

# Going vegan

With veganism increasing in popularity, what must settings know about providing a healthy plant-based diet, asks **Meredith Jones Russell**

**T**he number of vegan children is rising in the UK. No-one knows exactly how many there are, but the Vegan Society's most recent survey in 2019 found there were 600,000 vegans aged over 15 in the country, more than twice the number found in 2016; a quarter of them were aged between

15 and 24, and it is widely assumed that the number of vegan children is increasing sharply as well.

A survey in 2018 found that one in 12 British parents were raising their child as a vegan.

While a vegan diet for the under-fives can be an emotive topic, dietitians generally agree children can receive all the nutrition they need from meat- and dairy-free



## case study: Jigsaw Day Nurseries in Chester

'We would be stretching it to say we're a vegan nursery. In the food world there is such a strong feeling towards the vegan movement, in both a positive and a negative way. We want to be known as plant-based as that is much more representative of what we do,' says co-owner Stuart Taylor.

'While we don't use meat, fish or dairy, we do not do a comprehensive search to ensure all our materials and resources are animal-product-free. We are just trying to feed children really healthy food which happens to be great for the environment too.'

The owners consulted nutritional guidelines and qualified dietitians while planning their menus.

'There was a unanimous feeling that providing we had well-thought-out, well-planned menus, a plant-based diet could more than sufficiently meet requirements at all stages of the lifecycle,' Stuart says. 'We quickly realised

there is no such thing as a perfect day or a perfect meal. You should really evaluate your food over the course of the week at least. You might have a day where you're particularly protein-focused, for example.'

Vegan families welcome that their children are getting a specially designed menu, but Stuart estimates that 99 per cent of children attending are carnivores. 'Parents like the fact that their children eat healthy food every day, even if it's not what they personally choose as a lifestyle,' he says.

The nursery does not push any particular agenda, however. Stuart says, 'We are based in a rural area with many parents from farming communities, and they were conscious we might be scaring children, but that has never been the case. The only thing we talk to the children about is vegetables, growing, and the benefits of healthy food. We just put healthy, tasty food in front of them every day and they enjoy it.'

### FURTHER INFORMATION

- British Dietetic Association: <https://www.bda.uk.com>
- NHS advice: <https://bit.ly/3nA9BQE>
- Childhood nutrition guides reviewed by a paediatric dietitian: <https://www.vegansociety.com/nutrition>
- First Steps Nutrition Trust guide: <https://bit.ly/3hyqvLM>
- The Vegan Society's Catering for Everyone campaign: <https://bit.ly/3CeCVQF>

food. 'A vegan diet is sustainable and can, with careful planning, advice and a little supplementation, provide a healthy, balanced diet,' says Clare Thornton-Wood, spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association (BDA).

Andrea Rymer, a dietitian at the Vegan Society, says a plant-based diet can be actively beneficial, especially when it comes to combating childhood obesity.

'Childhood nutrition is a public health concern, with many children in the UK not eating enough fruit and veg and consuming too much saturated fat and sugar, so it is reassuring to know that children can thrive on a vegan diet, and introducing them to a wide variety of plant foods can help them establish healthy eating habits for life,' she says.

### HEALTHY BALANCE

The NHS recommends that vegan adults and children should:

- eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day
- base meals on potatoes, bread, rice, pasta or other starchy carbohydrates (choosing wholegrain where possible)
- have some dairy alternatives, such as low-fat and low-sugar soya drinks and yoghurts



- eat beans, pulses and other proteins
- choose unsaturated oils and spreads, and eat in small amounts
- drink plenty of fluids (six to eight cups or glasses a day).

A sound understanding of nutrition will help inform these choices. 'It is important to ensure a balance of nutrients, including macronutrients such as protein, carbohydrate and fat, and micronutrients such as calcium and iron,' says Clare. 'Be aware that it is fairly easy for a vegan diet to be quite high in fibre compared to other diets due to the use of lentils and pulses, so consider adding fat sources such as vegetable oil (rapeseed is particularly good as it is a source of omega 3) or smooth nut butters.

'Nutrients to pay particular attention to are protein, calcium, iron, Vitamin B12, omega 3 and iodine.'

For young children, particularly when weaning, there are further, specific considerations to ensure all nutritional needs are being met.

While the main source of milk up to one year of age should be breastmilk or infant formula, plant-based milks can be used on cereal and in cooking from six months of age, according to the BDA.

'Nurseries should aim to use a plant-based milk that is fortified

with calcium at the very least, and ideally with other vitamins and minerals such as vitamin D, calcium, B vitamins and iodine,' Clare advises. 'Be aware that not many are fortified with iodine, and the levels are low and will not meet the full requirements.'

Iodine supplements are likely to be needed, which a healthcare professional should be consulted on. Clare adds that meat substitutes are unsuitable for young children due to the levels of salt and fat.

## FIRST FOODS

Key considerations around first foods suggested by Andrea include:

- offering iron-rich options with a good source of vitamin C
- using unsweetened and plain fortified alternatives to milk and yoghurt from the age of one, apart from rice milk
- including less bulky, nutrient-dense options, such as white rice and pasta, quinoa, or seeds
- offering a rich source of omega 3 fat daily, such as ground flaxseed stirred into porridge, and considering microalgae supplementation.

She adds, 'Vitamin A can be supported without animal products by providing a rich source of carotenoids daily, such as carrots or sweet potato. There are many plant-based sources of iron and zinc, like beans, chickpeas, lentils and tofu, and iron absorption can be boosted by including a rich source of vitamin C, such as pepper, broccoli, cabbage or mango.'

For nurseries with many vegan children, or considering a switch to vegan menus, Andrea says a full understanding of all these early nutritional needs is vital. 'It's important for everyone to learn about balancing food groups, as well as the roles of fortified foods and supplementation,' she says.

Stuart Taylor, co-owner of plant-based Jigsaw Day Nurseries in Chester, says a vegan approach should not be that different from any meal plans for children.

'People often suggest you have to really plan a plant-based diet to provide all the right nutrients,' he says, 'but my argument would be that you have to really plan any diet to make it effective. If you're a carnivore, and you don't think about what you're eating, you'll pay the price eventually from a health perspective too.' ■

# Cookery corner

approximately 4–6 people

## CHILLI SIN CARNE

At Jigsaw Day Nurseries, this popular dish provides the opportunity to talk about vegetables, growing produce and the benefits of healthy food.

The nutritional value of lentils and beans is also a great talking point as children begin to identify their different tastes.



PHOTO: JIGSAW DAY NURSERIES

## Ingredients

- 500g mushrooms
- 1 large white onion
- 1 stick of celery
- Half a red, green and yellow pepper
- 3 garlic cloves or 3tsp of garlic puree
- 2tbsp tomato puree
- 2tbsp tomato paste
- 2tsp paprika
- 1tsp cocoa powder (dark)
- 1tsp mild chilli powder
- 1tsp dried coriander
- 1tbsp Marmite
- 400g tin green lentils
- 400g tin black beans/kidney beans
- 400g tin borlotti beans
- 400g tin cannellini beans
- 2 x 400g tins chopped tomatoes
- 1tbsp BBQ sauce
- 250ml good quality veg stock

## Method

- Peel, chop and prep onion, celery, garlic and peppers.
- Fry onion, celery and garlic for 5-8 mins.
- Meanwhile, blend mushrooms in a food processor.
- Add blended mushrooms and peppers to the onion mix and fry for a further 5-8 mins.
- Add tomato puree and stir for 1 min.
- Add all dried spices and stir for 1 min.
- Add chopped tomatoes, tomato paste and BBQ sauce and stir for 1 min.
- Add Marmite and stir for 1 min.
- Add lentils and beans and stir for 1 min.
- Add stock, bring to the boil then turn down heat and simmer for 20-30 mins to reduce stock, thicken sauce and let the flavours blend.
- Serve with rice, jacket potato or crusty bread.

Feel free to vary the vegetables. Go seasonal or use up leftovers in the fridge such as spinach or fresh tomatoes to bring extra flavour and nutrition to the dish. You can also mix up the beans – any combination works well.

Recipe courtesy of Jigsaw Day Nurseries in Chester