

## Get up and grow

Last Updated Wednesday, 17 June 2009

All very young children need help to establish patterns of good eating and exercise for their present well being and for a healthy life. Within this broad focus area obesity and food allergies/intolerances are the exception rather than the rule, but they do have major impacts on many children and their families. Clearly, early childhood professionals working with young children in early childhood education and care settings need to be able to meet the full range of needs, both general and specific, with skill and confidence.

Get up and grow, a Commonwealth Government initiative to provide guidelines for healthy eating and physical activity for early childhood settings, should be a great support in this. The project is being carried out by a consortium which includes Early Childhood Australia, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute/Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, and the Department of Health and Ageing. They will provide evidence-based resources and materials that will support healthy eating and physical activity in children attending early childhood education and care services and will be linked to the National Quality Framework for these services.

### Meeting different needs

The project is ambitious in its scope and goals. It is targeting centre-based child care, pre-school and family day care services, and will doubtless be useful to people working with the birth-to-five age group in other settings.

The Guidelines aim to meet the different needs of directors and co-ordinators; staff and carers; cooks; parents/carers and families; and of course children. Major goals are to overcome some of the state and territory differences that arise in areas of nutrition, health and safety, as well as to provide materials that are practical, attractive and accessible. The team is very keen to provide information and resources that will be in continual use and will make life better and easier for the target groups &ndash; and not be left sitting on a shelf or in the 'too hard basket'. The issues involved in providing best care for children with particular needs (including allergies), while properly meeting the needs of all children in the setting will be addressed.

Achieving these complex goals has required an equally complex range of strategies. These include:

- Wide promotion to ensure that as many people as possible know about the project and opportunities for input, including through websites; e-newsletters; information to targeted stakeholders; and speaking at meetings and forums around Australia.
- Extensive consultation to obtain current information about issues and constraints, evidence of good practice, and professional and family needs. This is being done through meetings with the project reference group; state and territory government officials responsible for early childhood, education, health and community well being; early childhood peak bodies for family day care, long day care and pre-school; experts in early childhood nutrition and food safety, physical activity and parenting; people representing special interest groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children, children and families of cultural and linguistic diversity and children with a disability and their families; and of course with parents and families in general.

- A range of resources developed for a range of people and a range of needs. These include:

- Family Book (and other resources relevant to parents) &ndash; flyers, posters, stickers and a CD-ROM with PDF newsletter inserts and flyers. These are resources for the service to share with parents and families to help them understand how the ECEC setting works and to give practical guidance about healthy eating and physical activity that can be carried into the home.
- Cooking for Children includes food safety and nutrition, as well as recipes and meal plans for healthy and interesting meals for developing children
- Staff and Carer Book is a very brief outline of best practice information to assist delivery of good practice and guidance in working with families around relevant issues.
- Director/Coordinator Book &ndash; all of the above, plus information about the underlying rationale of the guidelines and how they will work in practice, along with tools that will assist in checking that quality care is being delivered. Overall, issues covered in the resources will range far and wide, including such topics as accurate information about nutrition and exercise, managing allergies, coping with limited space for active play, lunch box suggestions for parents, how to support breast feeding and ideas for balancing risk, safety and fun in active play, as well as the more traditional areas of policy development, menu planning, safe food handling and budgeting.
- Quality control to ensure that the draft information and resources are as relevant and useful as they can be before they are finalised, including through trying them out in services, feedback from practitioner and parent focus groups and an online survey.

Bianca Gazzola, the Coordinator of the project, says that important learnings during the project have included the need to bridge the gap between early childhood education and care settings, families and health professionals in supporting the development of children's healthy behaviours.

She also said the project has involved finding a balance for healthy eating and physical activity guidelines and practical information to support directors, coordinators, staff and carers from across early childhood sectors and states and territories.

The project team expects to have the Get up and grow guidelines completed by the end of June 2009 and hopes for a launch and distribution soon after.

Margaret Young

National President

Early Childhood Australia

As national president of Early Childhood Australia Margaret Young chairs the National Children's Services Forum (NCSF). This article is drawn from a presentation by Bianca Gazzola to the March 2009 meeting of NCSF.

Every Child magazine &ndash; vol. 15 no. 2, 2009, p. 26

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