

# Childcare meals, what is really going on in the kitchen

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There are many talented Childcare Cooks in kitchens around Australia. Without their passion, efficiency and flexibility, centres offering a 'full meal service' would simply not survive. By a 'full meal service', I refer to the delivery of a menu of up to 5 meals per day; breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, and late afternoon. In some cases, this even extends to dinner provision. Coupled with the demand of catering for individual allergies and dietary preferences. Extending beyond recipe basics can be quite challenging, notwithstanding the additional pressure of meeting national guidelines, budgets and time limitations.

An average childcare kitchen dishes out hundreds of meals per day. To meet this demand, some Cooks rely on the purchase of pre-packaged and/or frozen ingredients to aid their preparation. Whilst the jury is still out on the nutritional content of frozen vegetables, it goes without saying that fresh produce, or that grown from own garden, is always a better option. There are ample opportunities for the creative Cook to expand their culinary skills without compromising children's nutritional needs. Gone are the days when meal preparation is limited to the delivery traditional childcare classics. Whilst dishes such as Spaghetti Bolognese remain favourites, we need to explore better ways of broadening tastebuds and reignite our passion for cooking, not only for the benefit of children but for our country's health.

The prevalence of obesity in Young Australians is increasing at an alarming rate, so much as that the NHMRC predicts that by 2025 a third of our population will not only be obese but develop type 2 diabetes. Equipped with these alarming predictions the Australian Government has committed millions to unveil causal factors that have led us down this path and determine ways we can avoid contributing to the rising obesity epidemic. Whilst there are many causal factors that have contributed to increased incidence, international researchers have determined that poor eating habits are by far the most common. Referred to as 'obesity promoting' compact living arrangements and contemporary lifestyles significantly impact decisions we make about when we eat and what we eat. Combined with any of the below factors, it's no wonder inactive bodies are a ticking time bomb.



- \* Changes to food supply and the availability of cheaper processed foods containing high levels of saturated fats, salts and sugars
- \* Increased portion sizes of packaged takeaway meals
- \* Decrease cost of pre-packaged foods and increase in cost of fresh produce
- \* Social and cultural food influences with increased consumption of alcohol and food associated with cultural festivities
- \* Disruption to sleep patterns which interferes with appetite and disturbs our metabolism
- \* Workplace circumstances have increased 'office time' and decreased activity

Despite these alarming findings, there are numerous ways we can avoid becoming victims of the rising health crisis, and it starts with exposing children to healthy eating habits early on. However, to make any real difference, community organisations, including those in the business of childcare must be receptive to shouldering some of the responsibility. Given approximately 1.5 million children attend childcare in Australia each day, there's a genuine opportunity to combat the obesity epidemic in partnership, and have childcare kitchens, such as Paisley Park Early Learning Centres lead by example.

Paisley Park is a private provider of 20 Early Learning Centres around Australia, focused on implementing a food philosophy where qualified Chefs, garden patches and access to locally grown fresh produce is a featured part of the daily program. Most childcare menus consist of staple ingredients; toast, wheatbix, apple, banana and orange, potato, carrot, broccoli, peas, chicken, beef, etc, in a way that contributes to at least 50% of children's daily nutritional intake. Whilst there are ample ways to use the mentioned ingredients in the preparation of delicious meals, Paisley Park Chefs incorporate more interesting flavours and textures, representing culinary tastes from around the world, including exposure to various herbs and spices.

For children the meal time experience extends beyond the kitchen and offers opportunities for them to nurture the growth of their own fresh ingredients. This is considered as a meaningful way to build their knowledge about where food comes from and encourages them to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Not only do children see 'life in action' but once mature ingredients are picked, delivered to the kitchen and used in the preparation for the daily meal, children see firsthand how they have contributed to the process and are therefore more inclined to try new flavours. Such holistic experiences, according to Paisley Park have the capacity to change the way children view food and contribute to them making better meal choices.

Mealtime practices are also a fundamental component of the Paisley Park food philosophy, implemented as an authentic dining experience. On any typical day, children are actively involved in setting up tables and using real tools, such as knives, forks, crockery and glassware when serving their own portions. Children are very capable of using the same implements adults do, especially when appropriate use is effectively role modelled. Mess being made and accidents occurring is inevitable, and as such forms a natural part of the learning process. Such experiences promote the meal experience as one where the child has contributed to the decision making, including learning important life lessons, such as being careful.

Research shows that exposure to healthy ingredients at an early age supports developing broadened palates and as such, contributes to making better long-term meal choices. It all comes down to attitude, a willingness for childcare providers to embrace new ways of doing things and encouraging Cooks to break out of traditional habits. This includes exploring uncharted territory and getting educated about the available produce in local communities, as well as engaging available resources such as families and fellow colleagues in important conversations about their meal choices. It's time to get cracking, make changes and reap the rewards of healthier happier children. The result is worth the effort.

#### Useful Links:

<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-topics/obesity-and-overweight>  
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/phd-gug-directorscoord>

