



Keeping early learning centre menus innovative

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There are many talented cooks out there preparing meals in early learning centre kitchens using repeated seasonal menus. Despite their best intentions, being innovative with ingredients can often be restricted by all sorts of imposed guidelines and standards; however, there are ample opportunities for the creative cook to expand their culinary skills without compromising children's nutritional needs.

Long gone are the days when meal preparation was limited to the delivery of traditional early learning centre classics. While certain 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 also for the betterment of our nation's health.

The prevalence of obesity in young Australians is increasing at an alarming rate – so much so that

the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) predicts that by 2025, one-third of our population will not only be obese, but will have developed type 2 diabetes. Equipped with these alarming predictions, the Australian Government has committed millions of dollars to unveil causal factors that have led us down this path, and to determine ways we can avoid contributing to the epidemic. While there are many causal factors, 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 and what we eat. Combine these with any of the below factors, and it's no wonder that 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
- decreased cost of pre-packaged foods and increased cost of fresh produce
- social and cultural food influences, including increased consumption of alcohol and food associated with cultural festivities
- disruption to sleep patterns, which interferes with appetite and disturbs the metabolism
- 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. In order to make any real difference, community organisations, including those in the business of early learning, must be receptive to shouldering some of the responsibility. Given that approximately 1.5 million children attend early learning centres in Australia each day, there's a genuine opportunity to combat the obesity epidemic and have our early learning centre kitchens lead by example.

Comparatively, Australia's early learning environments are highly regulated, and our kitchens are no exception; however, upon review of the National Quality Standards (NQS) Standard 2.2.1, which stipulates that: 'Healthy eating is promoted, and food and drinks provided by the service are nutritious and appropriate for each child [and] there are no restrictions on the meal types delivered', so long as we display the weekly menu (Regulation 80 in the Education and Care Services National Regulations, 2011) and provide children with meals consistent with the recommended Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia, early learning centre cooks have far more flexibility than perhaps first thought.

The recently developed Get Up & Grow resource provided by the Department of Health takes meal recommendations to another level in its 10 healthy



eating guidelines. With the view of exploring various ingredients, healthy eating guideline seven recommends trying 'different food types and textures in a positive eating environment', a strategy that encourages children to become more familiar with a range of flavours and colours in meal offerings. Rolled out across five predetermined meal times (breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and late snack), the traditional early learning centre menu consists of staple ingredients – cornflakes, Weet-Bix, apples, bananas, oranges, potatoes, carrots, broccoli, peas, chicken, beef, canned tuna or salmon, rice, noodles, cheese, Vegemite, crackers and dried fruit – in a way that contributes to at least 50 per cent of children's daily nutritional intake.

While there are ample ways to use the mentioned ingredients in the preparation of delicious meals, we now have far more interesting flavours and textures



at our disposal, such as kale, chia and seaweed. This extends beyond the preparation of the 'one pot pasta' and encourages the use of interesting preparation methods, such as steaming or poaching, and using fresh fish and meats, including lamb or duck.

The mealtime experience should also extend beyond the kitchen and offer opportunities for children to nurture the growth of fresh ingredients in garden beds, as this is a meaningful way to build their knowledge about where food comes from. Implementing projects that feature the growth of ingredients is a wonderful way to engage children in critical thinking and tap into their knowledge base. Not only do they see 'life in action', which is a direct link to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) Outcome 2: 'Children are connected with and contribute to their world', but once mature ingredients grow in garden beds, they can be picked by children and delivered to the kitchen for use in the preparation of the next meal.

We now know that exposure to a variety of ingredients at an early age supports developing broadened palates and contributes to making better

long-term meal choices. Therefore, our creative flair in the kitchen needn't be crippled by restrictions we often impose upon ourselves. There are many ways to expose children to varied ingredients, all while exploring interesting preparation and cooking methods. It all comes down to an attitude of willingness to embrace new ways of doing things in the kitchen, and to challenge ourselves to break out of traditional habits.

As long as we continue to use well-balanced food staples that contain iron, protein, fibre, carbohydrates and vitamins, the opportunities are endless. This includes exploring uncharted territory and educating ourselves about the available produce in our local community, as well as engaging the resources at our disposal, such as families and fellow educators. It's time to get cracking, make changes and enjoy the fruits of our labour. Bon appétit! 🍴

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