



Summary of research on childcare nutrition policy and practices

This is the first paper in a series, detailing results from an online survey of 257 Early Childhood Education (ECE) services in Auckland, Counties Manukau and Waikato in mid-2014, called Kai Time in ECE. The survey asked questions about nutrition and physical activity policies and practices for 3-4 year olds in daycare centres, kindergartens, Kōhanga Reo and playcentres. Responses were received from 30% of licensed ECE providers in these regions, and were fairly representative of all services, with the exception of Kōhanga Reo who were under-represented. We expect that this research will be relevant to licensed ECE services throughout New Zealand.

The full academic paper can be found online at www.growingup.co.nz/kai-time

Overview

This was the first research in New Zealand to examine the content of written nutrition policies and discover the proportion of ECE services providing food to children daily. It also updated our knowledge on the prevalence of staff practices known to encourage healthy eating in children.

We found that although most ECE services had written nutrition policies, the documents did not include a lot of detail and the wording of statements was usually weak. Some services appeared to struggle with encouraging and promoting healthy eating (as directed in the ECE licensing criteria HS19); with some signaling that they required more support from parents/whānau to enable this. Most ECE services (especially day care centres) provide meals and/or snacks to children every day, and nearly all had special occasions where extra food was served. We found evidence of widespread implementation of several recommended practices to encourage healthy eating (e.g. edible gardens; not using food in punishments or rewards; and family-style meals). However, many services required improvements in other areas (e.g. regularly cooking, baking and gardening with children; providing healthy food on special occasions and for fundraising; and never hurrying children to finish eating).

Provision of food

Food was provided daily to children in 56% of services, with 34% providing lunch and at least two other meals/snacks. A larger proportion of private and community daycare centres than other services provided food everyday: 82% and 56% respectively. A nutritional analysis of the menus supplied by ECE services is underway. In 47% of ECE services, children bring all their food for the day/session from home. One third of services did not have guidelines for food brought from home, potentially making it difficult for families to know what is expected in lunchboxes.

Food on special occasions

Many ECE services regularly celebrate special occasions, such as birthday parties, national holiday celebrations etc.: 7% of the survey respondents had special occasions weekly, 41% monthly, 46% a few times a year. Nearly all services asked parents/whānau to bring food from home for these occasions and the food served was generally high in energy, sugar, salt and/or saturated fat. All eating times could be seen as an opportunity to increase children's consumption, exposure to and liking of fruit and vegetables, yet only half of ECE services reported that they usually serve fruit and vegetables on special occasions.

Promotion of nutrition and healthy eating

Teachers talked to children about food, and cooked with children, at least weekly in 60% of childcare services. Nearly all services (90%) had an edible garden. 40% of ECE services said they faced a barrier to promoting nutrition to children. The most commonly reported barrier was a lack of support from parents and families (21%). Playcentres were generally less likely than other services to follow some of the recommended practices to promote healthy eating (as listed in Table 1), and a smaller proportion of private and community daycare centres regularly baked and cooked with children when compared to other services.

Table 1: Proportion of childcare services following recommended practices that promote healthy eating to children (N=257)

Recommended practice	Total n (%)
Staff never withhold food as a behaviour consequence	233 (96.3)
Staff never use food to reward "good" behaviour	230 (95.0)
Staff always encourage and promote water consumption	203 (83.9)*
Staff always sit with children while they eat	193 (79.8)
Children sometimes or always serve themselves from a communal plate or platters	172 (71.1)*
Children are involved in gardening at least weekly	127 (59.9)*
Staff teach food and nutrition concepts at least weekly	142 (59.7)*
Children bake or cook at least weekly	140 (58.8)*
Staff always talk to children about what they are eating	120 (49.6)*
Staff verbally check with children if they are full/hungry before giving seconds	96 (39.7)*
Staff never hurry children to finish eating	95 (39.3)*
Staff always or mostly eat and drink the same things as children	64 (26.5)

* Statistically significant difference in the proportions by type of childcare service, chi square ($p < 0.05$). See Table 6 in the full paper for more information on differences by type. No statistically significant differences in recommended practices were found by neighbourhood deprivation category.

Source: 2014 Kai Time in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Survey, Growing Up in New Zealand, University of Auckland.

Food sold for fundraising

Fundraising by selling unhealthy foods sends a contradictory message to children and their families, undermining nutrition education. More than one in three ECE services had sold food or beverages as part of their fundraising activities in the past 12 months, which was similar to the proportion in 2007 and higher than 2009 when government policy had actively discouraged this practice. A greater proportion of kindergartens and playcentres sold food for fundraising compared to other services (67% and 71% respectively). The majority of food used in fundraising was high in sugar, salt and/or saturated fat; pizza, pies, sausages or sausage rolls were the most common foods for fundraising, followed by cupcakes, cake, croissants or biscuits, with confectionery being sold by some ECE services (9% overall).

Nutrition policies

A well-written nutrition policy in ECE creates an environment that enables children to develop healthy preferences and encourages staff, children and families to reassess existing practices. 82% of childcare services had a written healthy food, nutrition or hauora/wellness policy but when we analysed these policies, the overall comprehensiveness and strength of statements were very low: scoring on average 25 out of 100 (range 3-64) for overall comprehensiveness, and 11 out of 100 (range 0-39) for overall strength. Most policies could be improved by adding a statement that the food provided by the service or parents should follow the Ministry of Health's Food and Nutrition Guidelines, and also include specific recommended practices for staff (such as those listed in Table 1).

More research underway

Further analyses planned for the survey data include:

- a dietary assessment of childcare menus
- source and preparation of food
- spend per child per day on food
- active behaviours and screen-use
- physical activity strategies and equipment
- health promotion programme participation.

We will also be investigating the health outcomes for children exposed to different ECE nutrition and activity environments using data from the *Growing Up in New Zealand* study.

Thank you to everyone who made the 2014 Kai Time in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Survey possible, including the participants and our funders:

