

feature



# Growing up in the best of health

Healthy eating habits start in childhood, and early learning services play an important role in supporting children's nutrition choices, write **Dr Ruth Wallace** and **Elly Mobilia** from Edith Cowan University.

Good nutrition supports quality of life, protects against infection, maintains healthy weight and reduces the risk of chronic disease (AIHW, 2018). These are well-established facts. However, many Australians are still not eating nutritious meals. In fact, poor food and nutrition habits have been found in children as young as two years, and these preferences are likely to continue into adulthood (AIHW, 2018).

As more children attend early childhood education and care services (ECEC), it's important they have

opportunities to learn food literacy skills. This will help them establish positive eating habits that continue into adulthood (Wallace, 2016).

According to federal government data, there are 1.3 million children attending ECEC services in Australia for about 28 hours a week. Therefore, it is important that ECEC settings implement food and nutrition policies that support healthy eating practices and ensure children's nutritional intake is the best it can be (Wallace, Costello & Devine, 2017).

## The importance of the ECEC environment

Introducing children at ECEC services to good nutrition—including a wide range of food flavours, textures and colours; practising good role modelling; and providing positive mealtime environments—can play an important role in promoting healthy eating habits in adulthood (Scaglioni et al., 2018).

Generally, it is food coordinators who create and provide meals for children attending the setting, while the educators are important role models who help create a healthy eating environment. But overall, it is the directors who hold the ultimate responsibility to ensure that food and nutrition policies are developed and implemented. These responsibilities underpin the concept that ECEC services can greatly influence children's understanding of what healthy eating looks like. Children's food preferences continue to evolve under biological, social and environmental factors—including their attendance at ECEC—which are all key determinants of food choices and diet quality (Scaglioni et al., 2018).

## Experiences to support children's knowledge and understanding of healthy eating

Children learn when they are provided with activities that respond to their strengths, interests and emerging needs. Following are some experiences that educators can provide to children to stimulate their understanding of, and interest in, nutrition and healthy eating.



## Growing and gardening

- Use your outdoor space to involve children in hands-on activities such as growing fruits and vegetables. Once the planting process is complete, discuss with children the benefits of each variety you have planted. When it's time to harvest the produce, talk about the health benefits in age-appropriate terms.
- Children can show respect for the environment and develop their autonomy and sense of agency through growing their own food
- Such activities could take between 4–10 weeks, depending on the seeds/seedlings chosen and time of year. Select easily grown herbs and vegetables such as basil, parsley, oregano, cherry tomatoes and capsicum and describe the growing process. When you have seedlings, show children how to transfer these into pots or garden beds. Help children make/draw labels for their plants, attach these to sticks and push into pots or garden beds. Keep a growing diary, either by drawing pictures or taking photographs showing seedling growth. Use herbs and vegetables as ingredients to make healthy pizza, using the bread activity described on the next page.





### Baking bread

- Making bread creates opportunities for experimentation and creativity, and can embed science with nutrition and culture.
- Plan a trip to the bakery to show children the different types of bread. This activity will allow children to learn how bread is made, and about the different varieties of bread available in different cultures.
- Making bread activity (snac, n.d): Children can help measure ingredients as they are added to the bowl. Watch through the cling wrap on the bowl as the dough rises and talk about the role of yeast in making the bread rise. Discuss the safety aspects of baking bread, and caution children about the oven, and that the steam rising from the bread will be hot and could cause a burn. Serve the fresh bread and discuss the taste and texture. Use the dough as a base for a healthy pizza made with some of the vegetables and herbs grown at the centre.
- Discuss the nutritional value of bread, explain how it gives us energy to play and be active and keeps little tummies healthy.



### Food preparation

- Plan a menu with children. Shortlist a few healthy dishes and discuss the ingredients. Involve children in the shopping process as well.
- Include children in food preparation and use this as a way to familiarise them with a range of fresh foods. This is a good opportunity to guide them on the proper ways to wash and prepare certain foods correctly.

**'Children learn when they are provided with activities that respond to their strengths, interests and emerging needs.'**



### Pouring

- When gardening, use watering of plants to teach children about the benefits of staying hydrated. Parallel this with our own need for hydration and reinforce the benefits of drinking water rather than soft drinks.
- Pouring water for drinks is a skill that is often messy in the home. This activity allows toddlers to practice this life-skill in a fun manner outdoors. Fill half a water jug and provide some cups and encourage children to fill the cups by themselves. Through practice they will gain confidence, and by the end of the activity will spill less water and be able to pour single handedly.

### Storytelling

- Use picture books about food and healthy eating—at age-appropriate levels for babies, toddlers and older children—to communicate positive themes and messages.
- Encourage children to tell their own stories about healthy foods they enjoy. This will be beneficial for their memory, increase confidence to speak in public and expose those listening to different food experiences as well.

### Healthy food alphabet and game

- Teach children the alphabet using healthy foods. For example, A is for apple, B is for banana, etc.
- Involve children in group discussions about different fruits and vegetables and make reference to the colours of these fruits and vegetables.
- Encourage children to categorise the produce as either fruit or vegetable. This will increase their nutrition knowledge and build their critical thinking skills.

**Further nutritional advice and activities for young children can be found at [snacwa.com.au](http://snacwa.com.au).**

#### References

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