

Food poisoning and infectious disease can be a serious health problem for children. If food is not safely stored or properly handled, bacteria can multiply to dangerous levels and cause illness. The use of safe and hygienic food storage and handling practices can prevent food contamination and the transmission of bacteria and infectious disease amongst children and adults. Every staff member who handles food has an important responsibility to maintain safe and hygienic food practices.

Food safety requirements

Child care services need to comply with the Food Safety Standards developed by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). These were developed to provide effective and nationally uniform food safety legislation for Australia. FSANZ works in partnership with Australia's Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to ensure safe food practices by all food businesses and food handlers. All Australian states and territories have food or health authorities who provide advice on implementing the Food Safety Standards.

States and territories may have specific child care regulations that require safe, hygienic food preparation, storage and practice. Regulations may also require that staff be employed who have completed training provided by a Registered Training Organisation.

In some areas, officers employed by local councils inspect child care services to confirm compliance with these requirements. Services should contact the relevant local council, food authority and/or licensing authority for specific information on safe food handling and hygiene requirements.

The *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Quality Practices Guide (2005)* also requires services to implement effective and current food safety and hygiene practices.

Preventing food poisoning

Food poisoning is caused by the growth of bacteria in food. This occurs when high risk foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products, are left to sit in the "temperature danger zone" (between 5° C and 60° C). Staff should also comply with recommendations from relevant authorities for handwashing, cleaning and sanitising, and safe food storage and handling.

Food preparation and serving

Management and staff should make sure there are adequate facilities and equipment for food safety and hygiene, including hot and cold running water, waste disposal, light, ventilation, refrigeration, storage space and personal hygiene facilities.

All facilities and equipment for food preparation and storage should be in good repair and working order. Eating or drinking utensils that are chipped, broken or cracked should not be used. Food preparation utensils, bench tops and chopping boards should also be in good condition.

In addition no live animals (other than seafood, fish or shellfish) should be allowed in food preparation, serving or eating areas. Pests and vermin should also be prevented and removed from the premises.



Food preparation and serving standards are determined by FSANZ and relevant authorities. These state that services should:

- Keep raw food separate from cooked and ready-to-eat food to prevent cross contamination
- Use different knives, chopping boards or other equipment for raw and cooked or ready-to-eat food. If this is not possible, equipment must be thoroughly washed in hot soapy water between uses
- Thoroughly rinse fruit and vegetables in clean water
- Use clean sanitised utensils (tongs, spoon, spatula) to serve cooked or ready-to-eat food
- Use only clean, disposable gloves and change them at least once every hour
- Comply with FSANZ standards for cooling, freezing and thawing foods
- Store food in a container that is clean, non toxic and strong enough to hold the contents
- Serve food and beverages with tableware that is in good condition and not chipped, broken or cracked

Food from home

To ensure that children are protected from food-borne illnesses, services can provide guidance on safe food handling to families that provide meals from home. Once the food has arrived at the service it is the responsibility of staff to handle and store it safely and hygienically. Staff should be aware of the “temperature danger zone” and ensure food is stored and served at temperatures that prevent the growth of bacteria.

Involving children

When children are involved in discussions and decisions about food safety they are more likely to be aware of and understand the reasons for good practice. To encourage safe and hygienic food handling, staff should discuss hygiene and food safety practices with children and involve them in setting rules such as:

- Do not share utensils or eat food handled by another child
- Wash hands before preparing or eating food
- Handle kitchen utensils with care
- Sit down when eating to prevent choking



Policies and procedures

Documented food handling and hygiene policies should detail practice that is consistent with recommendations from recognised health authorities. These practices should ensure the service stores, handles, prepares and serves food and drinks safely and hygienically. A key resource for the development of food safety and hygiene policies is the Food Safety Standards developed by FSANZ. Service policies could include:

- Preventing food poisoning
- Food preparation facilities and equipment
- Communicating with families
- Involving children in food safety
- Safe food storage
- Safe food preparation and serving
- Cleaning and sanitising
- Personal hygiene
- Food brought from home

Food safety tips

Follow these simple food safety tips:

- Remember the “temperature danger zone”. Keep cold food cold (below 5° C) and hot food hot (above 60° C)
- Cook food thoroughly
- Separate raw and cooked food and don't use the same utensils for both
- Keep utensils and kitchen clean
- Wash and dry hands thoroughly before handling food

For further food safety tips see the NSW Food Authority's *Food Safety Tips Fact Sheet 2005*, available from their website (www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au).

Safe food storage

Food storage standards are determined by FSANZ and relevant authorities. These state that:

- Food must be stored in areas designed for food storage, including pantries, and refrigerators and freezers that have thermometers
- Raw food should be stored separately from and below ready to eat food in the refrigerator
- Food should never be stored with chemicals and cleaning equipment, clothing or the personal belongings of staff
- Food containers should be in good condition and should be washed and sanitised before use
- Canned food should be stored in a sealed container once it has been opened

Staff should be aware of the standards for heating, cooling and thawing food. Cooked foods that are potentially hazardous, such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products, should not be left out for longer than one hour. Once cooled, the food should be immediately placed in the refrigerator and cooled to below 5° C. When reheating these foods a heat process should be used that rapidly heats the food to a temperature of 60° C or above.

Cleaning and sanitising

Cleaning and sanitising are usually separate processes. Cleaning removes visible residue such as food waste, dirt and grease and can be achieved through the use of water and detergents. Sanitising reduces micro-organisms and can be achieved through the use of heat and water or chemicals.

Food preparation areas should be cleaned daily as well as before and after food preparation. For example, surfaces and equipment that come into contact with food should be cleaned and sanitised before use. Drinking and eating utensils should also be cleaned and sanitised between uses.

General cleanliness of food preparation and serving areas can be achieved by regularly wiping surfaces, sweeping and mopping floors and disposing of rubbish.

Personal hygiene

Handwashing

Handwashing is one of the most effective ways to reduce the spread of infection and is particularly important for staff handling food. Staff and children must thoroughly wash and dry hands before

handling food. For handwashing to be effective, soap and warm running water should be used and hands should be thoroughly dried on a single use towel. The National Health and Medical Research Council provides guidelines for handwashing in their publication *Staying Healthy in Child Care*, available from their website (www.health.gov.au/nhmrc).

Using gloves

It is important to note that gloves are not a substitute for handwashing. If gloves are used, care should still be taken to ensure hygienic practice when handling food. For example, even if gloves are worn it may still be preferable to use utensils when serving cooked or ready-to-eat food. *Food Handler Requirements* is a useful factsheet that can be downloaded from the NSW Food Authority website (www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au).



Staff health and hygiene

Staff must not handle food when they are suffering from a disease which is likely to be transmitted through food such as vomiting, diarrhoea, gastroenteritis and hepatitis A and E. If staff are unsure about whether they should be handling food they should contact their doctor for advice. Staff should also be diligent in ensuring their body, anything from their body and any clothing does not contaminate food or food surfaces. The *Food Handler Requirements* factsheet also contains useful information on this topic.

Consistent practice

To ensure consistency of practice staff should have access to current information and ongoing training and professional development from recognised authorities. Procedures for monitoring staff compliance with food safety and hygiene policies and practices should also be put in place.

Ideally all staff responsible for food preparation and handling should complete a food safety training course delivered by a Registered Training Organisation. If this is not possible, staff who attend the training should pass this information on to other staff. Services can also arrange for external audits of food safety and hygiene practices to seek recommendations for changes and improvements to their practice by contacting the local health authority.

Communicating with families

It is useful to involve families in discussions and decisions about safe food handling to achieve consistency between practices at home and at the service. Services can facilitate communication with families by:

- Providing them with up to date information, advice and support
- Inviting them to contribute to policy development and review
- Developing policies with them about food being brought from home
- Communicating with them about any food allergies or sensitivities their child may have
- Seeking input on cultural values or religious expectations for food handling

Further Information

- Tarrant, S. (2003) 'Food Safety Plans: What are they?' *Childcare and Children's Health*. Vol 6, No 4. The Centre for Community Child Health: Melbourne.
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand. (2002) *Food Safety Standards*. Food Standards Australia New Zealand: ACT.
- National Health and Medical Research Council (2001) *Staying Healthy in Child Care*. (3rd Ed. National Health and Medical Research Council: ACT.
- Hughes, L., and Tansey, S. (2004) 'What is a Recognised Authority?' *Putting Children First*. Issue 12. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.

Useful Websites

- Better Health Channel - www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Department of Health Government of Western Australia, Population Health Division - www.population.health.wa.gov.au
- Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania - www.dhhs.tas.gov.au
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) - www.foodstandards.gov.au
- Government of South Australia Department of Health - www.dh.sa.gov.au/pehs
- National Health and Medical Research Council - www.health.gov.au/nhmrc
- National Training Information Service - www.ntis.gov.au
- Northern Territory Government Department of Health and Community Services - www.nt.gov.au/health
- NSW Food Authority - www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au
- Victorian Government Health Information, Food Safety - www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety
- Queensland Health - www.health.qld.gov.au



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