

The Emotional Meaning of Food in Residential Care

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Working in residential care, I've come to understand that food is never just about eating. It is one of the main ways young people experience care, emotional security, feeling safe relationships, and trust, often all at the same time. Much of this thinking is reflected in the work of Jonathan Stanley (NCERCC) and research from Ruth Emond, Samantha Punch, Ian McIntosh and others at the University of Stirling ([Children, food and care - Iriss](#)) but it also deeply reflects what I see, feel, and experience in my day-to-day role.

What makes this shift in understanding even more significant for me personally is my background. I spent over 20 years working in professional kitchens. In that world, food was about standards, timing, presentation, and service. It was fast-paced, structured, and outcome-focused. Meals were created to meet expectations, to satisfy customers, to complete the job well. And for all those years, that's what food was to me; a job. Something to produce, deliver, and move on from.

I never really noticed the emotional side of it. I didn't need to.

But stepping into residential care has completely changed that perspective. It's almost like learning to see food again for the first time, but through a relational and therapeutic lens instead of a professional one.

On the surface, food in residential settings can still look simple. Planning meals, cooking, sitting down together. But underneath, there is always something else happening. The same act, making a meal or inviting a young person to the table, can be experienced in very different ways. As adults, we may intend it as care, as nurturing, as an opportunity to connect. And sometimes it is received that way, creating warmth, comfort, and a sense of belonging.

But other times, it can land as pressure, expectation, or even control.

I've seen moments where sitting together at the table genuinely feels like a family experience, where there is ease, laughter, and connection. I've also seen moments where that same expectation feels overwhelming for a young person, exposing, too much, or simply not where they're at emotionally. Those experiences have taught me that care is not defined by what we offer, but by how it is received.

Food is also one of the clearest ways young people communicate without words. Refusing meals, picking at food, asking for something very specific, or avoiding routines altogether, these are not just behaviours; they are expressions. For many young people, particularly those who have experienced instability or loss of control, food can become one of the few areas where they can reclaim some sense of autonomy.

It's rarely just about the food itself.

At the same time, structure and routine still matter. Mealtimes can provide predictability, which helps create a sense of safety. There is something powerful about

knowing when food is coming, what to expect, and that someone will provide it consistently. But there is a delicate balance. Too much structure can feel rigid and controlling, and young people often respond by pushing against it.

What I've come to understand is that many young people are not seeking full control; they are seeking understanding. They want to feel seen, to have some choice, some flexibility, and the space to engage when they feel ready rather than being forced into something they cannot manage in that moment.

Frameworks like ARC and NVR have really supported my thinking. Through an ARC lens, food becomes more than nutrition; it becomes a therapeutic opportunity. It allows us to build attachment through shared experiences, support regulation by understanding how emotions show up in eating behaviours, and develop competency by offering appropriate levels of choice and independence.

From an NVR perspective, it reminds me to stay present without becoming pulled into power struggles. To offer food consistently, without forcing it. To communicate care without escalating conflict. To show that the relationship remains steady, regardless of whether a young person accepts or rejects what is being offered.

Transitions into care add another layer of complexity. Every young person arrives with their own history of food, different routines, different expectations, and different meanings attached to it. Something that may seem ordinary to us can carry deep emotional significance for them. Without taking time to understand that we risk misinterpreting behaviour and missing what is really being communicated.

Where food feels most meaningful to me now is in the small, relational moments. The things I would never have noticed during my years in kitchens. Remembering how someone takes their hot chocolate. Offering something at just the right time without making it a big issue. Sitting alongside rather than insisting. These are quiet acts, but they build trust in a way that feels authentic and lasting.

At the same time, I've also seen how quickly food can become a battleground. When it is used as a tool to control behaviour, or when young people feel unheard, it can damage relationships. What could be a point of connection can easily turn into conflict if we lose sight of the meaning behind it.

For me, the biggest shift, and probably the most important learning, is that food is never just food in residential care. After 20 years of seeing it purely as a task, I now see it as something deeply relational. It can represent care, control, comfort, resistance, or belonging, sometimes all within the same day.

My role is no longer just to provide meals. It is to understand what food represents for each young person, and to respond in a way that supports connection, safety, and trust.

And that change in perspective has transformed not only how I work, but how I see the young people I care for, and ultimately, how I understand care itself.