



GOOD Bite

for childcare
staff

Helping Children Achieve and Maintain a Healthy Weight

"Food is the construction material for children's growing bodies. The growing body of a child is built from the deconstructed and then reconstructed components of food and drinks and nothing else.

High performance bodies warrant high performance fuel. We are, I trust, disinclined to construct anything we care about- least of all the children we love- out of junk."

Michael Katz



Early childhood education centres (ECECs) have a valuable role in helping children make good food choices. Whether food is provided by the centre or brought from home, the preschool years are an ideal opportunity to teach children good eating habits, which have the potential to last a lifetime.

Encouraging healthy choices for children who bring food from home or providing centre based healthy meals and snacks are a great way to do this. Having an up to date nutrition policy that parents sign when their child is enrolled at the centre is one way to help with compliance regarding the provision of healthy foods. ECEC teachers have a role modelling healthy eating habits and discussing the positive attributes of healthy foods at snack times and mealtimes. Promoting healthy foods and participating in health promotion programs such as Munch & Move are just some ways centres can provide positive messages around the food children eat at their centres. This is important as weight problems are very common among children in Australia. At least 1 in 4 children in Australia are overweight or obese.

With so many children having issues with weight, all the factors that influence children's weight need to be addressed with a 'whole of centre approach'. Other ways centres help children maintain a healthy weight include promoting opportunities for physical activity and reducing the amount of time spent on sedentary activities such as 'screen time' such as TV, computers, tablets etc.

When it comes to weight, much also depends on what foods and drinks children are provided with at home. If a child is provided with lots of high fat, sugar and salt foods at home, resulting in them consuming more energy (calories or Kilojoules) than they burn up, then over time the excess calories will be stored as body fat.

When a child is in energy balance, i.e. their energy output matches their intake; they will grow normally and reach their genetically determined height. Excess calories will lead to extra body fat. Currently, nearly 40 % of a child's intake comes from 'discretionary' or 'sometimes' foods. These are highly processed packaged foods such as chips, chocolates, biscuits, soft drinks, cordials etc.

With so many delicious foods and drinks available, it is easy to over consume without realising how many calories are being ingested. So while a child doesn't consciously know that they have taken in excess calories, their bodies do a magnificent job of storing the excess calories as body fat.

If parents of overweight children are also overweight, parents may be tempted to think that the problem is in the genes, it is a family thing. In reality, it is probable that the whole family is consuming more calories than they 'burn' up.

Currently we are at the highest levels of overweight and obesity ever recorded. If the growing numbers of overweight or obese children were due to genetics then there simply hasn't been enough time in the last 2 or 3 generations for this change in the gene pool to occur. It has to be lifestyle factors.

So what can be done for overweight children at your centre?

There are dozens of reasons for obesity in modern society. However whatever the causes they can boil down to either eating too much, or using (burning up) too little.

Here are just a few things to try to prevent excessive weight gain:

- Provide breakfast if children don't have breakfast at home. It will help them to concentrate better at preschool and reduce hunger.
- Having regular main meal and mid meal times encourages the social aspect of meal time as well as the opportunity to discuss and reinforce healthy eating. Regular meal times (sitting at the table) helps to reinforce that meals are not play time. Those ECECs that have progressive meal times need to be mindful of the benefits of social interaction and healthy eating role modelling.
- Continuous access to food throughout the day i.e. 'grazing' is to be discouraged. 'Grazing' is not good for teeth and can lead to poor eating habits and over eating.
- Involve children at your centre in food choices and when they are old enough, encourage them to help with growing foods, food preparation and basic cooking.
- Teach children the difference between fast foods and healthier meals prepared at home. Reinforce that most of these take away foods are high in fat, sugar and salt, so are not healthy choices. They are 'sometimes' foods to be eaten occasionally.
- Children can be taught to have water as the main drink of choice when they go home as well as in care. In childcare water is the main drink provided to quench thirst. Children seem to manage quite well without soft drinks, fruit juice and cordial, which all contain unnecessary extra calories as sugar. If they can do it in care they can do it at home.
- If food is provided, follow the nutrition checklist found in Caring for Children (2014) and that way each child will meet 50% of their nutritional requirements if in care for 8 hours or more. If food is brought from home, encourage parents to pack grain-based breads, crackers and breakfast cereals, fruit, dairy, vegetables and iron rich foods. Wholegrain products contain more iron than more processed white varieties. Some examples of wholegrain varieties include multigrain breads, Weetbix™, Mini Wheats™ and Just Right™.
- Provide or encourage reduced fat dairy foods (including milk, yoghurt and cheese) for children over 2 years and low fat dairy foods for those over 5 years of age. If this is what they have been given from a young age, then that is all they know.

- Encourage children to eat a wide variety of vegetables for both meals and snacks. Only one in twenty 4-8 year olds eat the recommended number of vegetable serves each day.
- Children are likely to feel fuller if their meal contains half a plate of vegetables or salad at the main meal. Again positive educator modelling is important as well as peer modelling. Often children will eat foods in care that they won't eat at home.
- Provide food related activities and let parents know that healthy eating has been a regular focus while children are in care. Ask them to reinforce what is learnt in care by doing the same at home.
- Encourage parents to download the 'Food Switch' app. It enables them to scan nearly every food product in the supermarket and see what its health star rating is. If packaged foods are brought from home, ask parents to provide foods with a health star rating of 3 or more.



- Encourage parents to choose healthy snack foods such as fruit, low fat yoghurts, wholegrain crackers with topping, toast, flavoured low fat milks and vegetable sticks. Don't forget to check the health star ratings on these packaged foods as there is a wide variation in yoghurts, crackers and flavoured milks.
- Decide if a child is bored or hungry, if they ask for extra food. If the child is asking for food after the meal or snack, only offer a healthy choice such as vegetable sticks. If this is refused they probably are not hungry, but may need some suggestions of what to do with themselves. Preferably something that increases their activity levels.
- Children should be active for at least three hours per day. This can be in short periods of 15-20 minutes. Encourage play outdoors and being active together as a family.



Contact Us!

This fact sheet is produced by the Central Coast Public Health/Community Nutrition Team. If you have any suggestions or nutrition topics you would like covered please contact us by telephone on 4320 3691 or fax on 4320 2828.