How to teach kids where food comes from – get them gardening

September 20 2018, by Lindsay Hamilton And Emma Surman

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Survey the shelves of most supermarkets and you'll no doubt be confronted with row upon row of food designed to appeal to children. Be it chicken nuggets or turkey twizzlers – many foods now bear little

resemblance to their original ingredients – "junk foods" now line the supermarket shelves to appeal to young consumers.

The influence of supermarkets on UK children is not to be underestimated. These super-retailers generated just under £164 billion in 2011 with UK grocery sales predicted to rise to just below £197 billion by 2021.

This makes the children's food and beverage market a highly lucrative sector. In the US, for example, it has been worth over US$41 billion (£30 billion) in the year to date. Children tend to influence their parents' buying decisions while shopping – and marketing tactics like free toys and media tie-ins can play a big part.

It's maybe not surprising then that a recent poll from the supermarket Asda, revealed that many children today lack basic knowledge of where their food comes from. The survey, which quizzed 1,000 children under the age of eight, found that 41% didn't know eggs come from chickens. Similar polls have found that many children are unaware that milk comes from cows.

There have, of course, been many campaigns to rectify this lack of knowledge by raising awareness of the risks and problems of feeding processed food and ready meals to children, including the publicity raised a decade ago by chef Jamie Oliver's campaign for real school dinners. Unsurprisingly though, many children still appear to be unaware of the origins of their food.

Food ignorance

This all comes at a time when childhood obesity is a major problem in the UK – with many children becoming fatter as they go through school. Almost 60% more children are classified as "severely obese" in their last

year of primary school than in their first year, according to the latest government figures.

For a whole variety of reasons, many children now spend long periods of time indoors, engaged in sedentary screen-based hobbies – which is a large part of the problem. This is something that was highlighted only recently when TV star Kirstie Allsopp [smashed her son's tablet] amid a riot of publicity on Twitter.

Of course, most schools routinely teach healthy eating and the importance of exercise as part of their curriculum. But this does not mean that children will act on the advice they receive from teachers in the classroom.

Limited choices

Nutrition is often an important component in food choices for adults, but it is taste, texture (and pleasure) that are more likely to be of interest to the average child. So although schools routinely challenge children to think about nutrition, neither the curriculum nor school lunches provide a broad sensory experience of food.

This means that many children progress through school without trying a range of fresh and nutritious foods, and remain unaware of the source and value of such produce as they get older. This is significant, because the research we have done shows that the sensory experience of eating is what drives childhood learning about food and nutrition.

Observing children in two UK schools, our work reveals that gardening clubs provide new and exciting opportunities to connect production with consumption. These spaces have the potential to change the way schools think about the healthy eating curriculum by giving children the freedom to touch, taste, smell and – above all – understand the source and value

of fresh food.

Let children get muddy

For children, this involves sensory engagement with "mess" and materials usually screened from the sanitised retail, marketing and service of food. Encouraging children to play with soil, discover animals and insects, and explore the garden is what gives them pleasure. Encouraging them to get their hands muddy is central to this playful experience. And, more importantly, when they are absorbed in these activities, feeling the soil, touching some worms, digging or even just running around, they learn about food at their own pace.

Research shows that when children experience the growing of food in the outdoors in this way, they are much more likely to taste and enjoy it. And they even challenge their parents to try what they have grown.

The benefits of outdoor learning are well documented. But gardens are vital if children are to grow up with a working knowledge of food cultivation and the pleasure it gives to harvest everyday crops like radishes, chives and peas.

Most schools could offer growing and gardening as part of the curriculum – even on a small scale. Sadly though, many do not – concerned about the practicalities it involves – and the time it takes away from "more important" classroom subjects. But if the government is serious about tackling obesity, anxiety and ignorance when it comes to eating, the school garden is the best place to start.

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