
Childcare and healthy eating

Summary

- Children may eat a large proportion of their daily food consumption in child care.
 - Childcare centres should adhere to hygiene regulations and nutrition standards.
 - Childcare centres should be aware of your child's food allergies and intolerances.
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All children in childcare need regular healthy meals, snacks and fluids (drinks). Promoting children's health is an important aspect of good quality childcare. It's important that children in care are offered nutritious meals and enjoy positive mealtime experiences. Research has shown that some children in care may not get enough of some important dietary nutrients.

Regardless of whether food is provided, all childcare services have a responsibility to promote good nutrition for children in their care. Childcare centres and all staff should be familiar with hygiene standards, nutrition principles for children, and food safety laws.

Types of childcare

There are many types of childcare options available for children including:

- Long day childcare centres (LDCCC)
- Occasional care and preschool
- Family day care
- Extended family care (especially grandparents)
- Out of school hours care.

More than 50,000 children in Victoria attend long day care on a part-time or full-time basis. Long day care is defined as spending at least eight hours a day in childcare.

Guidelines for nutrition and health standards

The **Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)** provides national guidelines for childcare, which cover all areas of care. These guidelines contain information on all aspects of quality childcare including standards of discipline, hygiene, programming, communication, food and nutrition.

Some of the issues covered include:

- **Respect** – show respect for all children
- **Environment** – provide a pleasant, culturally appropriate atmosphere for children at mealtimes that encourages social interaction and learning
- **Culture** – provide culturally appropriate meals, food and drink for children
- **Nutrition** – promote healthy eating and good food habits
- **Hygiene** – have staff trained in correct food handling and hygiene.

Nutrition

Food provided in childcare has an important role to play in the growth and development of children and in the development of future eating habits. In long day childcare centres, menus should aim to meet a significant amount of a child's daily nutrition requirements. A variety of foods such as vegetables, fruits, cereals, lean meat, fish, chicken, milks, yoghurts and cheeses should be provided to children in care, including a range of textures and tastes, appropriate to the developmental stages of different age groups.

Children are also encouraged to drink water and milk throughout the day. Other sweet drinks such as juices and cordials are not necessary. Sweet foods such as cakes, biscuits, lollies, and chocolates should not be served on a regular basis in childcare. Individual centres may have a policy on the availability of sweet foods and other treats.

Breastfeeding

Childcare services have a responsibility to offer opportunities and support to families to continue to provide breast milk for children in their care. Childcare services can provide support by developing and implementing clear policies and procedures for storage and provision of expressed breast milk for children in their care. Policies for safe storage and provision of infant formulas are also required.

Meals and snacks

Mealtime arrangements can vary. Some centres provide all meals and snacks, while other centres ask families to provide meals for their own children. Long day childcare centres must provide a minimum of one meal and two snacks each day. Often this will be morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea. Some centres also serve breakfast. Even when they don't provide meals, childcare staff can encourage and support families to provide healthy meals for their children whilst in care.

Mealtimes should be relaxed and supervised

The mealtime atmosphere and the attitude and behaviour of childcare workers is important to the development of healthy eating practices. Children should be relaxed and happy when they are eating. Meals are often shared with carers and other children. Childcare workers should develop and encourage healthy eating patterns and positive attitudes to food and also supervise children's eating. Children learn from others about food preferences and how to eat. Safety at mealtimes is important.

Other important points:

- Food should be an appropriate size and texture for the age and ability of the child so they can easily chew and swallow their food.
- Nuts and other hard foods that are difficult for young children to chew should be avoided.
- Children should not be force-fed.
- Children should be seated quietly at mealtimes.

Food hygiene is essential

Careful preparation of food and correct food handling techniques are important. Childcare centres must observe the following principles:

- Regular training for all cooks and staff in safe food storage, preparation and handling of food
- Safe food handling by children and staff, including sharing of food for example when fruit platters are shared
- Adequate hand washing by staff and children
- Safe use of microwave ovens for heating food and drinks.

Food regulations and preschools

Local council health departments can provide help and advice regarding food safety in childcare centres. In Victoria, the requirements of the *Food Act 1984* do not apply to preschools where parents or carers bring food to the preschool.

When your child takes fruit or vegetables for morning tea or takes their own lunch, the preschool is not subject to the Food Act requirements, even if the preschool staff or parents cut up the fruit and vegetables and place them on a platter to be shared. However, everyone should follow the basic hygiene rules of hand washing.

Menus should be on display

A childcare centre nutrition policy should provide guidelines for all aspects of meal preparation and service to cooks, staff and parents. In centres that offer meals, menus are on display to give parents the opportunity to provide feedback.

Special diets

Some children have other special dietary requirements due to food allergies, cultural background or medical conditions. Childcare services work together with families to ensure the specific needs of individual children are met.

Food allergies

On rare occasions, for example, a life-threatening situation for a child with a severe food allergy can occur within a childcare setting. Many centres have a food allergy policy in order to limit the risk associated with severe food allergy reactions. Childcare staff should be made aware of your child's food allergies and food intolerance.

Dental health

Children who consume high-sugar foods and drinks risk tooth decay. Around 50 per cent of all primary school children seen by the School Dental Service in Victoria have signs of dental decay. Nutrition policies in childcare centres should include dental health guidelines. Supervised teeth brushing programs in childcare have been shown to reduce tooth decay.

Key principles should include:

- Baby feeding bottles should not contain sweet drinks.
- Baby feeding bottles should not be used to settle children at rest times.
- Sugary snacks should be limited.
- Children should not get sweet foods as a reward for good behaviour.
- Teeth brushing should be encouraged after meals.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local council
- Your maternal and child health nurse
- **Healthy Eating Advisory Service** Tel. 1300 22 52 88
- **Dietitians Association of Australia** Tel. 1800 812 942
- **Royal Children's Hospital** Tel. (03) 9345 5522

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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