

Safety regulations bar some First Nations children from eating traditional foods ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Provincial regulations effectively ban traditional First Nations foods from being served in many early childhood education programs, according to a report prepared for the B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society.

Some on-reserve group daycares and preschool programs operate without provincial licensing in order to avoid regulations that demand only store-bought foods — disdainfully referred to as “bar-code” foods by First Nations educators — be served to children.

“It’s really important to serve traditional foods to the children, it’s really part of our identity,” said Deanna Cook, executive director of Splatsin Tsm7aksaltn Society in Enderby. “We serve moose meat and fish and those were the foods we ate pre-contact (with Europeans).”

Traditional foods are a core element of the programming at the Splatsin teaching centre, for young children and the entire community at feast days.

“We observe a very high standard, every person who works here has FoodSafe certification,” said Cook. “I go out of the traditional hunt, so I see how the (animals) are cleaned and I take it to the butcher to have it wrapped.”

Eating traditional foods is essential to the lifelong health of the children, she said. First Nations people are up to five times more likely to suffer from Type 2 diabetes than other Canadians, according to Health Canada.

Children learn hands-on how to dry, smoke and preserve everything from fish roe to venison as their ancestors did, said Splatsin’s language and culture teacher, Rosalind Williams.

“We do this with game meats, berries, roots and all those traditional foods,” she said.

But that rich experience is not available to many First Nations children.

While children in unlicensed facilities on reserves have regular access to traditional foods and learned preparations taught by the community’s elders, children in licensed facilities and in urban centres do not, said BCACCS executive director Karen Isaac.

Game meat, fish caught and prepared by elders and foraged plants and berries are considered unsafe under child care licensing and food premises regulations.

“The methods used by hunters and fishers to ensure food safety are treated as inadequate, if not dangerous,” the study’s authors said.

The early introduction of traditional foods is vital to building a positive cultural identity for First Nations children, she said.

“Traditional foods are really important to our well-being and the well-being of children. Look at the research and you will see that First Nations kids are at a higher risk of obesity and we know that these traditional foods are healthier,” Isaac said.

“They are a powerful reminder of our culture and our ways and we need to preserve them, not regulate them away,” she said.

However, the regulatory hurdles are significant. The Food Premises Regulation says sites used for preparation must have food service permits and kitchen operators to have FoodSafe or equivalent qualifications. All food must be obtained from sources approved by environmental health officers.

Regional health authorities were far less likely to approve traditional, wild and game foods in off-reserve facilities than were agents of the First Nations Health Authority operating on-reserve, because they know and trust the hunters and fishers and their methods.

“Our elders are experts with a lot of food knowledge to bring to the table,” Isaac said.

The report suggests that health and licensing officers build “cultural competence” by familiarizing themselves with traditional food safety techniques and develop criteria for evaluating “non-market” foods.

Isaac notes that the B.C. Centre for Disease Control has developed standards that allow game meat to be donated to food banks, which could be a model for agreement.

-reprinted from Vancouver Sun

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