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Nutrition in Childcare – What You Need to Know

By OSCAR Care Group Dietitian, Lauren Goffredo



In Australia and throughout the developed world, the demand for childcare services has significantly increased in the past several decades due to the rising costs of living and emphasis on gender equality in the workplace.

The benefits of having two working parents is not only economically advantageous for households and families in the current age, but rightfully entices equal opportunity, social connection and leadership in the workforce.

In 2017, 3 in 5 Australian children aged 0–4 years attended some form of childcare, with most recent statistics from the Childcare in Australia Report stating 45% of children under 5 years of age used childcare services.

With so many Aussie kids spending part of their week in childcare services across the country, it is important to have care centres that provide a safe, nurturing environment that promotes growth, health and wellbeing through their education, exercise and nutrition programs – after all, healthy kids are happy kids!

Why good nutrition is important for Kids

Nutrition is a pivotal component of health for people of all ages, from breastfeeding infants to the elderly. Nutrition needs change across the lifecycle. As children grow & develop in their earlier years of life, their need for nutrition significantly increases to help promote adequate growth and development of their little bodies.

Promoting healthy eating habits at an early age can lay down a good foundation of nutrition principles right from the start & ensure your little ones are able to prevent the onset of chronic illness (e.g. diabetes, obesity, heart disease etc.) later in life whilst giving them the energy they need now to live, look & feel their best.

The 5 Core Food Groups

For optimal health, the Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend that people of all ages, especially children, should be eating a wide variety of foods from the 5 core food groups, drinking plenty of water, limiting discretionary foods/fluids and screen time and engaging in regular physical activity every day. The guidelines also encourage and support breastfeeding.

The 5 Core Food Groups include:

Core Food Group	Recommended Number of Serves Per Day		
	1-2 years	2-3 years	4-8 years
Vegetables, legumes and beans	2-3	2 ½	4 ½
Fruit	½	1	1 ½
Grains (cereals) – mostly wholegrain and/or high-fibre varieties	4	4	4
Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives	1 – 1 ½	1 ½	1 ½ - 2
Lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs and alternatives – including nuts, seeds, tofu and legumes/beans	1	1	1 ½



It can take up to 15 attempts at a new food before a child will develop a liking to it and it is important to know that like us, children will never like everything and that's ok! It is very rare that children will exclude all foods from a particular food group so you can have confidence that they are still likely meeting their nutrition requirements, even if their food choices are selective.

It is important to continue to offer a variety of foods from all 5 food groups at meal or snack times, in conjunction with foods that you know your child already likes to encourage them to give it a go. If you are concerned about your child's nutritional intake, you can always seek the advice of an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) for tips and tricks on how to combat fussy eating.

Is my child disadvantaged being a fussy eater?

It is no surprise that nutrition is on the forefront of every parent's mind. As a parent, you have an important role in shaping the eating habits of your children – whether that be by modelling healthy eating behaviour, facilitating the family mealtime environment, packing a lunchbox or choosing the types of foods your children eat and when.

Although it can be concerning for parents, it is a normal part of a child's development to be selective with food, with many children falling victim to the "fussy eater" stereotype. Children need time to learn about new foods – their smell, taste, appearance, texture and shape. They need to lick, touch, poke, chew, spit out and sniff foods to become familiar with them.



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How do I know my child is getting the nutrition they need when they are in care?

There are many types of childcare options available for children and infants, the most common being long day childcare centres where children will spend at least 8 hours a day. In long day centres, children are usually served a morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea meal/snack and therefore, the menu provided should aim to meet the majority of children's dietary requirements. In some instances, children may also be present for breakfast and/or a late snack.

Australian childcare centres are governed by the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority who work to provide care centres with guidance, resources and services to improve outcomes for children in care. The National Quality Framework (NQF) provides a standardised, national approach to regulation and quality improvement for childcare. Their 7-step framework emphasises important outcomes for children to facilitate healthy and safe outcomes and highlight Children's Health and Safety (Quality Area 2) inclusive of healthy eating as a foundation.

Childcare facility menus (particularly for long stay centres) are planned in accordance with Menu Planning Guidelines from the Healthy Eating Advisory Service which are based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines and other government-run health initiatives such as Get Up & Grow. These guidelines are governed by experienced dietitians in conjunction with the government and provide support to facilities to ensure their menus meet quality area 2 of the NQF. Menus are designed to provide foods from the core 5 food groups, including culturally sensitive foods (where applicable), lots of variety (menus are usually developed over a 2-4 week cycle to avoid repetition), exposure to different textures, colours and tastes (e.g. crunchy and soft) and limitation of discretionary foods and fluids (e.g. juice, soft drinks and packaged treats). Mealtimes are often shared in the company of other children and carers which allows childcare workers to supervise eating, recognise eating patterns/behaviours and encourage/model healthy eating behaviours in a safe, calm environment. Children may be offered to participate in kitchen garden programs and food preparation activities which can also help foster good relationships with food and where it comes from. Childcare centres can enlist feedback from APDs who will assess the menu in accordance with standards and guidelines and offer recommendations for improvement. A sample menu that meets nutrition standards and guidelines for a childcare facility can be accessed below. [Source: Healthy Eating Advisory Service](#)

(Name of centre) summer menu						
WEEK 1						
		MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
BREAKFAST		Choose from: Wholegrain cereals (wheat biscuits, dried fruit and flake mix), porridge and wholemeal toast with healthy toppings, served with milk and water				
MORNING TEA	Food	Fresh fruit platter (apple, nectarines, grapes, banana) with pineapple and yoghurt dip	Rainbow platter (banana, rockmelon, plum, beans, cucumber, red capsicum) Cheese cubes	Fruit smoothie small (100mL) Fruit toast with ricotta cheese	Fresh fruit platter (apple, nectarines, grapes, banana) with pineapple and yoghurt dip	Yoghurt, summer sunshine salad (peach, nectarine, passionfruit, mint) and (untoasted) muesli
	Drink	Milk and water	Milk and water	Milk and water	Milk and water	Milk and water
LUNCH	Food (include ingredient details)	Chicken curry (Main ingredients: chicken, brown rice, carrots, pumpkin, green beans, canned tomatoes, curry spices and yoghurt)	Beef lasagne with fresh salad (Main ingredients: beef mince, brown lentils, carrot, celery, zucchini, canned tomatoes, ricotta, lasagne sheets, cheese)	Beef and vegetable rissoles with pita bread and salad (Main ingredients: lean beef mince, potato, carrot, zucchini, capsicum, egg, pita bread, salad vegetables)	Creamy tuna pasta bake (Main ingredients: canned tuna, pasta, broccoli, corn, carrot, evaporated milk)	Vegetarian fried rice (Main ingredients: egg brown rice, carrot, capsicum, spring onion, peas, corn, reduced salt soy sauce.)
	Drink	Water	Water	Water	Water	Water
AFTERNOON TEA	Food	Toasted wholemeal English muffins with sliced tomato and cheese Rockmelon wedges	Fruity crumble (wholemeal flour, oats, cooked seasonal fruits) served with Greek yoghurt	Rice cakes and toppings (cottage cheese, sliced tomato, cucumber) Watermelon and friends platter (watermelon triangles, grapes, strawberries)	Make your own pizza faces (wholemeal pita bread, salt reduced tomato paste, shredded chicken breast, mushroom, tomato, capsicum, cheese)	Vegetable sticks (beans, celery, carrot) with creamy corn and tuna dip and wholemeal crackers Watermelon and friends platter (watermelon triangles, grape, strawberries)
	Drink	Milk and water	Milk and water	Milk and water	Milk and water	Milk and water
LATE SNACK		Choose from: wholegrain crackers and cheese, fresh vegetables and fruit, served with water				
Water		Water is freely available throughout the day				
Infants (eating solids)		A variety of healthy foods are offered every day including iron-rich foods (meat, poultry, fish, legumes/beans, tofu, eggs), fruit, vegetables, grains and milk products. Foods are an appropriate texture for infants' age (e.g. mashed, lumpy, chopped, finger foods).				
Allergies		Children with allergies and or food intolerances are provided a tailored version of the regular menu to suit their individual needs				

Where to go for more Information

If you are concerned about your child's nutrition intake or would like to know more about their mealtime experience when in care, reach out to the staff at your childcare facility for feedback, ask for a copy of their menu or seek out the advice of an APD. More information on the NQF can be found at [National Quality Framework](#) | ACECQA. A copy of the Australian Guide for Healthy Eating and the Australian Dietary Guidelines can be found at www.eatforthehealth.gov.au.



Need help with ensuring you provide healthy Menus for the children in your care?

This article was written by **OSCAR** Care Group Dietitian, Lauren Goffredo

OSCAR Care Group Dietitians provide assistance in the development of Childcare Menus and conduct Comprehensive Menu Reviews to support your facility to ensure that the Menu provides the opportunity for children to meet their nutritional needs.

Please call or email **OSCAR** Care Group Dietitians via our contact details below.



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