Childhood obesity and diabetes seem on an unstoppable rise, but can a new way of teaching children about food make all the difference? Bee Wilson enrolls at Flavour School

Please, Sir, can we have some more?

O

It is a spring-like day in February at Washingborough Academy, a primary school in Lincolnshire, a forty-something teacher bites into a heavily salted Swedish liquorice lozenge for the first time: “It’s not bad,” he says, with a grimace, “except that it tastes like sewage.” Another teacher refuses to try it, but a third likes the strong taste, commenting that it reminds her of the sea, or maybe a Fisherman’s Friend. The teachers are tasting the lozenges — or not — as part of a lesson on how certain foods can be vile or not — as part of a sensory education called Flavour School, which will launch in Britain this summer.

In a perfectly normal thing. Teachers in Finland, Sweden, France and the Netherlands see taste lessons as a basic part of every child’s development. From nursery onwards, children are encouraged to explore food with all their senses: to learn the difference between bitter and sour, or to pay attention to the way that the red or green skin of an apple makes us expect it to taste. For more than 20 years, Swedish children have been given “taste lessons” through the Sapere method. In Latin, sapere means “to taste” “to be able to” and “to know.” Research suggests that at the end of a course of these lessons, a child will be more open to tasting a variety of foods, including vegetables, and less susceptible to the junky “kids’ foods” so heavily promoted in every supermarket.

The children hardly realise they are learning, yet Finnish kindergarten teachers have reported a dramatic improvement in pupils’ attitudes to food since the lessons were introduced. Instead of finding beetroot revolting, some children now beg their parents to buy it. The more I learnt about Sapere in Finland, the more I wished that we had something similar in Britain.

I first became aware of the Sapere method when I wrote a book, First Bite, about the psychology of learning to eat. I’d been idly thinking how brilliant it would be if someone could give children lessons in eating when I discovered that, in Finland, they do just that. The Finnish version of Sapere, which is taught in every kindergarten in the country, was introduced just over a decade ago as a weapon against child obesity. Children aged one to seven are encouraged to taste a huge variety of foods in a playful way. Sometimes, the children go berry-picking; at other times, they taste yoghurt blindfolded and try to identify whether it is sweetened, plain or fruit-flavoured.

“The pupils’ attitude to food has dramatically improved since the lessons were introduced.”

Then I met an energetic couple from Hackney — chef Nick Wilkinson and sustainable food expert Geraldine Gilbert — who were expecting a baby, and made them think about how to improve children’s food. They had read my book and said they wanted to bring Sapere to Britain. What’s more, they had found the perfect school to kick-start it: Washingborough Academy, which has already won awards for the quality of its food education. The first day I visit, Washingborough children are buzzing with Flavour School and the chance to play with different foods. Joshua Nix, in year 1, says that squeezing a lime made him feel like the Hulk, except that it is “very messy and hard to squeeze.” Alexa Scott handles a piece of root ginger and marvels at its resemblance to tree branches. “It feels so heavy and bumpy.”

For Jason O’Rourke, head teacher of Washingborough, adding Flavour School lessons to the curriculum is a matter of urgency. Like other teachers around the country, he has been horrified by the rising numbers of British children who suffer from entirely preventable health problems, such as type 2 diabetes, caused by poor diet and lack of activity. Seventeen years ago, not a single child in the UK suffered from type 2 diabetes. Last year, more than 600 children were registered with the condition. Almost one in five children arrive at school overweight or obese, and by the time they move on to secondary school, it’s one in three. “If we had maths results like that, we’d be out of a job,” O’Rourke remarks.

British schools have been promised new funding from this September — some of the forecast proceeds from the sugar tax — to finance initiatives to help pupils adopt healthier lifestyles. In return for the money, the signs are ...
that, for the first time, schools will have access to it. O'Rourke described how well they deliver on food education under a new healthy-eating scheme. Flavour School may be an idea whose time has come.

For the children themselves, judging by the first reactions, the selling point of sensory learning is that it is so much fun. Last month, at St Matthew's Primary School in Cambridge, some reception class aged four and five who are part of a Flavour School pilot were smelling mystery jars containing different ingredients hidden by foil and trying to describe the contents. A pair of aniseed reminded them of "those rocky pink chews", aka licorice. "Ahh," said Nel, breathing deeply into a jar of star anise. "That smells like a really lovely perfume, but I can't say what it is." When they smelled a jar containing guayusa cheese, most of the children recoiled from the stinkiness. Toby, a 5-year-old boy, said, muffled behind his hand, "I remember me of this thing called Mina Chindars," he said sagely.

We are now 17 years on from the revolution in British school food that was started by lady Jeanette O'Reilly and continued by Jamie Oliver in 2005, in his TV series Jamie's School Dinners. The quality of food in most schools in England is far better this year, in the shadow of the days of Turkey Twizzlers in the 1990s, when it comes to children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.

Typical Flavour School lesson will look nothing like food education as we usually think of it in the UK. There will be no dry textbooks on a five-a-day diet but any classes in how to bake cakes. The idea is to make children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.

Typical Flavour School lesson will look nothing like food education as we usually think of it in the UK. There will be no dry textbooks on a five-a-day diet but any classes in how to bake cakes. The idea is to make children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.

Typical Flavour School lesson will look nothing like food education as we usually think of it in the UK. There will be no dry textbooks on a five-a-day diet but any classes in how to bake cakes. The idea is to make children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.

Typical Flavour School lesson will look nothing like food education as we usually think of it in the UK. There will be no dry textbooks on a five-a-day diet but any classes in how to bake cakes. The idea is to make children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.

Typical Flavour School lesson will look nothing like food education as we usually think of it in the UK. There will be no dry textbooks on a five-a-day diet but any classes in how to bake cakes. The idea is to make children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.

Typical Flavour School lesson will look nothing like food education as we usually think of it in the UK. There will be no dry textbooks on a five-a-day diet but any classes in how to bake cakes. The idea is to make children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.

Typical Flavour School lesson will look nothing like food education as we usually think of it in the UK. There will be no dry textbooks on a five-a-day diet but any classes in how to bake cakes. The idea is to make children's practical ability to feed themselves in a healthy way, we seem to be going backwards. Primary school teachers encounter five-year-olds who still can't eat an orange before you eat it because they've never had one at home. Nor do they have even a basic understanding of what low incomes. I've met numerous middle-class children who believe that a packaged fruit roll is just as good as a piece of fresh fruit. The thing that I once of your five-a-day" on the label.

It was O'Rourke's alarm at the way most British children eat that made him invite Nina Algotson, president of Swedish charity, to impart taste lessons to the UK. Algotson, who has taught children to cook from the age of children and teachers since 1995, explains how Flavour helps children to learn the basic cooking skills of building blocks from savoury sauce of not to sour sauces and sweet toppings. Flavour School will do the same, but with British produce underpinned instead of from Caribbean and blackberries or tart apples instead of lingonberries. "The wish to try new foods is the key to health," Algotson says. A child who has been through the Sapere system, she claims, "will see things in a new way, read more things and hear more things.}