

Children failing to get adequate nutrition in early education centers, finds Australian study

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Many centers frequently provided low nutrition foods, including savory spread sandwiches on white bread. Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Researchers at The University of Queensland have found meals provided

in early education and childcare centers in some low socio-economic communities are not meeting national dietary recommendations.

Dr. Bonnie Searle from the Queensland Brain Institute led a study of 55 mealtimes at 10 Queensland childcare centers in communities where the risk of food insecurity is high.

They found the quality and quantity of food across the board was low, with meals only meeting 75% of estimated energy requirements. The paper is [published](#) in the journal *Child: Care, Health and Development*.

"Typically, these childhood education centers are providing food that children easily eat, not necessarily what might be best for them nutritionally," Dr. Searle said.

"According to the Australian Dietary Guidelines, children must consume a wide variety of nutritious foods across the five food groups: vegetables, fruit, grains and seeds, meat, dairy and alternatives to meet nutritional requirements.

"However, we were concerned to find many centers did not provide enough food and frequently provided low nutrition foods such as kabana, crackers and jam or savory spread sandwiches on white bread.

"Also, the amount of vegetables served ranged from zero to just under a fifth of recommended amounts."

The concern regarding [food quality](#) and quantity was also evident in the childcare centers that required families to provide home-made lunches.

"Either children weren't coming in with enough food or what they were bringing was nutritionally poor," Dr. Searle said.

"This research shows that the greatest burden of poor nutrition is being shouldered by children in the most marginalized communities."

Dr. Searle said Queensland childcare centers don't have access to free menu planning, with the task often falling on educators with an interest in food.

"When you've got children with multiple allergies, tight budgets and limited facilities, it's hard to expect educators with no nutritional qualifications and little time to produce a high-quality menu," she said.

Dr. Searle said providing healthy and [nutritious meals](#) in an [early education](#) setting has benefits to young children, their families and broader society.

"Many childcare services are missing an important opportunity to provide food environments that positively influence eating behaviors and food preferences in developing children," she said.

"Without adequate nutrition it's harder for children to learn and regulate their behavior."

Dr. Searle praised programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) in the United States, which reimburses child-care centers for providing food to eligible kids.

"This is a good working model that could be adopted in Australia—providing targeted [financial support](#) to ensure high-quality food is accessible in Queensland's vulnerable communities," she said.

"We assume we don't have a hunger problem in Australia because we're a [developed country](#), but one in six children live in poverty and those [children](#) are in real danger of food insecurity."

More information: Bonnie Searle et al, Mealtimes in the context of poverty: Comparison of ECEC services providing food and those requiring food provided from home, *Child: Care, Health and Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/cch.13109](https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.13109)

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