

WODEN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRE

MEALTIMES POLICY

POLICY STATEMENT:

Woden Early Childhood Centre provides a relaxed, positive and social environment at mealtimes and promotes good nutrition and healthy eating habits for children.

This policy supports inclusive practices at Woden Early Childhood Centre. Please refer to the Inclusion Policy.

RATIONALE:

Good nutrition and healthy eating habits help children to grow, develop and maintain healthy bodies in childhood and throughout later life.

SCOPE: This policy applies to all staff within the Centre

RELEVANT LEGISLATION:

ACT Centre Based Children's Services Conditions for Approvals in Principle and Licences 2000 part 4; 417- 4.20

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM:

Quality Improvement & Accreditation System – Quality Practices Guide, 2005 (P6.1; P6.2; P6.3)

LOCATION OF INFORMATION

This information is in the Staff Handbook CD policies.

Linking policies
Food and Nutrition
Healthy eating plan
inclusion

Source Documents -

- Bunney, C & Williams, L (4th Ed) (2005) *Caring for children: Food, nutrition and fun activities*. NSW Dept Health
- Centre for Health Promotion www.chdf.org.au/childcarenutrition (Retrieved 15 Jan 07)
- Centre for Community Child Health, *Connections*, (Dec 2002, Issue 8). Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.
- Centre for Community Child Health (2002) *Relaxed and social: a positive approach to children's healthy eating*.
- National Health and Medical Research Council, *Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia, 2003* www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/subjects/childhealth (Retrieved 15 Jan 2007)

POLICY REVIEW

This policy is reviewed on a biannual basis both by the centres staff and then by families. Once the Policy has been reviewed and changes are made it goes to the management committee for ratification. Please refer to the Policy development and review policy.

Date endorsed by Committee: 24.3.09

Date to be reviewed: 24.3.10

1) INTRODUCTION

When children are in child care, it is recommended that the food provided makes up 50% of their required daily intake of food and drink. This is a significant contribution to their dietary needs. Therefore, it is important that the food and drink provided is safe, varied, nutritious, developmentally appropriate and culturally diverse.

It is also important that the mealtime environment is pleasant and relaxed. This type of setting greatly contributes to children's enjoyment of mealtimes that in turn contributes to their growing understanding about balanced, healthy eating and the social context of mealtimes.

2) RESPONSIBILITY FOR FEEDING CHILDREN

The Centre believes that helping children to eat healthy meals and to develop positive eating habits is a shared responsibility between staff and children.

Staff are responsible for:

- i) scheduling regular times for meals and snacks that meets the children's needs
- ii) planning a healthy and nutritiously balanced menu
- iii) preparing food in a safe and hygienic manner
- iv) supporting children to come to the eating area for meals and snacks
- v) creating a relaxed and pleasant social environment at mealtimes
- vi) respecting children's choices

Children are responsible for:

- i) choosing which of the healthy food options offered they want to eat
- ii) deciding how much food they want to eat

The five (5) key behaviours that staff promote at mealtimes are:

- * Eat together
- * Sit and interact while eating
- * Offer new foods regularly
- * Provide healthy meals and snacks with a few choices
- * Let children choose what to eat and how much to eat, from a healthy selection

3) HEALTHY FOOD MESSAGES

Mealtimes together provide an opportunity for staff to discuss the origins of food, food production and nutrition messages with children. However, good food messages are also integrated into other parts of the day at the Centre and these messages focus on –

- * Mealtimes are social occasions when people eat together
- * Developing good eating habits such as regular times for meals
- * Trying new foods, regularly
- * Eating when hungry
- * Starting with small portions and stopping when full
- * Enjoying a variety of foods

4) TRANSITION TO MEALTIMES

Children can be very involved in their activities and may be hesitant to stop what they are doing to come for snack or mealtimes. Consequently, staff:

- i) provide snacks over an extended period so children can come in small groups and as they feel hungry
- ii) encourage children to help set up the meal area, in anticipation
- iii) provide a short transition time with a story or some songs to help children slow down from their activities and begin to focus on mealtimes
- iv) use transitions to set the scene for mealtimes with suggestions of some social discussion topics (what happened during the playtime that morning)
- v) respect children's wish not to eat if they are not hungry but establish a 'rule' that children come to the table and talk with their friends at meal time, as sometimes watching peers eat may change their mind about eating
- vi) use transitions to minimise children's waiting time for food

5) THE EATING ENVIRONMENT

The focus of the mealtime environment is on a safe and relaxed atmosphere and about building positive relationships between staff and children and among peers.

In the eating environment staff provide:

- i) tables for small groups of children to sit together
- ii) tableware and utensils that are attractive and the area maintained in a clean and aesthetic manner
- iii) opportunities for children to assist in setting up and clearing away the meal environment – in line with their skills and interest
- iv) discussions with children about the environment and what they would like – tablecloths, a centerpiece for decoration, quiet music; utensils or other items that reflect different cultures

- v) utensils of a size and shape appropriate to the development of the child that encourages self feeding skills
- vi) serving bowls with food and drink in small jugs that children can serve themselves with staff close-by to supervise and support when needed
- vii) safe area/s for children to stack used plates, cutlery and cups
- viii) scheduled snack and mealtimes throughout the day, set up consistently to provide continuity and assurance for children but with some flexibility for special activities, the weather, or if younger children seem to be getting tired, etc.

6) MODELING GOOD EATING HABITS

At mealtimes, staff encourage children to:

- i) serve themselves with some assistance when required
- ii) begin with a small serve and allow for 'seconds'
- iii) try a small sample of a new food first (to minimise wastage) before a regular serving of a new food
- iv) eat until they feel full, but not necessarily finishing what is on the plate
- v) chew their food well and not overfill their mouths with food
- vi) develop their table manners, but do not over emphasise manners

Food preferences are often influenced by children's peer group, so staff:

- i) sit a 'good' eater next to a child who may need encouragement to try new foods
- ii) use the older children to model good practices with the younger children
- iii) encourage older children to help serve some of the food to younger children to encourage them to accept and try the food

7) INTERACTIONS AT MEALTIMES

The focus of interactions and conversations is primarily on the children's interests and experiences. Staff can:

- i) encourage children to talk among their table group
- ii) highlight particular activities they may have engaged in that day
- iii) sit close to a group and/or move around to each table group
- iv) sit when talking with children rather than always talking at them from a standing position
- v) eat some of the food offered with the children
- vi) remain calm and accommodate children's growing self-feeding skills and some 'messiness' at mealtimes

Staff can also:

- i) discuss nutrition at mealtimes, in an informal manner
- ii) draw children's attention to a new food or something interesting about a particular food eg how beans grow; if food has been prepared differently, and any cultural factors about the food offered
- iii) encourage children to stay at the table and talk or provide quiet activities for children who may finish eating more quickly than others

Staff do not:

- i) focus on how much a child has eaten – but note this for families
- ii) force children to eat through rewards, heavy persuasion or coercion
- iii) withdraw food as a behaviour guidance strategy
- iv) rush children to eat but encourage a timely pace especially if the area needs to be used by another group

8) ENCOURAGING HEALTHY CHOICES

The Centre provides a variety of food items across all the food groups. Variety also includes different ways of preparing the same food, eg fresh apple pieces or stewed apple offers different flavour and texture to expand children's healthy choices.

To encourage healthy choices, staff:

- i) highlight when a new food is being introduced with some discussion about the food – this can happen during small group experiences or as part of the calming down process as children transition to mealtimes
- ii) discourage naming foods as "good" or 'bad' – this can encourage children to want 'restricted' food or create a food 'hierarchy' with desserts seen as a 'special' part of the meal
- iii) discuss the value of particular foods to promote their growing, healthy bodies

Staff also integrate good food and nutrition opportunities throughout the program on a regular basis with children such as:

- i) growing vegetables or herbs with children
- ii) involving children with food preparation such as collecting herbs from the garden for the cook
- iii) having a compost bin and or recycling food scraps
- iv) involving children in preparing food, eg for special occasions or other simple preparations such as mixing ingredients for a dressing, rolling pastry, measuring etc
- v) exploring the kitchen when it is 'empty' to discuss appliances, how it is important to keep food in the fridge, etc
- vi) drawing children's attention when food deliveries are made
- vii) conducting excursions to local food stores and if possible to a farm where food may be produced

9) RESPECTING CHILDREN'S CHOICES

When staff provide a variety of healthy food, children are more able to choose from the food provided. Enabling children to make choices empowers them and builds their skills in making good food choices.

Staff respect children's choices by:

- i) supporting children to choose from the healthy food provided
- ii) offering culturally diverse foods and in particular food from the culture/s represented within the Centre
- iii) offering small servings of food first and having provisions if a child is still hungry for a second portion
- iv) providing time so children are not rushed to eat (but do not usually remain in the eating environment for more than 30 minutes)
- v) commenting positively on food selections rather than what has not been chosen
- vi) making some provision for children to be involved in menu planning
- vii) responding to children's hunger and request for food outside scheduled mealtimes

Staff also acknowledge that:

- i) food choices (and refusal of particular food) may be culturally or religiously based or there may be a health reason. Ultimately though, not all foods are preferred by all children
- ii) children's emerging autonomy is supported by offering a limit of choices (usually 2 or 3 options) at mealtimes, so decision making isn't overwhelming
- iii) every child is different. Most children can regulate how much food they need
- iv) trying to control the amount of food children eat can interfere with their normal development of appetite and self regulation
- v) activity levels, exercise and growth spurts can influence the amount of food children eat as well as the choice of food offered

10) **FOOD/DRINK REFUSAL**

Food/drink refusal can be frustrating for staff and for children. There are often many reasons for this. It is important for staff to remain calm and support the child during these situations. Consequently, staff:

- i) view food intake (and food refusal) over the number of days the child attends the Centre, rather than how much a child may eat (or not eat) at a particular mealtime
- ii) work with families to implement recommended strategies when there is ongoing food refusal by the child
- iii) never force children to eat nor reward them to eat as this can also lead to future struggles over food
- iv) understand that rewarding can also lead to a decrease in preference for the target food
- v) understand that trying too hard to get children to eat can lead to negative eating behaviours and power struggles – this results in disrespectful feeding strategies, disempowering of children and their loss of autonomy
- vi) serve fluids generally towards to end of the first portion of food so that fluids don't take up 'space' in the child's stomach, making them feel full and thus refuse food
- vii) offer an alternative (such as a sandwich) if the child is hungry but isn't eating any of the food offered

11) **INTRODUCING NEW AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE FOODS**

While all children prefer 'familiar' foods, the Centre environment provides an opportunity to encourage children to eat a diverse range of foods, including culturally diverse foods and to be confident to try new foods.

Staff do this by:

- i) planning the menu cycle to provide for new foods to be introduced on a regular and repeated basis, so there are many opportunities for children to try new foods
- ii) encouraging children but not forcing them to try new food – a small sample to start
- iii) link new food to something familiar for the children – eg familiar food that is prepared differently
- iv) being relaxed if new food is refused
- v) having discussions focused on the cultural aspects of food and how diversity, in all forms, is valued within the Centre
- vi) inviting family members or local community members to prepare or discuss food from various cultures
- vii) recognising cultural differences, nurturing and celebrating difference

12) **HEALTHY & SAFETY**

Food safety and hygiene practices are also important to consider as part of the mealtime experience.

Staff ensure that:

- i) the eating area is clean before presenting food and before children eat
- ii) children with food allergies are monitored closely
- iii) sensitive discussions occur regularly to help other children understand the dangers of some foods for some children
- iv) children thoroughly wash and dry their hands before eating
- v) gloves are worn to serve food or food tongs are used
- vi) children do not share food or handle the food or utensils of other children
- vii) any dropped utensils are quickly replaced
- viii) the area is cleaned properly following snacks or mealtimes, for safety and to minimise vermin and other pests.

To minimise the risk of choking, staff:

- i) ensure children are always seated when eating
- ii) do not give food to children who are crying or upset – calm them first
- iii) never force a child to eat
- iv) ensure children's mouths are empty before they return to play
- v) actively supervise children when they are eating
- vi) avoid foods that pose a high risk of choking such as pieces of raw hard vegetables, tough fruit skin, popcorn and seeds.

13) **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR BABIES**

When babies can sit in a belted low chair, they are seated whenever possible with other children at mealtimes so they can interact with each other.

Staff undertake to:

- i) introduce new foods – one at a time
- ii) offer new food alongside a familiar food
- iii) offer new foods on many occasions, even if refused at first
- iv) understand that food refusal doesn't always mean food is disliked, but is often about the baby being cautious
- v) treat food refusal calmly and without fuss so all food is seen as a positive experience, especially when the food is reintroduced
- vi) serve small amounts of food to allow the baby some choice
- vii) provide finger foods and encourage self feeding as babies become more interested
- viii) change the preparation (appearance), taste or texture of food slowly over time to provide variety and increase the child's healthy food range

14) **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TODDLERS**

When toddler's growth rate begins to slow after the first year, so does their need for food.

Staff understand that:

- i) food refusal is treated calmly and without fuss so all food is seen as a positive experience, especially when the food is reintroduced
- ii) new foods may need to be offered many, many times before a toddler may accept and enjoy the food
- iii) rejected food is re-offered periodically rather than day after day
- iv) reluctance to try new foods often emerges at this time, but continued positive experiences are important and reluctance often decreases in the coming years
- v) young toddlers may easily lose interest in feeding themselves and in the food itself, and it can seem that they are tired. Staff are available to encourage them, to model to them and, if needed, to help them with their feeding
- vi) other activities can also take over the toddler's interest or sometimes they do become too tired to eat at the designated mealtime
- vii) food is kept for the child to be eaten when they awake

15) **PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES**

Working in partnership with families is central to the operations of the Centre. In order to promote healthy eating habits in children, staff:

- i) seek information from families, on an ongoing basis, about their child's food likes and dislikes
- ii) respect family practices at mealtimes and incorporate these into the program
- iii) develop nutrition and other food/drink related policies, in consultation with families
- iv) display the weekly menu and chart the child's daily food/drink intake
- v) encourage families to share favourite nutritious food recipes, including culturally diverse food –
- vi) seek family input into menu planning and food selection
- vii) provide recipes from the Centre's menu to families
- viii) are sensitive to any ongoing issues families may be dealing with related to the child's health and nutrition
- ix) provide information on nutrition, healthy eating habits and the social/developmental aspects of mealtimes to families
- x) provide information that is accessible ie visual, written or verbal and wherever possible, in relevant community languages
- xi) support and assist families in addressing issues or concerns they have about their child's eating habits

Link to other Centre policies:

- [Nutrition policy](#) [Health & Hygiene policy](#) [Alternatives to Chemicals policy](#)