

Why do we need to get rid of prison trays?

Given all the challenges that schools face as they get to grips with improving school dinners, aren't getting rid of the prison style trays the least of our worries?

There are very strong reasons for getting rid of them...

They are horrible to eat from. The small compartments make it impossible to use knives and forks correctly. This encourages children to eat with their hands. We shouldn't be making it harder for children to learn table manners.

Being confronted by your pudding and your main course at the same time can be very off-putting. Children complain constantly of getting gravy in their custard and vice versa. Some young children can be tempted to eat their pudding first and to leave their main course

It creates an expectation that feeding children is simply about convenience. Pile it all on one plate and go. Its association is with TV dinners, on the move, prison - all negative images that, while OK for exceptional occasions, shouldn't become the everyday norm.

Its use supports the myth that there is adult food and there is children's food. It is no co-incidence that the rise in fussy eating has been accompanied by the development of so-called children's food products - often high fat, lacking in fruit and veg, shaped to look like fun objects. The development of trays to replace plates can be seen as part of that trend.

There is no reason why children can't be shown how use a normal plate and knife and fork. Despite fears from lunchtime staff in Merton, young children took only a couple of days to adapt when we replaced our trays with plates. Staff found that although the number of items to be washed up increased, it was actually easier to wash plates and bowls than trays.

"If not now - when?" There are always going to be hard decisions to be made with competing priorities. Planning to replace trays sends the clearest message that you value a pleasant dining experience with good table manners and a civilised environment.

Convenience? Although it may be more convenient for schools to use the trays, convenience does not justify their use - after all it was an over-dependence on convenience foods that helped get us where we are today!

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