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Nutritional practices in full-day-care preschools in Dublin North West

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The preschool provider has become an important gatekeeper in early childhood feeding, providing an environment that can promote the development of lifelong healthy dietary patterns or alternatively lay the foundations of obesity and subsequent ill health. However, as Irish preschools are not obliged to structure their nutritional practices in line with the Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Pre-school Services⁽¹⁾, variability exists in current nutritional practices, with adherence to food safety legislation currently taking priority.

The present study investigated the current nutritional practices of full-day-care preschools (*n* 54) in Dublin North West by means of a telephone questionnaire completed by preschool managers. The detailed questionnaire contained over 150 questions, both open and closed ended, and took between twenty-five and fifty minutes to complete. It was preceded by a pilot study of seven full-day-care preschools in Dublin North Central. Descriptive data analysis using SPSS for Microsoft Windows (version 14.0; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) revealed that twenty-five preschools were the only food providers for attending children, twenty-three contributed to food provision, with parents as only providers in six. Attendance at nutritional training was reported by forty preschools and the possession of the Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Pre-school Services by forty. Forty-one preschools were found to adhere to the current regulations necessitating provision of at least two meals and two snacks daily for full-day-care children, with variation existing in menu cycles used. Although thirty-four pre-schools had a written healthy eating policy, poor parental (*n* 11) and staff (*n* 14) involvement in policy formation existed. Food was used as a reward in fourteen preschools. The Table provides information regarding food provision in preschools catering for children <1 year of age (*n* 35) and children aged 1–5 years (*n* 54).

Food provision to children <1 year (<i>n</i> 35)	<i>n</i>	Food provision to children aged 1–5 years (<i>n</i> 54)	<i>n</i>
Weaning at 4–6 months	32	Provision of breakfast:	47
Choice of first foods:		Sugar- or chocolate-coated cereals	8
Cereals	32	Provision of drinks:	54
Pureed potatoes	29	Milk	50
Pureed meat	12	Water	53
Pureed pulses	16	Squash	39
Pureed fruit	31	100% pure fruit juice (undiluted)	6
Pureed vegetables	33	100% pure fruit juice (diluted)	16
Proprietary baby food, e.g. cereal, jars	31	Provision of snacks:	49
Additional fluids served in milk bottles:	29	Fruit	47
Juices	16	Dairy foods (cheese, yoghurts)	41
Water	28	Crackers	40
Use of cow's milk before 1 year of age:	9	Raisins	37
As primary drink	5	Sandwiches	36
In food preparation and cereals	8	Biscuits	31
Introduction of beaker at 6 months	16	Provision of processed meat, e.g. sausages	43
Prolonged use of bottles >1 year of age	35	Use of packet soups, sauces, stock cubes	35

In conclusion, variable dietary practices exist in preschools, many of which are inconsistent with current guidelines. Nutritional training should advocate parental and whole staff involvement in nutritional practices, and focus specifically on policy development, appropriate weaning practices, healthy beverage and snack provision and menu planning.

1. Department of Health and Children (2004) *Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Pre-school Services*. Dublin: Health Promotion Unit.