

## Healthy Eating in Early Childhood Settings

**Lynn Hogan**

*Director, Campus Kids*



---

Hogan, L. (2010). Healthy eating in early childhood settings. In R. Doiron & M. Gabriel (Eds.), *Research in early child development in Prince Edward Island: A research monograph* (pp.90–100). Charlottetown, PE: Centre for Education Research, University of Prince Edward Island.



## Healthy Eating in Early Childhood Settings

I have been in the early childhood field since 1987 and I have loved every minute of it. My own personal growth and education has led me to be the early childhood educator (ECE) I am today. I have especially enjoyed watching the field evolve. One of the biggest changes I have observed is the involvement of parents prior to and during their time at a childcare centre. I remember when parents would call on a Friday and start on Monday. They would have little to no knowledge of the centre. Now parents want to come in and meet with you to see if this is the right place for their child. They want to know about the educators and the philosophy of the centre. Once the interview and tour is over and the child has been enrolled, parents remain involved. They come to information sessions, drop in for visits, bring in birthday snacks, and participate in field trips.

One of the most frequent questions now asked by parents when they visit a childcare centre is “Where is your menu?” They want to know what we serve to their children on a daily bases. Healthy eating and obesity is a major concern in our society. We live in a society that has become negatively influenced by a fast-paced lifestyle and easy access to foods that are full of empty calories. Slowly, we are seeing a shift in the education field to help combat this trend as we witness the effects it is having on our children. With the role that early childhood educators play in the education of our youngest citizens, is it now our role to provide an environment that encourages healthy eating? This paper will look at healthy eating and some of the major factors surrounding it. Some of the points that will be covered are: (1) why is it important for children to eat healthy; (2) what are some of the barriers for both parents and childcare centres in providing a positive healthy eating environment; (3) what are the provincial regulations surrounding healthy eating in childcare centres; (4) what do parents see as our role in healthy

eating; and (5) how can childcare centres influence the eating habits of children in a positive manner.

The Child Care Facilities Act, Regulations and Guidelines of Prince Edward Island (CCFA) clearly states, “The supervisor shall ensure that all meals and snacks that are served meet the nutritional requirements of children in accordance with Canada’s Food Guide” (Child Care Facilities Act, 1988). The Canada’s Food Guide details serving sizes of vegetables and fruits, grain products, milk and alternatives, and meat and alternatives, plus it offers ideas for each group. If each centre offered the number of food groups recommended at each meal and snack, in appropriate amounts, that would provide each child with the adequate opportunity to meet their food guide requirements (“Canada’s Food,” July 2008). The CCFA also states centres must post menus for parents.

The Canada Food Guide tells us it’s important to serve children healthy food because it helps them grow, makes their bodies strong, helps with brain development, and gives them energy to play and to help their bodies to heal (“Canada’s Food,” July 2008). Another big factor that we can’t ignore is that children develop food-related attitudes during preschool years (Fuller, Keller, Olson, & Plymale, 2005) that extends into their adulthood. If we give them a strong foundation in the early years, it will be instilled into their life style and help them avoid the pitfalls of our fast-food, calorie filled societal norms.

Now that we know why it is vitally important for young children to eat healthy, we need to discuss some of the barriers that early childhood educators are faced with on a daily bases. The first issue usually mentioned is money. There are lots of concerns around money and budgets. The media, administrators, and society in general claims that it costs more to eat healthy, but does it? This is a burning question. In the past five years at my early learning centre, we have worked hard on developing healthy menus for the children and their

families. I know from my financial statements over the years that I spend less on groceries now than I did before. That did not happen overnight.

I had to come up with some creative ways to save money. Our summer/fall menu operates on a four week rotation so we know the groceries we need in advance. Knowing the menu in advance makes it possible to buy in bulk and to shop around by knowing where the sales are and purchasing the sale item in bulk. Labeling your menu with generic titles such as “vegetables” or “fruit” allows you some freedom on purchasing seasonal or sale produce. For example, buying meat directly from a butcher helps cut the cost plus you know where your meat comes from. It’s okay to use coupons and buy store brand names. When you plan the menu, it’s important to think about what you are cooking each day and look at time you can save by having some of this preparation done ahead of time. You can use leftovers for another meal the next day. For example buy a big chicken and have that with potatoes or rice and vegetables. The next day have chicken soup. By saving both time and money, a centre can then afford to hire a cook rather than use the other staff to piece-meal the cooking together. Having a staff that is fully aware of the situation in the kitchen can also save money. When they are not being drawn in different directions, they are can give the children homemade products which are cheaper and healthier and put more time and effort into things such as groceries which also saves time and money.

Every childcare centre has many families with their own values and beliefs around healthy eating and the barriers they perceive. Family meals have changed in the last decade which has a direct impact on children’s diet (Condrasky, Graham, & Kamp, 2006). Time, or lack of, is a problem. Families are busy and finding to time to eat can be challenging, let alone time to prepare healthy meals. If a family has a “picky eater” or special diets, those are real issues they have to work through (Dwyer, Needham, Simpson, & Heeney,

2008). Of course, for some parents, it's the cost of groceries and the belief that they cannot afford some food items. Perhaps their own "eating education" did not include introduction to the importance of variety and the health benefits of certain foods. This is where ECEs can make a difference within families. We have the opportunity to introduce new foods to children over and over again with their peers in a nonthreatening atmosphere. This information will then be carried back to the home with the child. In addition, the fact that the child did eat well balanced snacks and lunch during the day can help parents feel confident their child is receiving the nutrients he or she needs. Parents should be able to take comfort knowing that the childcare centre must base its menus on the Canada Food Guide as mentioned in the discussion on regulations. Centres who follow this closely, avoiding too many "sometimes foods," can help support families and children in developing a positive experience with healthy eating and perhaps lessen the stress and guilt parents can feel at home when they must develop their meal plans with far more issues and constraints to consider.

Parents play a very important role in childcare centres. If it were not for the parents we would not exist; their opinions matter. In addition, ECEs and parents must work hand-in-hand to help create the best possible situation for children. I conducted a quick survey to a few parents around healthy eating to see what they're thinking and what is important to them. The first question I asked was did they feel the ECEs played a role in educating their child on healthy eating. All the surveys that came back said yes. One participant stated, "Healthy eating should be a part of any young child's formal/informal education" (Tara, mother of four, August 3, 2009). It was noted that many factors affect the child's healthy eating education. With children spending large blocks of time in their childcare settings, ECEs have great opportunities to introduce children to many different aspects of healthy eating. Children have to learn about food and nutrition (Unusan, 2006). They learn about food and eating behaviors through home and schools (Fuller, Keller,

Olsen, & Plymale, 2005). There is more to healthy eating than serving. We need to consider role modeling, offering a variety of foods, getting the children involved, making food fun, providing colour and choice, and remembering the physical component. Early childhood educators are in a unique position to model healthy lifestyle habits or to help some behaviors change because we are with the children every day (Maimon, 2008). When you offer an integrated program you need to see the whole child.

Another aspect that we see connected with healthy eating is physical activity. Do parents see physical activity as part of the healthy child? Again, we heard an overwhelming yes. “It impacts the overall health and general well-being and it needs to be built into the children’s daily routine” (Nadine, mother of three, August 3, 2009). “They have enjoyed a healthy meal and now they are ready to burn off some energy. It is a child’s natural tendency to be physical and active” (Maimon, 2008). We need to create time in our day to allow the children to run, jump, skip and move their bodies. In most childcare centres we have the children for 6-8 hours per day which gives us plenty of opportunity to plan for physical movement. The children need unstructured outside play every day. I proceeded to ask if there was food their children ate here but did not eat at home. All said no, but it was noted that “sometimes they eat food at daycare that I was not aware they would want to eat; i.e., tuna” (Tara, August 3, 2009). We know that every child isn’t going to like every food that is offered to them but somebody will like it. Don’t worry about waste; think about variety. When the children get involved in the preparation of their meals, they usually eat it. I remember when a child made a tuna and jam sandwich and ate it but they never made it again. They can be very creative and sometimes it’s hard to keep opinions to yourself but you have to. It’s important for the child to learn his/her likes and dislikes, not the ECEs’.

The last thing I asked about was what they felt was the most important component of our

menus. I must say I was impressed with the answers. It told me parents are paying attention and health is important to their families. Most said choice and variety because “if a child does not like one item on the menu there will always be something else that they will probably like or consider” (Sheri, mother of three, August 3, 2009). When they get to create their own subs, put spaghetti sauce on or not, and build a taco with lots of lettuce, the children see that food is fun. Use lots of color to make the meal appealing and then they can make choices for themselves and it’s a happy experience. Parents are listening, watching and learning from us. We are perceived to be the experts in these areas, and so we need to keep current on all the issues surrounding early childhood.

Change is not always easy, but it is necessary. With all the research and information on healthy eating and its importance on child development, it’s time for centers to re-evaluate their menus. Thinking healthy and making changes within a menu is a journey and it takes time and experimenting. You have to set goals, attend workshops, and visit other centers to see what will work at your centre. When we first started our journey I had three goals: I wanted to use more whole wheat products, give children choice, and have the children participated in the serving. We then came up with a plan of how to best implement these goals into our program. In terms of the whole wheat, we thought it should be a gradual introduction. Our cook did a 50/50 split of whole wheat and white. For sandwiches, we used one white slice with one whole wheat slice; biscuits were made with half white and half whole wheat flour. The children did not mind, and within a month the white was gone. We had to make opportunity for choice within our existing lunch and snack times. We did two things: opened up both morning and afternoon snacks for an hour and served everything in divided containers, so meal components were not already mixed together. Now the children had choice of when and if they wanted to eat snack and input on what they wanted on their plates. This flowed smoothly into our next goal of

the children serving themselves. The divided containers allowed the children to decide on what they want to eat, how much and to build their lunches and snacks themselves. This was very powerful for the children and there was less waste and more conversations happened at the table. Lunch and snack became a social time, not a struggle. While these steps may not work for everyone, this is a journey and centres need to figure out what is important to them and how to get there. Think big but start small and change will happen.

My values and beliefs are based on play and child choice opportunities. I have sampled many methods and beliefs over the years, but Reggio and emergent-integrated curriculum have meshed perfectly with my passion and belief in valuing the healthy child. We need to think of the child as a whole (integrated) and their bodies and minds included. The theory that motivates the Reggio teacher is the belief that children are capable and competent. The learning in the classroom happens throughout the day in an integrated environment. Even snack and lunch is part of the learning. The children are capable and competent, they are able to serve themselves. If milk spills, the children know the environment so they get the material needed and they clean it up. We see lots of learning happening at the snack and lunch time such as: math (counting their crackers), science (tasting red and green apples), language (conversations and building relationships), and social studies (introduction to new foods).

ECEs have access to a variety of resources to help them provide healthy eating information to children. New and updated resources are appearing all the time. In 2006, our centre started to participate in a research project called Eating Between the Lines (EBTL). This project was created by Dr. Ray Doiron, Faculty Education at UPEI, and Dr. Jennifer Taylor, Family and Nutritional Sciences at UPEI. EBTL “is a resource for Early Childhood Educators to use to foster an interest in nutrition issues and food awareness in a fun

and informative environment” (EBTL, 2009). Integrated into this program is early literacy . The children love it and they don’t even realize they are working, but through our observations we are able to build on what they know and introduce new ideas to further their experiences

We can clearly see through the research provided, how essential it is for children to receive a comprehensive “eating education.” Research tells us it is the first six years of life that establish our food and physical activity preference.( Vasquez, Salazar, Andrde, Vasquez, & Diaz, 2006). We can also clearly see that ECEs spend large blocks of time with children during these formative years. Logically, then, early childhood educators, supervisors, and administrators all have a crucial role to play in meeting and educating the nutritional needs of the child. We are with young children every day and have developed relationships with them already. The stage is set; we, the educators, just need to create opportunities for the children to be able to explore and experiment with healthy food and drink choices, as well as appropriate portion sizes (Maimon 2008). This can be done through snack, lunch, cooking class, games, projects, or interactive websites. Parents and society see it as our responsibility to integrate nutrition and physical activity into our daily schedule. Parents depend upon us to create this environment for their children. The lessons we teach children during these years are essential to their continued health and success as they grow to become an integrated of our society.

### References

- Condrasky, M., Graham, K., & Kamp, J. (2006). Cooking with a chef: An innovative program to improve mealtime practices and eating behaviors of caregivers of preschool children. *Journal of Nutrition Education & Behavior*, 38(5), 324-325. doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2006.04.005
- Dwyer, J., Needham, L., Simpson, J. R., & Heeney, E. S. (2008). Parents report intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental barriers to supporting healthy eating and physical activity

among their preschoolers. *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism = Physiologie Appliquée, Nutrition Et Métabolisme*, 33(2), 338-346.

Fuller, C., Keller, L., Olson, J., & Plymale, A. (2005). Helping preschoolers become healthy eaters. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care: Official Publication of National Association of Pediatric Nurse Associates & Practitioners*, 19(3), 178-182.

Laws of Prince Edward Island, Child Care Facilities Act, Regulations, and Guidelines  
R.S.P.E.I. 1988, Cap.C-5 (60), 22.

Maimon, M. (2008). Michelangelo and the prevention of childhood obesity. *Exchange: The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine since 1978*, (181), 76-78.

Unusan, N. (2007). Effects of a food and nutrition course on the self-reported knowledge and behavior of preschool teacher candidates. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(5), 323-327.

Vásquez, F., Salazar, G., Andrade, M., Vásquez, L., & Díaz, E. (2006). Energy balance and physical activity in obese children attending day-care centres. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 60(9), 1115-1121.

### **Web Resources**

Eating Between the Lines (2009). Retrieved from [www.ebtl.org](http://www.ebtl.org)

Mealtime Mentoring (2008). Retrieved from [www.hc.-sc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index\\_e.html](http://www.hc.-sc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index_e.html)

