

Nutrition in child care

A healthy child is a happy child, at home or in child care. Some services will provide all or most of your child's meals while they are there, while others may only supply snacks, or require you to provide all of your child's food.

Whether or not food is provided, your child's service has a responsibility to promote good nutrition for your child, and they should provide your family with current information about healthy eating.

Why is good nutrition important for my child?

It is important your child has nutritious food to give your child all the nutrients their bodies need to grow, and to develop and reach their physical and mental potential.

On the flip side, poor food choices and unhealthy eating habits in childhood can lead to a range of health problems later in life.

How can my child's nutritional needs be met?

The National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) recommends 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
- cereals (including breads, rice, pasta and noodles) preferably wholegrain

The Council also states that a healthy diet includes:

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

The balance of these food groups is essential for maintaining your child's health and wellbeing. You should encourage your child to drink plenty of water throughout the day - the NHMRC's drink of choice!

Healthy snacks throughout the day will also help maintain your child's energy levels.

Can I breastfeed my child when they are at the service?

Breastfeeding has many positive benefits for infants, and many services provide opportunities and encouragement for families to continue to provide breast milk for children while at the service. The use of expressed breast milk for feeding babies can easily be supported in child care settings, and families should talk to the service about the policies and procedures they have in place for storing, warming and providing of expressed breast milk to children.

Where 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 services recognise that families have the right to decide whether they will breastfeed their child while they are at the service, and each family's decision should be accepted and respected.



Does the service have a healthy eating policy?

All services will have a policy on healthy eating that outlines how children will be provided with healthy food and positive mealtime experiences. An effective healthy eating policy is important as this will help staff and families understand what foods promote good outcomes for children.

A service that provides food for children should have a policy outlining the service's responsibilities for meeting children's nutritional requirements, and 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 eating policy and be able to participate in the policy's development and review. Families are encouraged to raise any concerns they have about the service's nutrition practices, and to suggest improvements to the current policy.

What happens if my child has special dietary needs?

Some children may have very specific food requirements due to allergies/food intolerances, their cultural background or other family preferences. All services work with families to make sure individual children's needs are met. In some instances, services may need to develop additional policies to promote children's health and wellbeing e.g. in the case of a child having an 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 staff play an important role in supporting children to develop a healthy and positive attitude towards good food choices. They do this through strategies and activities such as:

- Involving children in creating a healthy menu
- Encouraging younger children and toddlers to talk about 'healthy' and 'not so healthy' food choices early on
- Providing children with opportunities to eat food and engage in the mealtime routines of different cultures
- Talking with children about nutritious food during mealtimes. Staff should also model healthy eating practices for children
- Making sure mealtimes are pleasant occasions, where children and staff can socialise with each other
- Allowing children to exercise their independence and to make some choices during mealtimes
- Including healthy food toys in the 'home corner' at the service to encourage children's investigative play

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 help them make healthy food choices for their children. The service's healthy eating policy should provide families with clear guidelines about the types of food and snacks that are appropriate.

Where children have specific food requirements, likes or dislikes, it may be helpful for families to speak with staff to negotiate helpful strategies to ensure children's nutrition needs are met.

Tips for providing healthy food for children

- Choose a variety of foods, using Nutrition Australia's Healthy Eating Pyramid as a guide. The latest version of the Healthy Eating Pyramid can be viewed or downloaded from the Nutrition Australia website: www.nutritionaustralia.org
- There are many different types of breads available that can be used as part of a healthy lunch. These include different types of sandwich bread such as multigrain, wholemeal, white, high fibre, rye, as well as rolls and flat breads
- 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 and lettuce
 - healthy spreads such as vegemite, cream cheese spreads, etc.
- 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

Please note that some services may not allow nut products in the service due to possible allergic reactions in children or adults.

