
Food Restrictions and Allergies— Feeding Our Children Well

— Zoë Rothfuss

Today's children are incarnating into an environment that is ever more hostile to healthy growth and development. The sensitive digestive system of the young child may be overwhelmed both by exposure to toxins and to sensory overload. In his article, "The Doctor Speaks — Allergic reactions, Observation and Encountering Outer Stress," anthroposophical physician Philip Incao states, "an allergic reaction is what happens in our body when we encounter an outer stress which exceeds our capacity to process it, to digest it and to neutralize it."

The needs of today's children are often different from those of the children of even one generation ago, and nutritional needs are no exception. In our striving to offer a nurturing and supportive education, we must consider the manifold needs of the children coming to us and adopt an attitude which is open to new ideas and practices. As early childhood teachers, we are called upon to reexamine our accustomed ways of doing things, including the ways we feed the children. Let us remain aware, as Rudolf Hauschka writes in *Nutrition: A Holistic Approach*, that "humanity today does not need rules but knowledge and insight; not fixed traditions, but the development of new capacities" (page 299).

Meeting the challenge

There are many ways in which teachers and schools can work with food restrictions. We can choose to serve only foods that everyone in a given group can eat safely and happily. We can choose to offer substitute foods to those children who require them, which can or cannot closely mirror the quality and appearance of the "typical" food. The allergy-friendly food might be lovingly prepared at school or home or purchased.

How we choose to work with restrictions can depend on several factors. If there is a life-threatening allergy in the class, it would be prudent to completely eliminate this food from the classroom. If the sensitivities are not as serious, we can consider the following questions: How important is it to me to serve a particular food that not all of the children



can tolerate? Is there a snack that I can offer to all of the children that offers good nutrition? How can I maintain simplicity and ease of preparation? How does an alternative food fit into my budget? How can the children participate in the preparation of this particular snack?

Choosing what to feed the children is not a trivial matter: snack time is an essential part of our kindergarten day, during which the senses of life, touch, warmth, taste, and smell are nourished. Rudolf Steiner urged in *Theosophy and Rosicrucianism*, "Everything which the child perceives through his sense organs must be considered deeply and thoroughly" (Lecture 5).

The young child dreamily lives in the realm of sense perception, will-based imitation, and oneness

with the environment. It is essential that the child experience the world as a place full of goodness. Based on this understanding of child development, I believe that the best choice in the classroom is to serve the entire class the same food, so that it can be eaten by all.

Experience in my classroom has led me to this conclusion. At one time we had two types of butter for our (gluten free!) bread: regular dairy butter and a non-dairy spread. Although I attempted to be as unobtrusive as possible in serving the different butters, the children certainly noticed that there were two different jars on the tray. Many children piped up to request the type of butter they weren't being offered, announced that they can eat cow butter now, compared what type they were eating with their neighbor, shared that cow milk hurts so-and-so's tummy, and so on. It was clear that the conversation about food restrictions and limitations was one that these children had been hearing at home. So my attempt to be nonchalant and not draw attention to the different types of butter didn't work--the children were already aware that some foods hurt some people.

This led me to ponder how the inclusion of a forbidden food on the snack table affected the children and the group. The entire situation seemed to work against many of the principles we are trying to support and nurture: the children were becoming awakened to differences among the group, the question arose of some food being "bad," and the focus shifted from brotherly sharing and sensory enjoyment to individualistic differentiation and cerebral rumination. Wendy Cook writes in *Foodwise*, "Mealtimes can provide an enduring experience of a real sense of well-being and community, of vitality and connectedness to nature, or the opposite, of alienation, restriction, lack of care."

Ideally, snack time nurtures the physical organism of the child, and promotes a healthy life sense; we can view snack time as an essential foundation for developing a healthy social life. As Christopher Clouder wrote for the Fundación Marcelion Botin Report in 2008, "In western societies the drift to greater individualism raises the question of the future social coherence and sustainability. The increase in . . . fragmentation places new emotional strains on a child, faced with feelings of insecurity and risk over which they are powerless." ("Social and Emotional Education. An International Analysis" page 25).

I believe that the simplest solution to the food restriction question is to ensure that our daily snacks and festival foods meet the dietary needs of all the children in the group. This is in alignment with Steiner's admonishment, "It is very important to let nothing happen in the little child's environment . . . which the child cannot rightly absorb and make its own." (*The Etheric Heart*, Dornach, May 26, 1922). Accepting the needs of the children in our care and seeking a way to meet those needs embodies a spirit of love, respect, and conscious awareness of the other. Let's consider expanding the protected space we offer children to include a place in which all the food is healthy for everyone.

As is always the case in our work with the children, clear communication with parents and an openness to understanding is essential to navigating these challenges. For parents, figuring out which foods are safe and healthy for their children, and which are truly harmful, can present a bewildering puzzle, with different "experts" offering wildly different advice on what constitutes a healthy diet. Dr. Hauschka wrote, "in earlier times, people had a healthy instinct for what was good for them . . . now the time has come for guidance and instinct to be replaced by knowledge. However, striving for knowledge exposes the seeker to error, on the one hand, and to dogmatism on the other. This explains why chaos reigns in knowledge—and in nutrition—today" (Hauschka, page 17). Perhaps the best that parents can do is be conscientious observers of their children and to employ the spiritually-guided instinctual knowledge that can come with a deep commitment to truly seeing and understanding the other.

Festivals

Festivals are beautiful moments in the course of the year in which the community comes together in celebration. Across cultures, food is a central feature of festival life. In the Waldorf early childhood movement, one of our fundamental intentions is to welcome children and their families with a gesture of open-heartedness. We strive to create festival experiences which are inclusive, offer experiences which are universally meaningful, and to recognize and honor the unique needs and gifts of each individual. As Nancy Foster so eloquently put it in *The Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood*, the



“realities of our school communities present us with a context that challenges and inspires us to re-examine some of our cherished festival traditions in order to welcome and include fully every child and family.”

When preparing a festival that will be celebrated in the classroom, such as a birthday, it is ideal to involve the children in as much of the preparation as possible, including creating a special festival food. This participation in purposeful work increases the joyful anticipation of the festival, and promotes a sense of contribution in the children. As Gerhard Schmidt wrote in *The Essentials of Nutrition*, “Everything brings health, which causes people to make themselves a center of creativity and production.”

In the case of school-wide festivals, I advocate for one lovingly and intentionally prepared alternative that is as similar as possible to the festival food being enjoyed by the majority, and which meets the needs of all those with food restrictions. Preparing an allergen-free treat for the entire student and parent body could be overly difficult and expensive.

Practical Considerations

It can seem intimidating to begin working with unfamiliar ingredients. And let us not forget, according to Rudolf Steiner’s *Essentials of Education*, that we are called upon to serve a snack which is delicious and satisfying, without being overly complicated in its flavors: “the child is conscious of taste . . . deeper down in its organism; its organ of taste extends, as it were, over a large part of the body” (Lecture 1, 15). Unpalatable foods with poor textures are not a necessary evil of working with food restrictions!

In my classroom, I strive to offer a daily snack which can be universally shared by all of the children. Traditional kindergarten snacks are centered around grains. Luckily, there are a wide variety of grains that are naturally free of gluten and well suited to being cooked into a porridge-type dish: rice, millet, corn grits, oats, even teff. If there is a child in your group whose family does not eat grains, they may find the “pseudograins” quinoa, amaranth, and buckwheat acceptable. All grains have increased digestibility when soaked in clean filtered water overnight with a tablespoon or so of lemon juice or vinegar, then drained and rinsed the next day (I do not drain oats, but simply cook them in the soaking water). Experiment with serving these grains either savory or sweet, as you would rice or oatmeal.

It is important to include sources of fat, protein, and complex carbohydrates in our snacks. Fresh or cooked vegetables, including roots, stalks, leaves, and fruits are also an essential component of a well-rounded meal! Some allergen-free sources of proteins include: seeds, ground seed-butters (or nuts and nut-butters where allowable), nutritional yeast, legumes like lentils or chickpeas, and bean dips. Healthy fats include virgin coconut oil, coconut milk, coconut butter, avocados, olive oil, nuts and seeds, and ghee (some children who cannot tolerate dairy are able to consume ghee, as all of the milk proteins have been cooked out).

When working with gluten-free flours, proper measuring is important for consistent results. Weighing out the amounts with a kitchen scale is the most foolproof method. However, in the recipes below, I used the “scoop and level” method: scoop a small dry measuring cup into the bag of flour, without packing it down, and gently level the top. In an effort to make the recipe more user-friendly, the

cake recipe simply calls for an entire bag of flour. If your school participates in bulk orders for grains, it is often possible to order gluten-free flours in larger quantities for a lower price. Amazon and other online retailers also offer discounts when buying flours in bulk. Flours should be stored in a cool, dark place such as the freezer or a cabinet.

Ground flax or chia seeds offer a solution when a binding agent is needed in baked goods, and whole psyllium husks (available in the supplement area of natural foods stores, or through bulk orders) add a bouncy quality to yeasted breads that allows them to be kneaded. Commercial gluten-free “mixes” contain xanthan gum and leavening agents in addition to the flours. Be sure to check ingredients, as some gluten-free baking mixes contain powdered milk. Xanthan gum is a blending and binding agent which can irritate some people’s digestion; ground flax meal generally works as a substitute.

In our classrooms, we are striving to create an atmosphere of inclusion, joy, sharing, and warmth. I believe that our intention to offer the best possible environment to young children necessitates the full and careful consideration of how we meet their nutritional needs. Have fun trying out these recipes, and I hope they bring the children in your care joy and nourishment!

Birthday Cake Ring

Makes one standard size ring or Bundt cake

Preheat oven to 325 degrees

Allow the children to “ice skate” with their fingers to oil the pan with coconut oil

Place in the oven, in a heat-proof measuring cup or bowl:

- 1/2 cup coconut oil

Place in a large measuring cup:

- 2 1/2 cups very ripe bananas (approximately 5-7)

Mash the bananas with a whisk, fork, or potato masher.

Add to the measuring cup:

- 1/2 cup maple syrup

Just be sure that the level of wets in your measuring cup (bananas plus syrup)



equals 3 cups. A little more syrup and less banana, or vice versa, is fine.

Add to the wets and whisk to combine:

- 1 t vanilla extract

In a large bowl, combine:

- 3 3/4 cups (16 oz) gluten-free flour blend

(I recommend the Trader Joe’s GF flour: it comes in a pink bag and this recipe simply uses the entire bag of flour)

- 2 t baking powder
- 1 t sea salt
- 1 T cinnamon/pumpkin pie spice
- 2 t flax meal

Mix the wet ingredients into the dries

Finally, add the melted coconut oil. The coconut oil will solidify into chunks if the ingredients in your bowl are cold, so it is best to pour the coconut oil in a steady stream while stirring.

Transfer the batter (it will be thick) to the prepared pan, and smooth the top.

Bake for 40-50 minutes, or until the top springs back when lightly pressed.

Allow to cool for 10 minutes in the pan, then turn out onto a plate.

We like to garnish our cake with fresh herbs and/or edible flowers from the garden, and serve with fruit and/or whipped coconut cream.

Note: We buy overripe bananas at a discount, and store them in the freezer. The day before you are ready to bake, remove them to the refrigerator (in a bowl to catch moisture). When you are ready to bake, pinch off one end of the banana, and allow the children to squeeze the pulp into the measuring cup.

Suggested variations:

Apple Cake

Substitute chunky applesauce for bananas.

Harvest Cake

Substitute cooked and mashed sweet potatoes or pumpkin for bananas. If using pumpkin, use 2 cups pumpkin, and increase maple syrup to 1 cup.

Saint Nicholas Honey Cake

Use honey as sweetener; bake in a rectangular cake pan (baking time may need to be adjusted depending on size of pan). When cooled, cut squares and wrap individually for a treat from St. Nicholas.

Whipped Coconut Cream

Makes 1½ to 2 cups

The night before, place in the refrigerator:

- 2 cans full-fat coconut milk

Remove coconut milk from refrigerator, and scoop out solids that have accumulated at the top, placing them into a bowl: reserve the liquids for another use.

Add:

- 1 t vanilla extract
- 1 T honey or maple syrup

Beat or whisk until fluffy (3-5 minutes)

Serve immediately or refrigerate for up to a couple of days (may need a brief whisking before serving.)

Santa Lucia Buns

Makes 24 buns

Adapted from a recipe by Thea Tilberg

The previous night, or several hours before



baking, combine:

- 1 t vanilla extract
- 1 t organic sugar
- 1/2 gram (small pinch) saffron threads

Line two baking sheets with parchment paper

Combine:

- 1 cup warm water
- 1 T active dry yeast
- 1 t organic sugar

Allow the yeast mixture to become bubbly (5 to 15 minutes).

To the yeast mixture, add:

- 2 1/4 cup (1 can) lite coconut milk
- 1/2 cup whole psyllium husks

Allow the mixture to thicken for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

In a separate bowl, combine:

- 5 cups/600 grams gluten-free flour blend

(I recommend the Trader Joe's GF flour: it comes in a pink bag)

- 1 cup organic sugar
- 1/2 t sea salt

Add the wets to the dries and stir or use a hand mixer to combine.

Add:

- 7 T of organic palm shortening

Continue mixing until the dough is smooth and somewhat shiny, and all ingredients are thoroughly incorporated.

Form dough into a ball, return to the bowl (glass or ceramic) and cover with a damp cloth.

Allow the dough to rise in a warm place for two hours.

Turn dough out onto a clean floured surface, and knead until smooth.

Divide the dough into 24 pieces.

Roll each piece of dough into a snake approximately 12 inches long, then roll each end into the center to form a scrolled s-shape.

Transfer the shaped buns to parchment-lined baking sheets, cover, and allow to rise for another 30 minutes, while the oven preheats to 425 degrees.

Transfer the buns to the oven, and bake for 7-9 minutes.

Remove the buns from oven, and press a raisin into each side of the bun, in the inner ring of the coils.

Allow to cool on pans for 2-3 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

If not eating the same day, buns may be frozen, and reheated in a 325 degree oven as needed. Texture and taste are best when warm.

Variation on Santa Lucia Buns:

Hot Cross Buns

Omit first step (soaking saffron in vanilla).



When adding coconut milk to yeast mixture, also add:

- 1/2 t vanilla extract

After beating in the butter/oil, stir in:

- 1 cup raisins or dried currants

For a glaze, melt together:

- 1/2 cup coconut butter (not oil; this is sold in the aisle with nut butters)
- 1 T honey or maple syrup
- 1/4 t vanilla

Once buns have cooled, scoop the glaze up with a spoon and drizzle over the buns in the shape of an "x". Alternately, fill a freezer bag with the glaze, cut out a small corner, and pipe the crosses onto the buns.

Kneadable Bread

Adapted from "Dark Teff Sandwich Bread" by Alissa Segersten.

makes approximately 2 dozen buns

In a large bowl, combine the following:

- 5 cups warm water
- 1 T plus 1 1/2 t active dry yeast
- 2 t honey, maple syrup, or coconut sugar

Allow the yeast mixture to become bubbly (5 to 15 minutes).

Add to the bowl and mix to combine:

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1/4 cup sweetener of choice

While stirring, add and combine thoroughly:

- 2/3 cup flaxseed meal
- 2/3 cup whole psyllium husks (available in the nutrition aisle of natural foods stores)

Immediately add (waiting too long will cause the dough to become too stiff):

- 2 cups buckwheat flour
- 2 cups sorghum flour
- 1 cup sweet rice flour
- 1 cup quinoa flour

(or try any combination of flours, to total 6 cups)

- 1 T sea salt

Mix the dough together with a spoon, then turn it out onto a floured surface and knead with your hands until all the flour is incorporated, adding up to an additional 1/2 cup flour.

Return the dough to the bowl, cover with a damp cloth, and allow to rise until you're ready to knead with the children (30 minutes to an hour, or use immediately without rising time if necessary).

Flour the work surface with any gluten-free flour you have on hand (I don't suggest using quinoa for this, as it can add a strong flavor), then give each child a piece of dough (approximately 1/3 cup). Allow them to pull, push, and shape to their heart's content!

Shape each piece of dough into a ball, and place on an oiled or parchment-covered baking sheet. Allow to rise for another 30 minutes, or bake immediately if necessary.

Bake at 400 degrees for twenty minutes. Buns will be slightly gummy straight out of the oven, but will cool to a chewy texture.

You can shape extra buns, allow them to rise, then freeze them—make sure they're not too crowded—on a baking sheet or cutting board. Once they're frozen, transfer them to a freezer bag. In this way, you can pull out as many buns as needed the day before baking day, and won't need to make the dough every week. ♦

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Resources:

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- Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophy and Rosicrucianism* (Kassel, June 16-19, 1907)