

Junk food in childcare centres: Is Saint-Laurent an exception? [CA-QC] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

A recent investigation done by Enfants-Québec magazine and the French-language television show L'Épicerie revealed that half of the province's childcare centres (commonly referred as CPEs) give kids fried foods to eat. Two CPEs in Saint-Laurent agreed to discuss their menus with the Saint-Laurent News recently to prove that they only serve high quality food to their kids.

"We eat well here," said Christine Durocher, director of the Tchou-Tchou CPE, which takes care of some 80 youngsters between the ages 18 months and five.

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Same goes for the Vol au Vent CPE in the Bois-Franc district. "We're proud of our menu. Fried foods are not done here," said director Michèle Marchand. Her CPE takes care of 120 pre-schoolers under four years old whose parents work at the nearby Bombardier plant.

"Our menus are balanced and fat-free. They follow the Canada Food Guide and we add a bit of diversity to allow children to discover different foods," said Marchand, adding that the CPE's board of directors insist on a health selection as a way of countering childhood obesity.

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The inquiry on food served Quebec's CPE's looked at the menus of 100 childcare centre across the province. There are 1004 CPEs in Quebec. Thirty of those sampled agreed, including three in Montreal, voluntarily showed their menus to the nutritionist handling the inquiry, who evaluated the offerings based on list of ten criteria.

She found that, at least once a day, half of the CPE's did not offer a vegetable and that one in four CPEs don't serve any fruit. Worse still, half of the centre were found to serve junk food, such as egg rolls, fried fish, sausages, pizza and fries. Four of the CPEs did not follow Canada Food Guide guidelines.

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The inquiry's findings disappointed staff at Vol au Vent. "We were hoping for something better, but the sample was small," said Marchand. Thérèse, Francine and Louise, the centre's three cooks, took courses on nutrition and food served in institutions.

"Everything is homemade, from the pureed foods for the little ones to the meals served to adults. Even the cookies are healthy," says Francine. "The menu also includes fish, tofu, pulses, and meat," added Thérèse.

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The inquiry into what goes on in the kitchens of the province's CPEs also showed that parents can play a key role in determining what ends up on the menu. Parents often make up the bulk of the members sitting on the board of directors of a childcare centre and they can decide what their children are served.

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CPEs are required to post their menus where they can be read. The Canada Food Guide, however, does not specify anything regarding how fresh the food needs to be, the variety and the quality of the food used. A revised version of the guide will soon be made available and may be more specific on these points.

If parents are unsatisfied by the menus in their child's CPE they can lodge an anonymous complaint at the Quebec Family Ministry. "Parents sometimes feel they shouldn't complain because it's so difficult to even get a spot in a childcare centre. But the tools to have their voices heard are there," said Cuchet.

As the government is working on eliminating junk food from school, CPE's might be a starting point to set a good example, says the

president of the Quebec Association of CPEs Johanne Roy.

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- reprinted from the Saint-Laurent News

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