

Nutrition in Child Care

By Angela Owens

Promoting children's health is an important aspect of quality child care. Some child care services provide all or most of children's meals while they are in care, while others may only supply snacks, or require families to provide all of their child's food. Regardless of whether or not food is provided, your child care service has a responsibility to promote good nutrition for your child while they are in care, and they should provide your family with current information about healthy eating.

Why is nutrition important for my child?

It is important for both services and families to supply children in care with food that meets their nutritional needs. By providing children with the nutrients that their bodies need to grow, they are able to develop and reach their physical and mental potential. Alternatively, poor food choices and unhealthy eating habits adopted during childhood can lead to a range of diseases and health related problems in later life.

How can my child's nutritional needs be met?

The National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) recommends that children and adolescents maintain a varied diet which includes the five main food groups. According to the NHMRC, children and adolescents need to be encouraged to eat plenty of:

- vegetables, fruit and legumes; and
- cereals (including breads, rice, pasta and noodles) preferably wholegrain.

The NHMRC also states that a healthy diet includes:

- lean meat, fish, poultry;
- milks, yoghurts, cheeses; and
- limited servings of saturated fats, margarine, butter and oils.

The balance of these food groups, in combination with recommended daily serving suggestions, is essential for maintaining children's health and wellbeing. The NHMRC also advises that children be encouraged to drink plenty of water throughout the day and to choose water as a preferred drink or refreshment.

Children also need to be offered healthy snacks throughout the day to help maintain their energy



levels. Snacks should be nutritious, and should vary in colour, texture and flavour to make them more appetizing to children.

Because children may be in child care for a large proportion of their day, they will consume much of their daily food intake while in the service. This is why promoting children's healthy eating is important, particularly where children attend care several days per week. Even when they do not supply children's meals and/or snacks, child care professionals can use their knowledge of healthy eating for children to support families to provide appropriate food and drinks for children in care.

Can I breastfeed my child in care?

Breastfeeding has many positive benefits for infants, and child care services need to provide opportunities and encouragement for families to continue to provide breast milk for children while in care. The use of expressed breast milk

for feeding babies can easily be supported in child care settings, and child care services can accommodate this by developing clear policies and procedures for the correct storage, warming and provision of expressed breast milk to children.

Where it is possible, the service may also support mothers who are able to return to the service to breastfeed their child throughout the day. It is essential that child care professionals recognise that families have the right to decide whether they will breast feed their child while they are in care, and each family's decision should be accepted and respected.

Does the service have a healthy eating policy?

All child care services should have a policy on healthy eating that outlines how children will be provided with healthy food and positive mealtime experiences while in care. An effective healthy eating policy is important as this will help both child care professionals and families to understand what will promote good outcomes for children.

A service that provides food for children should have a policy that talks about the service's responsibilities for meeting children's nutritional requirements, and that outlines how this will be achieved. A service where families provide the majority of their child's food should have a policy that explains how families will be supported and encouraged to provide healthy food for their children.

Families should be able to easily access the service's healthy food policy and be able to participate in the policy's development and review. This is an ideal time for families to raise any concerns that they have about the service's nutrition practices, and to suggest improvements to the service's current policy.



Nutrition in Child Care - a NCAC Factsheet for Families

What happens if my child has special dietary needs?

Some children may have very specific food requirements due to issues such as allergies/food intolerance, cultural background or their family's lifestyle preferences. All child care services need to be prepared to work with families to make sure that individual children's needs are met. In some instances services may need to develop additional policies to promote children's health and wellbeing. For example, where a child has an anaphylactic allergic reaction to certain foods, the service will need to develop policies and procedures to protect the child.

How can my child be encouraged to gain an understanding of healthy food?

Child care professionals play an important role in supporting children to develop a healthy and positive attitude toward good food choices. They do this through strategies and activities such as:

- Involving children in creating a healthy menu. Even younger children and toddlers can begin to talk about 'healthy' and 'not so healthy' food choices.
- Providing children with opportunities to eat food and engage in the mealtime routines of different cultures.
- Talking with children throughout mealtimes about nutritional food. Child care professionals should also model healthy eating practices for children.
- Making sure that mealtimes are pleasant occasions, where children and child care professionals can socialise amongst each other.
- Allowing children to exercise their independence and to make some choices during mealtimes.

How can the service help me to provide healthy food for my child?

When families provide all or most of children's food while they are in care, services can provide families with information to assist them to make healthy food choices for their children. The service's healthy eating policy should provide families with clear guidelines about the types of foods and snacks that are appropriate.

While it is each family's right to provide the food of their choice for their child, families need to consider the food they choose not only in relation to their own child's wellbeing, but also in relation to what is being modelled by their child for other children. Where children have specific food requirements, likes or dislikes, it may be helpful for families to speak with the service's child care

professionals to negotiate some helpful strategies. For example, if a child is determined to eat a chocolate biscuit for lunch, perhaps the family and child care professionals can work together to encourage the child to first eat a healthy sandwich and to have the chocolate biscuit afterwards.

How will positive mealtime experiences be provided for my child?

Child care services need to encourage the idea of mealtimes as an opportunity for social interaction in a relaxed atmosphere. This is helpful not only for the development of children's interpersonal and language skills, but also helps to convey the message that eating healthy food is fun.

Strategies that services can use to promote positive mealtime experiences include:

- Providing children with an interesting variety of foods, and allowing them to exercise some choice in what they eat.
- Allowing children plenty of time to eat and to interact with others, including other children and adults.
- Supporting and encouraging children to help with preparing the eating area, and to assist with serving food and drinks and tidying up after the meal.
- Ensuring that child care professionals take time to eat and talk with children during mealtimes in a sociable way.
- Where appropriate, involving children in planning menus and in food preparation.
- Including foods and eating rituals into mealtimes that are reflective of diverse cultures.

Tips for providing healthy food for children

- Choose a variety of foods, using the Healthy Eating Pyramid as a guide. The latest version of the Healthy Eating Pyramid can be viewed or purchased from the Nutrition Australia website: www.nutritionaustralia.org
- There are many different types of breads available that can be used as the basis for a healthy lunch. These include different types of sandwich bread such as multi grain, wholemeal white high fibre, rye, as well as bread rolls, flat breads and muffins.
- Mix and match healthy bread fillings, such as:
 - lean meats, meat alternatives and dairy foods such as ham, chicken, beef, tofu, eggs and cheese;
 - tinned fish such as tuna, salmon and sardines;
 - vegetables such as tomato, celery, carrots, sprouts, lettuce;
 - healthy spreads such as vegemite, cream cheese spreads, peanut butter*, and sandwich pastes.
- Provide a variety of healthy snacks, including fresh fruit, cheese cubes, vegetable sticks, healthy dips, rice cakes, pikelets, dried fruits and mixed nuts*.
- Provide water bottles, which can double as cool packs by being frozen and placed in the lunch box ■

* Note that the service may not allow nut products in the service due to possible allergic reactions in children or adults.

References and Further Reading

- Heart Foundation. (n.d.). Snacks, Breakfast and Drinks for Children. Retrieved 3 December 2007 from http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/document/NHF/esps_snacks_breakfast_drinks.pdf
- Matthews, C. (2004). Healthy children - a guide for child care. NSW: Elsevier.
- National Health and Medical Research Council. (n.d). Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia. Retrieved 3 December 2007 from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/_files/n30.pdf

Useful websites

- Better Health Channel: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Nutrition Australia: www.nutritionaustralia.org
- Parenting and Child Health: www.cyh.com



For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au