thought

Guest editor Ferruccio Cremaschi

Ferruccio Cremaschi, guest editor, Children in Europe

Childhood and food, taken together, are topical subjects. They lead us down many paths: nutrition, health, psychology, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, the economy... In editing this issue, I came across many significant issues. In choosing what to include, I put myself in the place of a child attending a nursery or school: what does meal time mean during the day? how important is it? how is it offered? what implication does it have for the child's overall development? I have also prioritised certain issues that I want to share with you.

Eating is a holistic process

Eating is not just about providing the necessary energy for daily activities. It is related to time, space, context and relations, and it involves all the senses. The sense of sight is involved, to appreciate the food that is offered, and evaluate the shapes, colours and arrangement of ingredients. The sense of touch is involved, to recognise the texture of the food, and distinguish between crispness and softness, between firm and liquid. The sense of smell is involved, to distinguish between different fragrances and aromas. The sense of taste is involved, to appreciate sweet, salt, spice, and bittersweet flavours. The sense of hearing is involved, to connect the contents of the dish with the sizzling of frying, the gurgle of a drink as it is poured out of a bottle. Above all memory is involved, through the appeal made by a dish to past experiences full of emotional meaning and warmth.

Desmond Morris relates food to the ancestral memory we have inherited from our farming and hunting forefathers. We choose food that has the colour of fruits and berries (yellow, orange and green) or meat and fish (red or white), and we refuse, despite the infinite technological possibilities, foods of other colours (who would willingly eat a blue sauce?). Entering an empty restaurant, we automatically choose to sit with our back to the wall for protection, experiencing the fear felt by our forebears of being robbed when dividing their prey in the open. These factors must be taken into consideration when we design areas where children can eat, so that they can feel secure and relaxed, avoiding bright lights, noisy plates and hard table surfaces.

Food has a social dimension

That eating is not only a response to a physical need, but has a shared, social dimension is also rooted in the ancestral memory. This is, of course, important in a nursery or school, where the child is a member of a wider group. The child does not eat alone. This experience is shared with other children, with whom different and new flavours are tried and different habits and preferences are compared. Eating means coming into contact with something other than yourself, with external material that is to become part of your body. There is a need for adequate time, comforting rhythms and the security given by the repetition of actions, including important rituals of preparation: you go and wash your hands, the table is laid; there are well understood rules to be observed, your place at the table is known.

Food is a complex process

The contents of the plate that children see before them is the result of a complex process, involving many political and technical choices. The organisa-tion of meals in nurseries or schools calls for the technical input of experts, such as paediatricians and nutritionists, to work out menus that, taking account of the seasons, guarantee a balanced supply of all the elements children need for their growth. Menus, too, need adapting to different medical, religious and ethnic requirements, and to the choices of the children themselves. The cooks then work to make the ingredients appetising and varied.

All this technical input should produce meals that are not only nutritious but are actually eaten. According to an estimate of the Italian National Institute for Nutrition, on average nearly half of school meals are wasted. A study to find out what is liked and what is not liked has led to the conclusion that it is important to relate food both to the gastronomic tradition of the country and to the cultural diversity of local families. This is only possible by involving children, teachers, parents, and all other stakeholders. In many regions in Italy, food education and cookery courses for parents are increasingly common, to inform them about the criteria adopted in providing school meals and to agree with them the most suitable menus.

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Attention to children's food can change the city

Increasing attention is being paid in many parts of Europe to the origins and quality of ingredients. An example is the city of Ferrara in northern Italy, recognized in March 2004 by the World Watch Institute as an international model of system ecology. Ferrara has included in its food supplies specification that produce has to be cultivated using organic techniques. This initiative is upheld by a system of control and support for producers, and combines respect for human health with environmental protection. Moreover, this initiative has started to modify the diet of a whole city because it has made organic products more widely available, as well as encouraging the spread of a culture that values this choice.

The child is always at the centre

Feeding children is never easy, either in the family or outside. Children have strong food likes and dislikes that adults do not always agree with, and they often refuse food. Their acceptance of food, their willingness to open up to the world which has to be 'tasted', is related to their trust of the adults offering them the food. And if getting children used to new tastes can be a struggle in the family, it can be even harder when children are outside the home.

From the pages that follow, the complexity of this issue of childhood and food emerges. There are many real problems, but in many cases solutions can be found and often come from the children themselves.

Let me finish by mentioning a minor episode, now widely quoted in Italy. In a small town in the region of Emilia Romagna, famous for culinary tradition and good eating, the local authority considered how best to meet the needs of children from different ethnic groups who attended its local schools. It introduced food like couscous in recognition of the culture of children from North African families, alongside traditional local foods such as cappelletti (pasta stuffed with meat, in a rich meat sauce). The mayor went to visit a nursery school at lunch time, and stopped to talk to a little boy who was not very convinced by the plate of couscous in front of him.

"Do you like the couscous, Mohammed?"

"The one my mummy makes is better," answered the little boy.

"She must have a special recipe."

"No, but my mummy makes a layer of couscous, one of cappelletti, one of couscous and another one of cappelletti..."

Mohammed's mother had created a dish that, while not gastronomically correct according to local traditions, was in practice providing a successful cultural synthesis. ■

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