

Food for thought - promoting healthy eating in child care

by Sonja Tansey

Healthy eating habits that begin early in life provide children with the nutrition they need for optimum short and long term growth and development. They can also encourage positive attitudes to healthy eating. A healthy diet of nutritious foods provides the essential fuel needed to support the rapid growth and development of babies and children. Good nutrition also helps to prevent childhood illnesses and health problems such as infectious illnesses, Type II Diabetes, bacterial infections and dental disease. Along with physical activity, and minimising children's sedentary or 'screentime' activities, healthy eating is also essential for preventing childhood obesity.

Healthy eating plans for children

Healthy eating plans for children should include a wide range of nutritious, fresh foods from the five food groups every day, with minimal intake of processed foods and sugary drinks. Foods in a nutritious menu should be low in salt and sugar, and foods that are high in trans fats, salt and sugar should only be eaten occasionally. To promote the optimum health of babies in child care services, child care professionals should also support mothers to breastfeed and be aware of when and how solid foods can be introduced to babies.

Healthy eating plans and practices for providing food for children should be consistent with the service's nutrition policy. Nutrition policies should be current and updated regularly with information from recommended health and nutrition

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principle:	4.2
OSHCQA Principle:	6.1
QIAS Principle:	6.1

authorities. A Healthy Eating Policy template can be downloaded from the NCAC website.

When planning a menu for children, child care professionals should refer to *The Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia, A Guide to Healthy Eating*. This resource is produced by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and provides clear advice about food and nutrition for children's health. It can be downloaded from the NHMRC website. These *Guidelines* are currently under review with a revised publication due for release in 2010.

These *Guidelines* provide information for:

- Encouraging and supporting breastfeeding
- Providing a wide variety of nutritious foods
- Eating plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruit
- Eating plenty of cereals such as wholegrain bread, rice, pasta and noodles
- Including meat, fish, poultry and/or alternatives
- Including milks, cheeses, yogurts and/or alternatives
- Choosing water as drink
- Limiting saturated fat, salt and sugar
- Preparing and storing food safely.

Supporting and encouraging breastfeeding

The best source of nutrition for babies is breast milk as it provides the essential rich nutrients and antibodies needed for optimum infant health. The NHMRC *Guidelines* recommend that babies be solely breastfed until six months of age and continue to be breastfed until at least 12 months of age. It is therefore important that child care services support and encourage mothers to continue to breastfeed their babies whilst in care. Child care professionals should also be aware



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of requirements for sterile storage, handling and reheating of expressed breast milk. The factsheet *Protecting tiny tummies – Preparing food for an infant or young child* can be downloaded from the Food Safety Information Council website (www.foodsafety.asn.au).

Breastfeeding can be a challenge for busy working mothers, but by providing them with encouragement and supportive information, child care professionals can help mothers to continue to breastfeed their babies while in child care.

Welcoming spaces that are comfortable and relaxed, such as quiet corners with soft lighting, arm chairs and/or sofas can help mothers to feel at ease with breastfeeding in child care. Private, comfortable and hygienic areas should also be made available to mothers who wish to breastfeed in private. Where a separate room cannot be used, privacy screens or curtained areas can be used effectively for this purpose. It is not appropriate for mothers to feel pressured to use bathrooms or toilet areas for privacy when breastfeeding.

It is also important that a mother's wish not to breastfeed her baby is respected. Mothers who do not breastfeed their babies should be supported to bottle feed their baby.

Introducing solid foods

Child care professional should work with families and, where necessary, other health professionals to determine how and when to introduce individual foods to babies.

By providing a range of food textures and colours, allowing young children to 'play' with their food, and supporting their attempts to self-feed with fingers or soft spoons, adults can help children to enjoy healthy eating and to develop a taste for a wide range of flavours and textures. Child care professionals should also be aware of the foods that should be avoided and how to recognise a child's reactions and allergies to food. The NHMRC *Guidelines* provide information on foods that are not suitable for infants and those that should be introduced with care.

Helping children enjoy healthy foods

Food can be a great source of pleasure and curiosity for children and babies. The role of child care professionals is to respond enthusiastically to children's interests and to promote a positive attitude to eating healthy foods. By taking a relaxed approach and introducing children



to a wide range of foods from the five food groups, and from a variety of cultures, adults can help children to enjoy healthy eating. Take opportunities through everyday experiences and interactions to talk with children about healthy eating such as during meal times and cooking experiences, and before and after holidays and celebrations.

Children who refuse or dislike new foods are often viewed as 'fussy eaters'. However, it is normal for children to refuse new foods and it can take up to ten attempts for children to enjoy different flavours and textures. Even with a great deal of support and encouragement some children will continue to have narrow food preferences. It is important to be patient and relaxed with children and to continue to offer them new foods without pressuring them to eat.

Strategies for promoting children's enjoyment and understanding of healthy eating include:

- Conveying simple, positive messages about food such as healthy foods being 'all the time foods' and processed or junk foods being 'sometimes foods'
- Never using food as a punishment or reward
- Respecting children's food preferences and individual appetites
- Incorporating food from a variety of cultures in the menu
- Involving children in meal planning, preparation and tasting
- Supporting children to be independent in self-feeding and pouring drinks
- Taking time to sit and talk with children at meal times and to feed infants individually
- Accommodating children's special dietary requirements and food allergies
- Undertaking training in nutrition for young children.

Healthy eating for families

Many families can find it difficult to stay up-to-date with recommendations for healthy eating and to provide nutritious meals for children that are quick and easy to prepare. Child care professionals can encourage and support families by providing a model for good practice and offering information and advice on nutritious food choices for children. It is also important to respect families' religious and cultural wishes for eating, drinking and food handling. Also listen to families' knowledge of, and views about, their child's food preferences and allergies.

By providing daily menu information and details of what individual children have eaten, professionals can give families regular and specific information about healthy eating at the service and their child's eating habits. Written information such as leaflets, web addresses and quick and easy recipes that children enjoy in child care can be a great source of support for families. Invite families to share their favourite healthy recipes and consider publishing these in the service newsletter, website or in a family recipe booklet. It can also be useful to invite guest speakers to parent meetings to provide families with current information about nutrition for children.

Conclusion

As some children can spend a significant amount of time in child care, child care services play an important role in providing nutritious foods and in reinforcing the importance of eating well and enjoying healthy foods ■

Get Up & Grow: The Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Guidelines for Early Childhood Settings

As part of the Government's Plan for Early Childhood and Plan for Tackling Obesity, guidelines have been developed on healthy eating and physical activity in early childhood settings.

The main publications for the Guidelines are *Get Up & Grow: The Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Guidelines for Early Childhood Settings*.

Get Up & Grow consists of a set of books, posters, brochures and stickers that are designed to assist early childhood services to promote healthy eating and physical activity for young children. The four books are each designed for a specific audience: directors/coordinators; staff and carers; and families.

While aimed specifically at early childhood services and parents of younger children, much of the information in this resource can be easily adapted for use with older children in outside school hours care settings.

Get Up & Grow also links to the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care that is being developed as part of the Government's Early Childhood Education and Care Reform Agenda.

The main publications can be downloaded from the Department of Health and Ageing website at <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/phd-early-childhood-nutrition-index>. Services can also order copies of the resource from this website.

References and further reading

- National Health and Medical Research Council. (2003). *Food for Health – Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents*. ACT: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved 16 October, 2009, from <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/dietsyn.htm>
- National Heart Foundation of Australia. (2004). *Eat Smart, Play Smart*. Victoria: National Heart Foundation.
- New South Wales Department of Education and Training. (2008). *Children's Nutrition and Wellbeing*. TAFE NSW Community Services, Health, Tourism and Recreation Curriculum Centre.
- The Children's Hospital at Westmead. (2008). *Baby's First Foods*. Retrieved 13 October, 2009, from <http://www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets/fobabyj.htm>

Useful websites

- The Australian Breastfeeding Association (formerly the Nursing Mothers Association of Australia): www.breastfeeding.asn.au
- Food Safety Information Council website: www.foodsafety.asn.au
- 'Go For 2 & 5' campaign: www.gofor2and5.com.au
- Nutrition Australia: www.nutritionaustralia.org