



Ontario Dietitians in Public Health
Diététistes en santé publique de l'Ontario

Ontario Child Care Settings Needs Assessment Report Summary

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Report Summary

Children spend a large part of their early years in child care settings and the majority of their food intake occurs in this setting. In Ontario, child care settings are mandated to follow the [Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014](#) (CCEYA) to create a supportive nutrition environment that promotes health and well-being of children.

To better understand the needs of child care settings across Ontario with regard to menu planning and supportive nutrition environment, the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health Child Care Working Group (ODPH CCWG) surveyed licensed child care settings to assess current practices, knowledge and attitudes of operators and staff as it pertains to planning menus and creating supportive nutrition environments. Respondents were asked to identify perceived challenges and enablers, as well as supports that would aid in offering a healthier menu and improve the nutrition environment in their child care setting.

The survey revealed that the resources most used for menu planning and to create supportive nutrition environments by child care settings are [Canada's Food Guide](#), followed by the [ODPH Menu Planning & Supportive Nutrition Environments in Child Care Settings - Practical Guide](#). Enabling factors that supports healthy menu planning included satisfaction from seeing children enjoying healthy foods and snacks and positive feedback from the children and from parents. Respondents identified that budget, time and staff constraints when planning menus and preparing food as well as lack of opportunities for professional development related to menu planning as barriers to offering a healthier menu.

Respondents felt that it is important to offer healthy foods to children and that creating a healthy nutrition environment and planning a healthy menu is a priority for the management at their child care setting. Best practices for creating a supportive nutrition environment are being implemented in most child care settings. Respondents indicated that they treat children in a positive and respectful manner regardless of their body size, by allowing children to decide what and how much to eat and both staff and children eat the food offered by the centre. The most helpful supports to creating a supportive nutrition environment were the positive relationship between children and child care staff, family style meals and staff role modelling healthy eating behaviours. Barriers included a lack of opportunities for professional development, insufficient knowledge about supportive nutrition environments and staff beliefs and attitudes about food and nutrition.

Other key findings were related to nutrition policies. Most child care settings use nutrition policies related to procedures for allergies and special diets, requirements for food and beverages offered at meals and snacks, and procedures for food being brought into the centre.

It was indicated that public health could support child care settings to offer a healthier menu by providing sample menus, recipes and an online menu planning tool. Respondents identified healthy

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eating curriculum to support staff education, training on how to create and maintain supportive nutrition environments and networking opportunities to foster a supportive nutrition environment. Registered Dietitians (RDs) in public health units are ideal to fulfill the need for resources, supportive tools and providing education in child care settings. RDs have credible expertise and experience in child health nutrition. Over the years, public health RDs have established effective partnerships and are well positioned to provide ongoing nutrition support to provincial and local child care sectors to meet both public health and provincial mandates.

Based on the evidence gathered from this survey, the CCWG recommends the following to support child care settings to create healthier menus:

1. Update the ODPH Practical Guide and related tools with the new Canada's Food Guide recommendations.
2. Continue to work closely with local child care settings to offer more support, resources, tools and training to staff on a regular basis, based on their needs. Consider an online recipe bank, sample menus, plant-based or recipes without allergens.
3. Share results of this survey with the Ministry of Education, in order to enhance collaboration with ODPH CCWG in producing and disseminating tools and resources to the child care sector.
4. Work in collaboration with Ministry stakeholders to develop a budgetary framework for the child care sector.

To support child care settings in creating a supportive nutrition environment the CCWG recommends:

1. Advocating for Early Childhood Educator students to receive comprehensive training on how to create a supportive nutrition environment.
2. Encourage child care settings who currently have nutrition policies to broaden the scope of their policies to include regular staff training on the various components that contribute to a supportive nutrition environment. For those child care settings who do not have nutrition policies, provide assistance to the development of such policies
3. Provide a combination of virtual and in-person professional development opportunities for child care staff on a regular basis, along with tools and resources to increase staff members' knowledge and ability to apply best practice recommendations for creating and maintaining a supportive nutrition environment.